Food Stories:

A Narrative-Based Approach to Analyzing International Students, Food, and Community

CONESTOGA

SOCIAL INNOVATION LAB

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Conestoga Community-Engaged Writing Initiative

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report explores the relationship between food practices and community for international students at Conestoga College. The research used a mixed-methods approach consisting of community consultations, a student survey, and a series of writing events to identify student attitudes and priorities related to cooking, eating, and their sense of belonging. Including writing events allowed the project to reveal insights not only into how food impacts community for international students, but also how narrative inquiry as a research methodology can elicit qualitative data that contributes in significant ways to an understanding of social issues currently impacting students.

We found that food plays an important role in the lives of international students at the college as a representation of cultural heritage, a connection to family, and a potential pathway to community and/or belonging. We also found that while international students report some dissatisfaction with the cost and availability of culturally appropriate food on campus, eating on campus is a significant source of community and belonging for them as newcomers. International students report facing food insecurity more often than domestic students, and they would benefit from more awareness of local food support services, just as these services would benefit from more knowledge about student needs. This report thus recommends that more affordable and/or free food that reflects the diverse cultural traditions of international students, as well as more food-related events, be made available on campus in order to strengthen food-based community and foster belonging.

INTRODUCTION

A number of critics have established that food traditions and practices can significantly impact one's sense of belonging in community (Banerjee-Dube, 2016; Long, 2017; Roberts & Stahlbrand, 2018). This sense of inclusion is vital to personal mental and physical health and to one's capacity to support one's community (DuPuis et al., 2017; Statistics Canada, 2022). There are, however, various factors that can complicate the relationship between food and community building, such as food insecurity and food access discrimination based on the intersectional barriers of ability, class, gender, and/or race. Unsurprisingly, many of these issues impact newcomers disproportionately (Allen, 2021; Martinez, 2022).

Across its eight campuses in Southern Ontario (located in Waterloo, Stratford, Brantford, Guelph, Ingersol, Kitchener, Cambridge, and Milton), Conestoga College has seen unprecedented and disproportionate levels of international student enrollment over the past five years, and as such the school welcomes a substantial population of students at an elevated risk of food insecurity and related isolation. Of Conestoga's total 64,833 students enrolled in the 2024-2025 academic year, 43,933 were international, which equates to 68% of all students (Conestoga Institutional Research). Conestoga Students Inc.'s 2023 *Food Security Report* indicates that 90% of student respondents identified as facing food insecurity. According to the report, international students in particular face "severe" food insecurity and are one of the school's most vulnerable groups as a result of financial barriers such as high tuition and limited options for employment (p. 23). Because those facing food insecurity are more likely to experience not only poor physical and mental health, stress, and poor academic performance, but also withdrawal from school (p. 5), supporting food-based community at the college is increasingly important, particularly for the international student demographic. This report explores the intersection of food and belonging for international students at Conestoga in this context.

Beyond the relationships between cooking, eating, and community, however, we also address the role that narrative can play in our collective understanding of student experience. Acknowledging that the concept of 'belonging' is not easily quantifiable, and in an effort to foreground student voices, our research deployed mixed methods such that our findings synthesize data from consultations, a survey, and narrative inquiry (through writing events where students provided narrative responses to prompts). In other words, the report relies on secondary research, quantitative survey data, and qualitative narrative data to enhance understanding of student priorities and challenges

related to food and belonging, but also to foreground the usefulness and value of narrative in decoding and addressing social justice issues at the college.

FOOD, COMMUNITY, AND INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

There is ample support for the notion that the relationship between food and community can both adversely and positively impact integration for newcomers. Schermuly and Forbes-Mewett (2016), for example, point to the negative impact that “unfamiliar tastes” can have on one’s sense of belonging (p. 2440). Sharing traditional food, however, can be a way for migrants to contribute to a new community in a way that supports both their integration and the upholding of their cultural identities (p. 2439). Schermuly and Forbes-Mewett accordingly position food sharing as central to a necessary “balancing of assimilation and cultural diversity” (p. 2441).

Bailey (2017) echoes this sentiment, arguing that that for many newcomers, traditional food practices contribute to both integration and the persistence of cultural practices (p. 58). That is, food can serve as a medium through which to identify shared cultural norms and thus as a way to coalesce while grounding exchanges in cultural identity. Moreover, Bailey notes that the availability of culturally specific foods for newcomers in an unfamiliar place can signal acceptance of their culture and relieve a “sense of dislocation” (p. 58).

Kwon (2023), however, notes that barriers to community and integration, such as lacking familiarity with the ingredients and eating practices in their new community, unemployment or underemployment, and financial hardship, often impact food choices negatively (para. 12). So, although food and food practices have great potential to improve one’s sense of belonging in a new community, there are considerable threats to this potential as well.

Postsecondary students are not immune to these threats. Lordly, Guy, and Li (2020) acknowledge that many international students are subject to the barriers to food-based integration described above:

> As a result of the cultural shift in food intake, international students experienced many changes that included a deterioration of well-being, cultural and social affiliation and connection. Student identity articulated through the values, beliefs and traditions associated with culturally relevant foods are positive but at the

> same time created barriers to integration with other cultures. Food insecurity and lack of culturally appropriate foods were related to the loss of community and feelings of isolation. This loss of connection impacted well-being, identity and integration. (p. 27)

Similarly, Pilli and Slater (2021) find that international students often struggle with food practices in Canada, particularly insofar as they consume fewer healthy fruits, vegetables, and dairy products when they arrive. In Pilli and Slater's study, students cited cost, lack of time, and lack of food preparation skills with new ingredients as reasons for this (pp. 4-6). Wright et al (2021) explore the implications of the cultural food insecurity Pilli and Slater gesture toward and find that it can lead to declining mental and emotional health for international students when they are unable to maintain cultural food practices (para. 4).

Given these findings, it is unsurprising that Pilli and Slater conclude, echoing Entz, Slater, and Desmarais (2016) and Olauson et al (2018), that improved access to traditional foods for international students can enhance their overall physical health and well-being (p. 2). Extending the goal of access to exchange and dialogue, Lordly, Guy, and Li (2020) encourage the creation of opportunities for students to teach and learn about traditional food practices. The formal exchange of ideas regarding food preparation or eating, they argue, can be integrated into curriculum or co-curricular activities as a means for students to effectively support cultural integration (p. 27). This recalls the 2018 study by Luongo et al in which international students at Simon Fraser University who reported experiencing isolation also reported that it was alleviated to some extent by cooking workshops that fostered physical health and belonging (para. 9).

At an institutional level, Noyongoyo (2023) calls for universities to offer affordable dining options that reflect diverse populations, a process that would require training on the relationship between "dietary acculturation" and student well-being. Nogongoyo suggests that policies in support of diverse food environments would reduce isolation and stress for international students (para. 55-60). Jin et al (2023) note that this kind of work is especially important for women students, highlighting the intersectionality of barriers to food health (para. 4).

Overall, research on food and belonging for international students indicates that these students are at risk of isolation due to factors such as low income and inexperience with local ingredients. Conversely, student mental health and physical well-being benefit from access to culturally traditional ingredients, as well as from education and integration regarding Canadian food and cooking that reduces this isolation. Generally

speaking, the nature of the food/community/international student relationship is understood such that community knowledge-sharing about food enhances belonging for newcomers.

METHODOLOGY

While the studies discussed above are valuable resources insofar as they explore the complex ways in which food intersects with newcomers' capacity to sustain a sense of integration while affirming traditions and cultural identities in host communities, they do not address the unique circumstances currently faced by international students at Conestoga, specifically, nor do they address how narrative inquiry as it relates to food might function to enhance community, belonging, and/or overall well-being.

Our study (as approved by Conestoga's Research Ethics Board) addresses this gap by focusing on three of Conestoga's campuses and their surrounding communities to identify the unique needs of international students in these areas. We selected three campuses: Kitchener (Doon), because it is the largest of Conestoga's campuses (68% international enrollment); Waterloo, because it houses Conestoga's culinary programs and is thus home to a robust body of students with interests in food and community (74% international enrollment); and Guelph, because our community partner for this project, Kuwait Aid Network, were aiming to increase food security support in downtown Guelph, where a new campus is expected to open in Fall 2026 (83% international enrollment). We also integrated narrative inquiry into our approach, along with community consultations and a comprehensive survey, with the twin goals of enhancing opportunities for meaningful qualitative results and self-reflexively evaluating our narrative-based method.

Survey

We administered a 32-question online survey via Qualtrics that was made available to all students enrolled in program-required Level 1 communications courses (degree, diploma, and graduate certificate), including both domestic and international students. The survey asked students to respond to a range of food and community-related questions. We had 332 respondents over two semesters (Fall 2024 and Winter 2025).

Community Consultations

We engaged numerous community organizations with a vested interest in food and community related to the three focus campuses:

- Conestoga Students, Inc., which until Spring 2025 had been providing food support for Conestoga students at all campuses through their Student Nutritional Access Program (SNAP), Affordable Produce Markets, Nourish-and-Go Program, and Emergency Food Funding. (At the time of this report, CSI has temporarily suspended SNAP offerings as they re-strategize and review the direction for this support service, recognizing that food security remains an integral part of the student experience; other suspended or cancelled programming includes campus grocery runs and Emergency Support Bursaries.)
- Campus managers throughout the college
- Conestoga Food Security Collective, a group of faculty/staff doing research and engagement related to food security
- The Guelph Neighbourhood Support Coalition (GNSC), where neighbourhood groups in Guelph share resources in support of various social causes
- Community FEWD (Chef Yasi Zorlutuna), or Food Equity with Dignity, a group that partners with GNSC to assist with processing perishables along with food support agencies with the goal of providing an “equitable, dignified, and nourishing food source for community members no matter their economic status” (Guelph Neighbourhood Support Coalition, 2025)
- Distro, a Waterloo organization that provides food support to students at Wilfrid Laurier University in the form of free groceries and essentials

Writing Pop-Up Events

We held a series of writing pop-up events on the three focus campuses named above, as well as an additional writing event in downtown Guelph, off campus, where students were invited to a free dinner for conversation about their experiences with community and food. For the on-campus events, we set up tables with welcoming signage in high-traffic social spaces (in or near cafeterias) and offered students free healthy snacks and beverages.

During the pop-ups, students were invited to write a response (of any length) to one of three prompts:

A. Do you think there is a relationship between food and feeling a sense of belonging in a new place? Share a story about a time when food either contributed to or diminished your sense of belonging.
B. When, where, and how do you most often come together with friends and/or family to share food? Share a story about a memorable meal with friends and/or family.
C. What are your food traditions, and why are they important to you? Share a memory of how you have practiced traditions around food.

Participants were given little to no guidance to direct their stories, other than an information sheet encouraging them to apply a free-writing approach in sharing their honest reflections (where the focus should be on responding in the moment without editing or self-scrutiny).

There was a total of 164 respondents: 67 from the Doon campus, 48 from the Waterloo campus, 29 from the Guelph campus, and 20 from the Guelph off-campus event.

NARRATIVE INQUIRY

A secondary objective of this report is to demonstrate the value and validity of narrative-based inquiry as a research method that is particularly suited to food studies, international students, and community engagement (with potential extensions to other related social-justice topics, including health and wellness, identity formation, and cultural expression, especially as they relate to marginalized groups).

As humanities professors and researchers working in a department that services all students at the college, we are deeply invested in demonstrating the importance of narrative for teaching, learning, and research. We are not alone; interest in narrative's possible roles in cross-disciplinary research has been building for decades. Bochner and Riggs (2014) identify an increasing distrust of objective evidence and the scientific method as one of the primary catalysts for the emergence "story-based forms of inquiry," beginning in the 1980s (p. 199). Narrative inquiry as an approach to qualitative research now has a well-documented history across disciplines as varied as business, education, language acquisition, law, medicine, and psychology (Kim, 2016), but it remains underutilized and undervalued.

For the purposes of this report, we are defining narrative inquiry as the complex process of analyzing relationships to systems through narrative responses. Specifically, we are exploring what narrative reveals about a particular social situation: how food intersects with community and belonging. Narrative inquiry is an effective method of conducting this type of research because it attends to the stories of individual participants while allowing researchers to identify common themes at the same time. Insofar as our qualitative research was primarily conducted through community-engagement events (including shared snacks and meals both on an off campus), it was also a form of community-building in and of itself.

Prompting students to write about traditions, memories, and opinions related to food, community, and belonging generated the bulk of our qualitative data. Exploring the themes and relationships present in this narrative-based dataset (as one might do when analyzing works of literature) has then informed our conclusions and recommendations, alongside our community consultations and our quantitative survey data.

Narrative inquiry is poised for researching sensitive topics like this one, not least because it allows space for subjects to openly tell their stories to an engaged and supportive audience (Squire et al, 2015, p. 81). In its privileging of participants' stories about their own lived experiences, narrative inquiry can be especially useful in giving a voice to marginalized populations who may not be adequately or accurately represented in mainstream culture or traditional research outlets. Students experiencing food insecurity, many of whom are newcomers, clearly fall within this category. In a more general sense, narrative inquiry is a useful approach to qualitative research because human participants, as "natural storytellers," are both willing to provide their personal stories and inclined to offer detailed descriptions in doing so, resulting in a rich data pool (Butina, 2015, p. 191).

Accordingly, narrative has the potential not only to help us to understand a problem, but to frame it from multiple perspectives and voice potential solutions in ways that emphasize autonomy and diversity. Broadly speaking, the goals of narrative inquiry are "to keep the conversation going (about matters crucial to living well); to activate subjectivity, feeling, and identification in readers or listeners; to raise consciousness; to promote empathy and social justice; and to encourage activism—in short, to show what it can mean to live a good life and create a just society" (Bochner & Riggs, 2014, p. 201). Long (2017) frames meaning and food in terms of significance: a food is considered significant if it "carries memories of loved ones or of places once inhabited; or it represents a relationship important to an individual; or it is an expression of identity, creativity, or belonging" – or if it features in a "ritual or celebration" (p. 207). As an

approach whose outputs are shaped by memory, creativity, and identity, narrative inquiry is ideally situated to access the meaning associated with food and food experiences for the Conestoga student body.

FINDINGS

Each mode of research revealed distinct information regarding the intersections of food and community for Conestoga's international students. While the survey provided useful quantitative data regarding food security, the availability of culturally appropriate ingredients, and eating in community, the community consultations and writing pop-ups revealed recurrent themes related to feelings of belonging, including the notion of food as a connection to home, a way to explore other cultures and traditions, a means of establishing or improving relationships, and a means of finding and sustaining community.

Survey Results

Students were asked to answer 32 questions related to their eating habits and perceptions of food affordability and availability. Of our 332 survey respondents, 61% identified as international students, and 67% reported that their country of origin is not Canada. Overall, the survey revealed that students are generally less satisfied with the availability of culturally appropriate food items and ingredients on-campus than off-campus, that international students are more vulnerable than domestic students when it comes to food insecurity, and that international students are more likely than domestic students to eat in community and report that their eating habits enhance their sense of community and belonging.

Availability of Culturally Appropriate Food for Purchase by Domestic and International Students, Off and On Campus:

Generally, students are satisfied with the availability of culturally appropriate food for purchase off campus, but fewer are satisfied on campus. 21% of students reported being very satisfied, 46% satisfied, 24% somewhat satisfied, and only 6% not satisfied with the availability of culturally appropriate ingredients when they shop in the community beyond campus (see Figure 1). However, as Figure 2 reveals, 38% of students report that the food available at Conestoga does not accurately reflect their culture or traditions or reflects them very little. This suggests that students may be less

satisfied with the culturally appropriate ingredients and/or food available to them at Conestoga than they are in the greater community.

Figure 1

Extent to Which Students are Satisfied with the Availability of Culturally Appropriate Ingredients Off-Campus

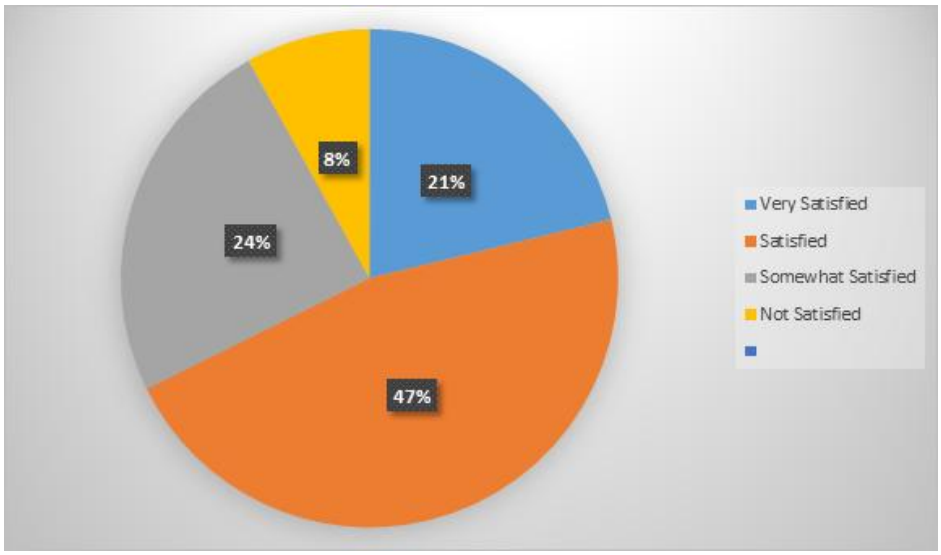
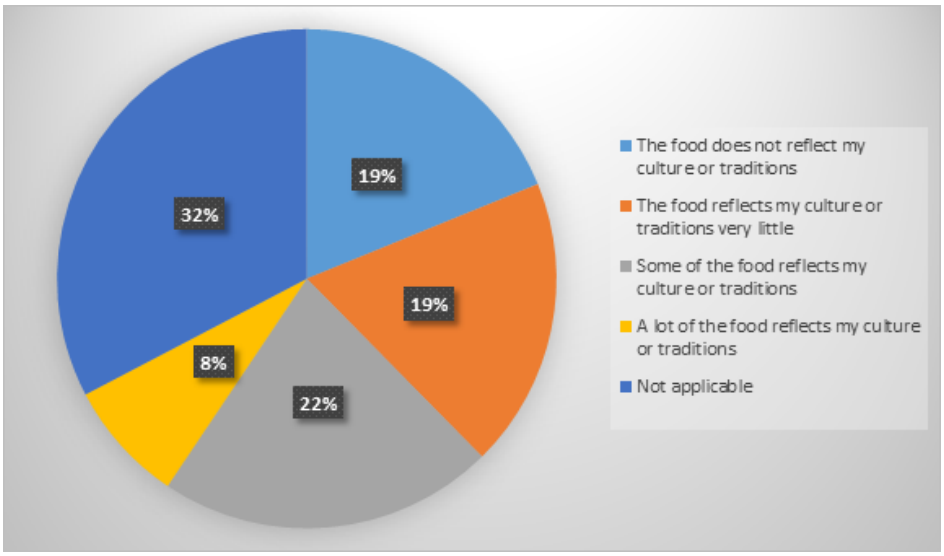


Figure 2

Extent to Which Food Available On-Campus Reflects Students' Culture or Traditions



The data also reveal that a significant portion of international students in particular feel that the food for purchase at Conestoga does not reflect their culture or traditions. 23.39% of international students report that very little of the food available aligns with

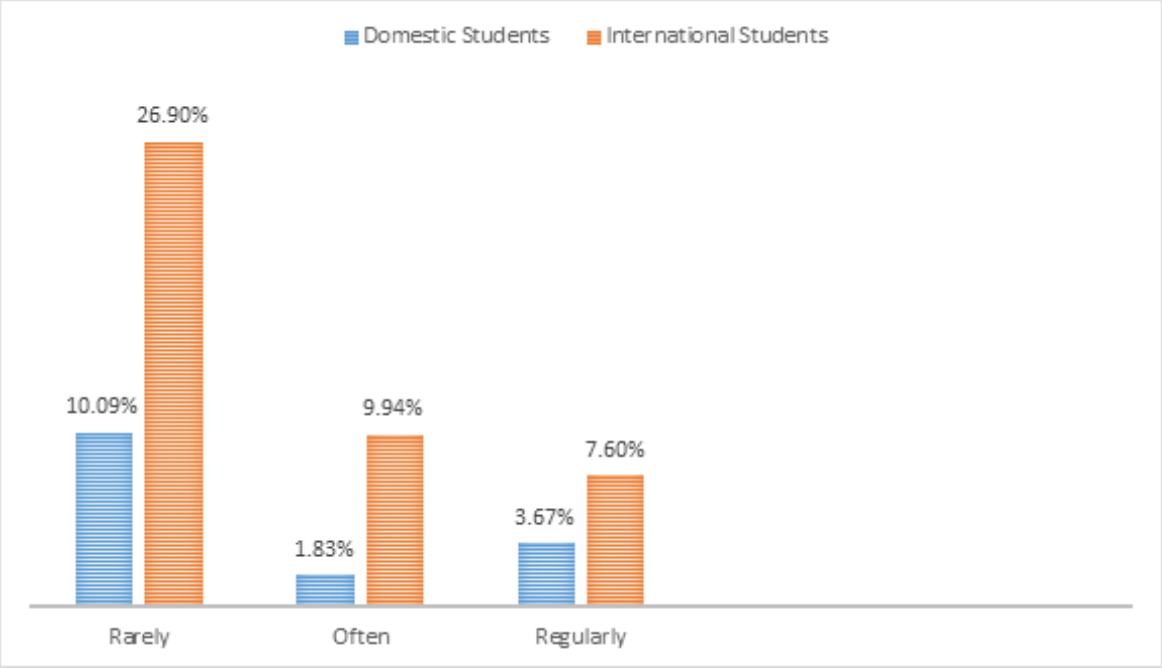
their cultural preferences, and another 23.39% feel that the food does not reflect their culture at all. This suggests that over 46% of international students believe the food options available do not meet their cultural needs, highlighting a potential gap in food offerings that could be addressed to better cater to the diverse student body.

Food Security and Culturally Appropriate Support Programs for International and Domestic Students, Off and On Campus:

Our survey found that many Conestoga students are facing food insecurity. 18% of students reported they rarely or never eat three meals a day, and of these, 33% indicate this is because they cannot afford to do so. 33% of students also reported having used off-campus food accessibility services, and 31% reported having used on-campus ones.

Figure 3

Comparison of Domestic and International Student Food Accessibility Program Use, Off-Campus



Most of the students who reported using off-campus food accessibility services report satisfaction with the availability of culturally appropriate ingredients, with no statistically significant difference between domestic and international students. 47% reported being very satisfied, satisfied, or somewhat satisfied, while only 5% of that group are not satisfied. This suggests that students in general are more satisfied with the availability of food that reflects their culture in off-campus food support programs than they are with food for purchase at Conestoga.

The survey also revealed that a higher percentage of international students than domestic students use off-campus food accessibility programs rarely (26.9% vs. 10.09%), often (9.94% vs. 1.83%), and regularly (7.6% vs. 3.67%), suggesting greater food insecurity or reliance on external food support among international students (see Figure 3).

On campus, the data show that international students are still more likely to rely on these support services than their domestic counterparts. Domestic students report a very low percentage (9.17%) of having ever used on-campus food accessibility programs, while international students have a much higher percentage (43.27%) of having used them. Almost half of the international students surveyed reported having used on-campus food-security programs, as opposed to just under roughly 10% of domestic students.

Of students who have accessed food security programs on campus, only 4% are not satisfied with the availability of culturally appropriate food. This is similar to the level of dissatisfaction with the availability of culturally appropriate food in off-campus accessibility programs. Again, there is not a statistically significant difference between domestic and international students here. However, the percentage of students who are dissatisfied with the availability of culturally appropriate food in on-campus accessibility programs is significantly lower than the percentage of students who are dissatisfied with the availability of culturally appropriate food for purchase on campus.

Eating in Community, Off and On-Campus:

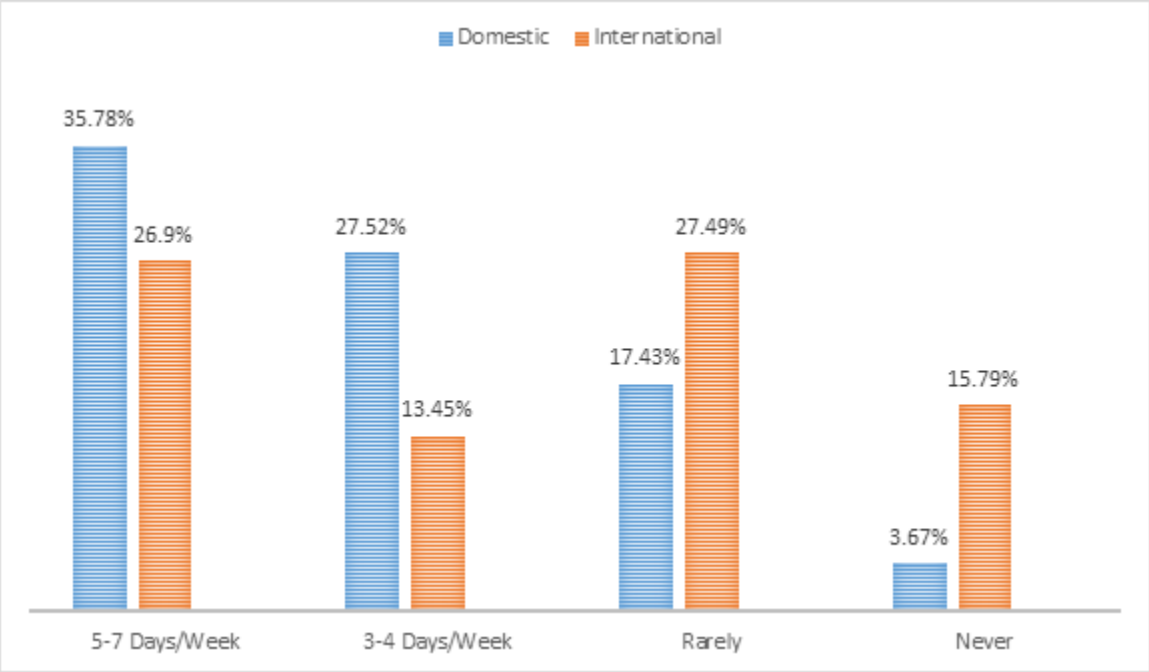
Our survey revealed insights into how often students ate in groups, the nature of such groups, and the degree to which their communal or individual eating habits impact their sense of belonging. We discovered that 35% of surveyed students rarely or never eat food prepared by someone else at home. Within that group, 58% of prefer to cook for themselves, 28% live alone, and 20% don’t know anyone in Canada who would cook for them. These numbers alone are not enough to suggest that students are eating in isolation, but when one factors in the fact that 65% of surveyed students rarely or never eat at restaurants (51% because they can’t afford it), we can begin to infer that there are barriers to communal eating for many students.

Such barriers are likely not equal for domestic and international students. Domestic students more frequently eat home-prepared meals made by someone they know compared to international students (see Figure 4). A higher percentage of domestic students eat such meals 3-4 days a week (27.52% vs. 13.45%) and 5-7 days a week (35.78% vs. 26.90%). In contrast, more international students report never eating home-prepared meals made by others (15.79% vs. 3.67%) or rarely doing so (27.49% vs.

17.43%), suggesting they may rely on self-prepared meals and are less likely to prepare or enjoy food in off-campus community settings than domestic students.

Figure 4

Comparison of Domestic and International Student Frequency of Eating Home-Prepared Meals Made by Others



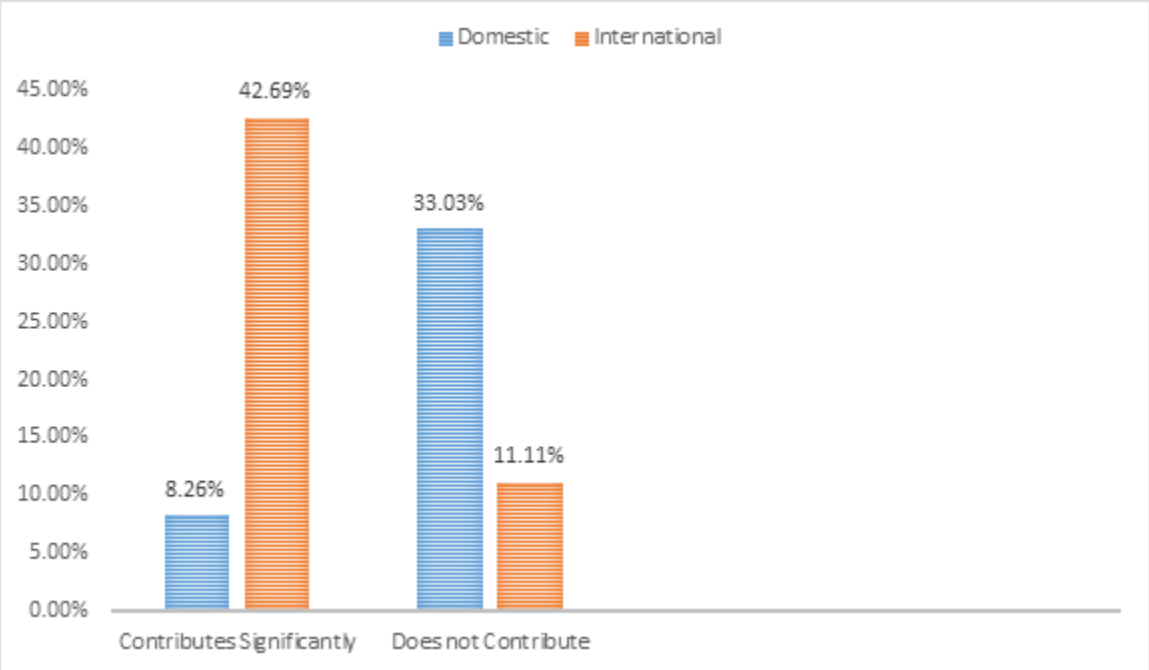
On campus, however, fewer students in general reported solitary eating, which may have positive implications for community at Conestoga. While 24% tend to eat alone (still not a small percentage), 26% most often eat with friends who share their cultural traditions, while 23% eat with a mix of friends with different cultural backgrounds. The data reflects that international students, being away from their families, are more likely to eat with friends (35.09%) compared to domestic students (6.42%). Meanwhile, domestic students eat with family (46.79%) much more often, as they are more likely to live with them.

This distinction may explain why international students are more likely to find a sense of community and belonging when eating on campus. While 23% of students reported feeling very comfortable eating on campus, 40% are comfortable, 22% are somewhat comfortable, and only 6% are not comfortable eating on campus. 65% of students feel that eating on campus contributes or contributes somewhat to their sense of community and belonging. Figure 5 illustrates that a larger proportion of international students (42.69%) feel that eating on campus significantly contributes to their sense of belonging, compared to only 8.26% of domestic students. Conversely, domestic students are more

likely to feel that eating on campus contributes *not at all* (33.03%) to their sense of belonging, while only 11.11% of international students share this view.

Figure 5

Comparison of How Domestic and International Students View the Extent to Which Eating on Campus Contributes to Community and Belonging



A higher percentage of domestic students (30.28%) report eating alone compared to international students (18.13%), indicating that domestic students may prefer solitary meals more often. In contrast, international students (34.50%) are more likely to eat with one or two friends or classmates who share their cultural traditions, compared to domestic students (12.84%). Altogether, this data suggests that eating on campus plays a more important role in fostering a sense of community and belonging for international students than it does for domestic students.

Domestic participants, however, show a higher interest in learning how to cook (43.9% vs. 28.4%) and sharing recipes (40.7% vs. 11.9%), indicating a stronger inclination towards culinary engagement. Additionally, domestic participants are more likely to attend community events related to food, with 29.6% expressing a definite interest, compared to just 5.5% of international participants. Conversely, international participants are more likely to express a disinterest in attending community events, with 21.1% stating they would definitely not attend, compared to 10% of domestic participants. These trends suggest that domestic participants may have a stronger

connection to local activities and community involvement, while international participants may be less engaged in these elements.

Community Consultations Results

Our consultations revealed consensus that Conestoga students are using food supports and that these programs are an avenue for community building. For confidentiality reasons, there are no records of how many students access these supports (or which local postsecondary institutions the students are coming from); students are not generally asked to self-identify. The evidence from community consultations is anecdotal, but it indicates that international students are more likely to access food programs in groups than domestic students, who are more typically alone. Organizers of food support services observe less stigma among international students about food insecurity. They also observe a more communal approach to collecting ingredients and preparing food. Those international students who do access food support individually often make connections with others while using these services.

Organizers of food accessibility services acknowledged that there has been a lot of negative backlash and scrutiny over international students using their supports, as though international students are perceived to be taking advantage of services meant for other demographics. The groups and individuals we consulted with expressed a need for more permanent solutions to food insecurity among international students, and all expressed interest in knowing more from Conestoga about its student needs.

Community consultations also reflected a desire to see more government funding directly targeting international students at colleges and universities. Some respondents argued that due to larger shifts in the global economy and correlated increases in the costs of living for transportation, housing, and food, provincial and federal authorities need to do a better job of protecting the large investments made by colleges into the local economy via international students.

Writing Pop-Up Events Results

The average response length of the 164 narratives we collected was 88 words, and of the 143 respondents who provided optional demographic information, 95% identified as international students. Combining what Jane Elliot (2005) refers to as naturalist and constructionalist approaches to narrative analysis, we have assessed these student stories both in terms of the realities they reflect about food for students at the college as well as the meanings they produce “in relation to available cultural, social and interpersonal resources” (p. 18).

In general, the responses we received to our writing prompts confirm much of the existing research on food and community for newcomers in general and international students in particular. Our data show that some respondents, for example, have a fear of cooking and eating in a new place (because of a lack of skills, a lack of appropriate ingredients, or a concern over being judged about their own food preferences and practices). One respondent reports that navigating unfamiliar foods in Canada can be alienating as well: “Food significantly affect my sense of belonging in every society I find myself. When I came to Canada I found the idea of eating out not appealing because most of the eateries do not serve my local dish.” A few respondents note that they find healthy food to be too costly in Canada; a few also make a connection between food and mental health (reporting that not having access to culturally appropriate food could exacerbate stress and loneliness). Unsurprisingly, the narratives also contain (implicit and explicit) expressions of homesickness as connected to cooking and eating.

Despite these negative responses, our respondents’ stories are notably positive overall. Given that two of the three writing prompts we provided are framed in positive terms (with a third prompt that allowed for both positive and negative responses), this result is to be expected. (We also recognize that our own interactions with student participants may have impacted the nature of their responses to some degree; for example, many of the responses we received may have been shaped by the styles of writing taught at the college and a desire to please us as professors, even if we are not currently their professors.) There is a general openness to food diversity expressed across the stories. Some respondents refer to the joy to be had in cooking for others. Many respondents mention the joy of sharing meals more broadly (with expressions of both love and community here); eating together and cooking together are regularly viewed as bonding experiences (with either friends or family). Finally, a few respondents discuss food in relation to helping others (typically others less fortunate than themselves), both back home and in Canada.

Upon careful (independent) review of the 164 narratives we gathered by each member of the research team, five common themes emerged, four of them broadly positive and one of them more notably mixed, with some overlap between them: 1) food as a representation of cultural heritage; 2) cooking (and/or learning to cook) cultural foods as a connection to family; 3) sharing food as a pathway to community and/or belonging; 4) accessing cultural foods in Canada as a pathway to community and/or belonging; and 5) food as a potential barrier to community and/or belonging (see Figure 6).

Figure 6

Overlapping Themes in Student Stories: Opportunities for Community and Belonging

The relative newness of narrative inquiry and analysis (along with its reach across disciplines) means that there is still no standardized method of representing narrative data. Narrative researchers can therefore face barriers when disseminating their findings within academic conventions (Barkhuizen and Consoli, 2021, p. 3). Squire et al (2015) openly acknowledge the ethical and aesthetic challenges of conveying narrative research findings, especially when it comes to balancing the presentation and interpretation of data (pp. 88-89). In recognition of this need for balance, we have chosen to present our qualitative data in a way that emphasizes the commonalties we found among the stories shared by our respondents while also preserving the individuality of students' voices: including select quotations from our narrative dataset that best represent each of the five themes we identified allows us to accurately represent our findings while preserving the fidelity of our respondents' individual accounts in their own vernacular.

To this end, we have quoted selections from the students' stories exactly as written, without standardizing grammar. Given that this report has the secondary goal of validating narrative inquiry as a research methodology, we also felt that it was important for us to include as many student voices as possible. As Bochner and Riggs (2014) explain, stories are a worthy addition research publications because "they seek to activate subjectivity and compel emotional responses from readers; they long to be used rather than analyzed, to be told and retold rather than theorized and settled, to offer lessons for further conversation rather than truths without any rivals, and they promise the companionship of intimate detail as a substitute for the loneliness of abstracted facts" (p. 206).

Theme 1: Food as representation of cultural heritage

The narratives we gathered collectively contain much discussion of food in terms of cultural or communal or family celebrations, including the ritualistic and/or symbolic nature of food as associated with religious practices. Many respondents name specific foods and ingredients that are important to them, their families, and/or their culture; they also mention food as intimately connected to geography and express a pride of place through their descriptions of regional dishes. In fact, some narratives highlight the idea that one can be an ambassador for one's country by sharing cultural foods with others (see also Theme 3 below).

As one student from India writes, "food is at the heart of tradition and family.... A special memory I cherish is from Pongal, when we cooked Pongal in a clay pot over an open fire. The smell of rice and the joy of sharing the meal with family reminded me of our deep connection to the land and each other. These food traditions keep our culture alive and create a sense of community. PS I miss home food!" For another Indian student, these sorts of memories are important because "they make us feel connected and attached to the roots of our home country. We feel proud of our cultures and traditions. It makes us unique and stand out of the world to represent our culture and community."

These food traditions keep our culture alive and create a sense of community. PS I miss home food!

A combination of cultural pride, longing, and love of family comes through in narrative after narrative, and the importance of both intergenerational family gatherings and storytelling as connected to cooking and eating is especially clear in these three responses:

> One of my food tradition is making sweets during Vaisakhi. As a child, I used to help my mother prepare Kaju Katli and Barfi. Learning the family recipes passed down for generations. The process was always filled with laughter and stories from my grandparents. This tradition is really important for everyone because with the help of tradition family bonding will be strong.
>
> One of my many memorable meals was during our family reunion a few years back. We gathered in our grandparents house. Our table was filled with family favourite dinner. The best part was not only the food, it was the stories we all shared around the table. The dinner lasted for hours. It was about love, connection and memories.
>
> One of the most memorable meals I have shared with family was during a holiday gathering at my grandmothers house. Every year, we come together for the special feast and everyone should bring some special homemade dishes the smell of Indian cuisines and slow-cooked beef and chicken. We all are sit around a long table and sharing stories and eat delicious food. This is not about eating this is something special of bonding.

While several of these narratives are fond recollections of the respondents' most loved cultural foods and family members, others are more overtly tied to loss – that is, to being away from home and subsequently missing the love, belonging, and community that cultural traditions and celebrations can bring. Some students, however, describe adapting their familial and cultural traditions to their new Canadian setting in an effort to retain a sense of self and a connection to home (thus providing a bridge from Theme 1 to Theme 2). A Nigerian student, for example, comments on "celebrating the start of a harvest season" through "a big community wide celebration where farmers come together for a potluck," noting that, "Living in the Western world, I have modified this with my family to say prayers during meal time and ensure everyone understands the importance of how food we eat is as a result of ingenuity of farmers and their workers." An Indian student similarly describes the importance of Onam Sadhya, and how, "Even after moving to Canada, I try to keep this tradition alive by making a smaller version of the feast with friends. It helps me feel connected to my roots and bring back memories of home, making me feel less lonely in a new place."

The repeated expressions of nostalgia in these narratives reveal that the link between food and cultural heritage is, for newcomers, a source of both comfort and pain. Importantly, it can also provide a tangible connection to family, as Theme 2 makes clear.

Theme 2: Cooking (and/or learning to cook) cultural foods as a connection to family

As demonstrated by many of the stories that fall under Theme 1, cooking and eating as a connection to home is an important refrain among our respondents. For some, not being able to access cultural foods at restaurants in Canada (including food services offered on campus) led to them cooking for themselves so that they might retain a link to their familiar cultural foods. The relationship between food and memory – often visceral and almost uniformly positive – is also clear, although we do recognize that by providing respondents with two writing prompts that mention memory directly, we have biased the narratives in favour of its inclusion.

The celebration of cultural traditions around food that make up the narratives under Theme 1 come through in many Theme 2 stories as well, where students articulate a direct association between learning to prepare cultural foods and feeling emotionally connected to family: as one student explains, “It is not just about the food. It is about spending time together and keeping our culture alive. When I was a kid, I watched my grandma make sweets. Mine never looked as good as hers. She would smile and say, ‘You'll get better.’ Now, when I make them, I feel close to my family, even if I am far away.” Another respondent mentions missing “chole-bhature made by my mumma” since moving to Kitchener: “Obviously, it isn’t possible to have it now but last weekend she was in front of me in the screen guiding me with the recipe. Magic of her hands was missing but the contentedness after eating is so delightful that I can't just express.”

While most international students are living far away from their families, many of our respondents show that this distance is more easily managed when they are able to cook and enjoy traditional foods that remind them of home. Some student stories of cooking and eating their favourite cultural or familial dishes are more obviously fraught with loneliness and distress:

> Being an International student, I live far away from my home all alone here, which made me homesick. Then, I started to cook food for myself. The food which I usually had in my home town. Some kinds of foods are those which were so tasty when my mother cooked it for me. Even every year my parents sends me a parcel in which they send some special homemade sweets. I think I am attached to my home only because of food otherwise it could be extremely difficult for me to stay here. I am so alone right now but then I cook and feel so close to my hometown.

Perhaps the missing piece for this student is the opportunity to share her cultural foods with others. One respondent nicely brings together Themes 1 and 2, while also gesturing to Theme 3, by naming his cultural foods, describing the process of learning

to cook for himself, mentioning the joy of sharing homecooked meals, and maintaining a connection to home through food, all within a single narrative:

> After moving to Canada I honestly thought cooking would be my wildest nightmare. I wanted to eat my favourite food which my mother often cooks and those I find only near my place. I was ready to learn those cooking skills, knowing the right ingredients, the right amount of time, the pinches of salt and the accurate amount of masala. I was confused in the beginning. More salt, extra watery, too much, and sometimes overcooked. However, very soon I did well. I found a wonderful cook in me. I started making everything I wanted to taste, everything I started missing. I even found joy sharing the food I make to others. This really was an eye opener. The favourite foods that you make at home bridges your home and where you are now. There is no struggle to cook. Everyone can be a cook once you realize the “most important ingredient is love!”

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Theme 3: Sharing food as a pathway to community and/or belonging

Sharing food with others is the most common thread among the narratives we gathered. One Nigerian student helpfully describes what food sharing means to him in general terms:

> Sharing food is boundless you can share anywhere it doesn't matter. To me it promotes a form of community, kindness and empathy between family, friends, even strangers. It's a form of invitation that shows people how inviting, caring, kind you can be. Every new years my family and I invite everyone we know friends, extended family and their friend, strangers even to come and eat different meals, snacks and have fun. Its been a tradition of our for a long as I can remember. Our little way to show love.

As previously mentioned in relation to Themes 1 and 2, food is viewed by many of our respondents as an occasion for togetherness. Finding or creating these occasions in Canada seems to be a big part of securing a home away from home: “In my family it is a tradition to at least eat one meal together in a day. Usually, back in India I used to eat

dinner with my family on dinner table and discuss about whole day. When I came here I was missing that but a couple of weeks ago, when I moved to a house I made new friends and we started to follow that tradition. I feel really good now."

A number of respondents describe sharing familiar cultural foods, especially with people from similar backgrounds, as a way of cultivating comfort and opening the door to new friendships and support systems:

> I often come together with my circle of friends who are staying in the same house. We all are from the same country thereby having almost similar taste buds. We cook delicious foods like biryani and other specific stuffs of our own taste buds and make a feast. We share all our daily happenings, sit together and chill so that we all get along well. The food we cook always connects us in a better way and give us a sense of belonging to the roots. We call it a "home" because the friends we are having here is like our own family.

While sharing cultural foods with members of the same cultural group presents opportunities for reminiscing about home and finding a sense of transplanted community, sharing cultural foods with others from outside one's own cultural group – and discovering new foods in the process – are also framed as powerfully positive experiences for many of our respondents, several of whom refer to their bond as international students. A student from India remembers a party with "featured dishes from various countries," and how "Sharing that meal with others who had similar experiences made me feel connected to new place transforming my initial feeling of isolation into a sense of belonging." A student from Nepal likewise recalls an "international potluck" where "Everyone brought dishes from their culture" and that the "simple act of sharing food sparked conversations, built friendships, and made me feel like I belonged in that diverse community." For another respondent from Nepal, enjoying food prepared by some Mexican friends had "a big impact on my life in Canada" because "I feel it tastes similar to our country food and I felt so good and it gives a sense of belonging with them and their culture. Even though we are from different country.... I felt many of us share the same taste in food even we are diversity in our culture." One student even raises the idea of harnessing this sense of belonging by creating formal opportunities for celebrating food diversity at the college:

> Conestoga is blessed with a population that is diverse in culture, language, tradition and food. There is hardly any social gathering that food is not part of the menu. From my observation, food has always brought people together. I remember opening up conversations with strangers at a party simply because we both liked a particular dish on the menu. I also think that the college should explore the possibility of offering diversity of food choices to showcase the

different cultures. Maybe draw up contests for students and staff to bring or make delicacies from their cultures.

Another student mentions the bonds created by sharing food with fellow students on campus, noting that “Traditions in my country is offering food to God first and then we have it. We often do that here and also we exchange this traditions with different cultural people.” Finally, a student from El Salvador describes feelings of loneliness and longing for the closeness created by family meals, while simultaneously acknowledging that “I made friends that were also on their own here and we bonded over a sense of isolation and foreigness. We begun to gather around food, every Friday, after school, we used to go and get cheap pizza, and it made us feel like we belonged. It was our ritual. Nowadays we sometimes meet to cook a warm meal (often a rarity/luxury with our hectic lives) and it becomes a safe place to laugh, cry, share and feel like a family. A found family.”

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Several respondents directly mention food sharing not only as a celebration of cultural traditions and new friendships but as a bridge between cultures as well. This student writes about how “Food has a way of connecting people, bridging their cultural gaps and creating their shared experiences.” For him (as for many of the students quoted above), “everything changed when I was invited to a dinner by my new best friend. Everyone brought a dish from their culture, and I made my favorite homemade dish from my hometown and it's call ‘Gujrati Thali.’ As we shared our food and stories, I felt a sense of connection and belonging... food became more than just a meal – it became a way to find comfort and community in a new place.” These two students share a similar story:

> Food plays an important role in sense of belonging especially when you go to a new environment. When I first came to Canada, I felt lonely and out of place being in an unfamiliar environment. Meanwhile, I remember one day when I was invited to a get together party by a friend. I decided to bring jollof rice, the food that reminded me of my home country.... I was nervous, wondering if other individuals would enjoy my food. To my greatest surprise people were excited to try the jollof rice. As we shared stories about our favourite dishes, I felt that connection people from different backgrounds and cultures. That the simple meal brought conversation about our different cultures and traditions and family, making me feel welcome and valued. That experience taught me that food is

> more than just nourishment to the body. It is also a bridge that connect or bring people together, helping to create a sense of hope even in a new place.
>
> From my perspective food is connected with our emotional bonding.... Overall, it makes stronger bridge between two or more persons.... Recently I and my friends arranged dinner party where we bought our meal from their home and get together at one place. The magic is we all friends have different food traditions and especially, I learnt the how different locations and food works based on their traditions. At the start of our dinner, we prayed to god and then started. I shared my meal to each of my friends, even I tried their meal. That makes stronger bond.

Eating together and cooking for one another are not just means of nurturing cultural ties while exploring new cultural traditions and practices in a new place: they are direct pathways to forming a new sense of community as well. All of this aligns with the findings of Schermuly and Forbes-Mewett (2016), who emphasize the importance of food sharing to both assimilation and the maintenance of cultural identity, as noted above (p. 2441).

Theme 4: Accessing cultural foods in Canada as a pathway to community and/or belonging

The concept of food as a bridge applies to Theme 4 as well, but in this case, it acts as a bridge between now and then, here and there. Numerous respondents present restaurants (or grocery stores) in Canada that serve familiar cultural foods as being a source of comfort and belonging. As one student reports: “When I moved to Canada, I felt homesick. One day, I found a restaurant that served food like home. Eating it made me feel comforted and connected. I even introduced my friends to it, which helped me feel like I belonged." Often, the experience of finding and eating so-called comfort foods locally happens in the company of friends or family as well (thus overlapping with Theme 3).

Several students tell a similar narrative of initially feeling alienated and homesick until coming across a restaurant that features food from their home countries. This student recalls finally feeling “more at home in a foreign country” after finding “a small Nepali restaurant in Kitchener that served momo (dumplings) just like back home. Sitting there, tasting the familiar spices, instantly brought comfort and a sense of connection. It reminded me of my family gatherings in Nepal." Another respondent remembers discovering a restaurant that serves “my favorite childhood dish” that he was able to share with new friends: “As I sat there, savoring the familiar flavors, I felt a wave of comfort wash over me. It reminded me of family dinners back home, where we would gather around the table laughing and sharing stories. That simple meal became a

bridge between my past and present, helping me connect with the people around me.... It made the unfamiliar city feel a little more like home."

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These students describe feeling more at home and/or more connected (both to their origins and their new friends) when enjoying familiar cultural meals at restaurants in their new communities. Some respondents even mention culturally familiar restaurants or grocery stores as catalysts to cooking for themselves (as in Theme 2). After enjoying "a traditional meal from my hometown" at a local Indian restaurant where the "familiar flavors immediately brought back memories of home and comforted me," this student "started cooking traditional dishes and sharing them with my roommates, which helped me bond with them and create a sense of community. That experience made me realize how food connects people and make them feel at home, no matter where they are." One student from China remembers feeling "touched" by a "Chinese grocery store" that "reminds me of my hometown and my country! When I cooked those Chinese traditional cuisines, I had a sense of belonging!"

As each of these stories shows, and as Bailey (2017) also suggests, there is a direct relationship between cultural foods and belonging, especially for newcomers navigating what it means to find a sense of community in a new place (p. 58).

Theme 5: Food as a potential barrier to community and/or belonging

The final theme we found within the narratives composed by our respondents captures the conflicted feelings some students have towards food in their position as newcomers to Canada. For example, one student notes within a single narrative that while there have been "times when unfamiliar foods made me feel isolated, as I struggled to enjoy them," he has also discovered a sense of community through a local market that "made me feel more connected to the city and its culture." Some respondents write about being unsure of how to adapt to cooking and eating in a new place; some express a fear of being stigmatized for their food practices; others simply describe how much they miss the cultural foods they enjoy the most.

Several respondents also write about the difficult process of acclimatizing to the food options and practices in Canada, some of them suggesting, as this student does, that "the real sense of belongingness toward a nation is totally depend on the food its

practices, food traditions.” One student from Nepal recalls how “When I first come to Canada, I found the Canadian food little bit bland for my taste, as I grew up in the country where we put spices in most of the food. It was a good experience for me to try new food here, like poutine, maple syrup with pancake,” while also being pleased to find that more familiar cultural foods were also readily available. These two respondents from India are less satisfied overall:

> As now I am in Canada and misses my food a lot. The food in Canada is also good but I am missing the exact taste of my food here in Canada. Food like the street food ... these are also available in Canada but the taste is way different from India. And I also missed the food cooked by my Mother.
>
> When I came to Canada, it was a huge shift in terms of food preferences as the food that we get here is considerably bland as compared to where I come from. I am from India, and India is all about spices. Although there are quite some Indian restaurants here, the spice levels have been toned down to the preferences of the people residing here to make it more palatable for them. This ironically gave me an opportunity to cook for myself, which has helped me consume my comfort food. However, cooking every day can be tedious. But I am slowly adjusting to the food culture in this country.

In these mixed responses, students comment on several of the topics covered in our other themes as well, such as the link between missing familiar foods and missing family or trying to cook for themselves in an effort to replicate cultural foods and maintain a connection to home.

A few students express concern over being judged for their food practices and preferences in a new and unfamiliar place, as in this response: “I believe food can bring a sense of belonging or unbelonging because people can sometimes judge or feel judged based on their dietary preferences or cultural food habits. When people feel like they eat the same way, they feel like they ARE the same way.” For other respondents, such fear has ultimately proven to be unfounded: “at first I avoided to have interaction with them related to food. I was afraid to be misjudged... but in the end people showed themselves open-minded and this is no longer a barrier."

Some respondents are openly critical of what they view as unhealthy eating habits in Canada, including food choices available on campus. One student is saddened by the college cafeteria because “Most of food are pizza and sandwiches, I think the college should have a health food, full of nutrients.... Rice, beans, salad, flour, meat, steak, chicken, eggs, sweet potato. This is daily in my family." Another student is similarly disappointed by many of the food options on campus, noting how his “eating habits have been changed... which makes you feel low... and make you miss home. So I would

just say... try to cook for yourself first and enjoy the first bite... to be happy and healthy." Just a handful of respondents describe eating Canadian foods as a means of feeling more connected to their new community; as this student from India admits, "I really loved the croissant and bagels that Tim Horton share through legacy. I really love eating Canadian food that give me feeling that now I am a part of Canada."

Finally, despite an awareness among students of food accessibility resources (as per our survey results), only one of our respondents chose to write about a community resource directly. His response is worth quoting at length because it brings together a number of the issues raised across the student stories we received:

> Its a beautiful saying that a way to heart goes through stomach. If ever you cooked for a friend and its was tasty, that person will remember you forever. I have several memories but here I would like to talk about my experience with food in Canada. As I move to Canada, everyone started offering pizza and coke whenever I visit my known ones. I started starving for home cooked food as I was very choosy while deciding what to eat. Although, I was enjoying new cuisines but home cooked food was a missing element. Due to the lack of jobs, the groceries were unaffordable so someone at college suggested to connect to Hope house. Nicole volunteer manager welcomed me and offered me groceries and a chance to serve community by volunteering for hope house. During my service as a volunteer I came to know that hundreds of students from Conestoga College receives this token of love and support which they strive, due to lack of jobs and funds. I felt blissful to serve there and survive here in such stressful situations. Now, I am at the end of semester and I came to know that college has started a community pantry where they share free groceries which helped me to support my limited funds. Still, life is challenging, stress and anxiety are at peak, study and exam fever is high but the thing that is leading me to bright future is "love of community."

Cooking for others, being welcomed with food, missing home-prepared meals, having limited financial resources, and finding a sense of hope in community are all touched upon here in this student's endorsement of food supports on and off campus.

CONCLUSIONS

From the Survey

Our survey revealed that students are less satisfied with the availability of culturally appropriate food on campus than off, and this is especially true of international students. Students are also less satisfied with the availability of culturally appropriate food for purchase on campus than with food available through accessibility programs on campus. There could be many reasons for this, perhaps the least of which is that one food source is free. However, given what we know about how unfamiliarity with ingredients can contribute to a students' sense of community dislocation, we can surmise that our students are not as integrated as they could be.

The survey also revealed that international students are less likely to be able to afford to buy food off or on campus, which is another barrier to their integration/community building. Off campus, international students are not eating in community as often as domestic students.

That said, international students generally report that eating on campus contributes to their sense of community and belonging, whereas more domestic students eat alone on campus. This may be due to the sheer volume of international students on campus. International students are more likely to eat with friends, and this could be why they find community through eating on campus. Conversely, domestic students are more likely to attend community events related to food, which could mean that while domestic students are comfortable in the greater community, campus is where international students are most likely to find belonging through food.

From the Community Consultations

Community consultations indicate that international students are heavy users of food support services, affirming the findings of the CSI *Food Security Report* (2023). International students appear to be more communal than domestic students in their approach to food procurement and preparation and visiting food accessibility hubs often becomes a source of community for them.

There is, however, some community backlash against international students using food accessibility programs. Anecdotally, our consultations revealed that members of the communities served by Conestoga have expressed concern that international students are using resources that should be reserved for permanent residents. This may be in

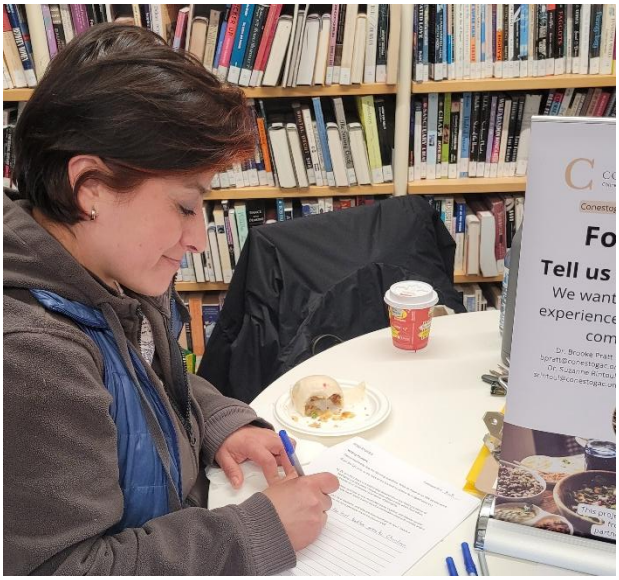
part the result of a lack of understanding about the challenges faced by these students. We found that community organizations want to know more and share more about Conestoga students' needs generally when it comes to food insecurity. Likewise, students would benefit from knowing more about the local community organizations involved with food. As per our survey results, 39% of Conestoga students are aware of off-campus food accessibility services, but don't know how to access them.

From the Writing Pop-Up Events

The sheer enthusiasm we were met with from student participants at each of our four writing events demonstrates their level of interest in food and in having the opportunity to tell their stories. Many students also approached us in groups, suggesting a desire for and/or a comfort level with community-building activities. Taken as a whole, the narrative responses we received reveal food to be an important contributor to community, identity, and belonging for Conestoga's international students. Students generally have positive associations with food as it relates to cultural identity, family, and tradition; however, many of them also associate food with more conflicted feelings of homesickness, loneliness, or disconnection. Being able to cook and eat their own cultural foods is vital to their well-being: it makes international students feel connected to their families and countries of origin, thus alleviating symptoms of homesickness or loneliness, and it makes them feel more at home in Canada, especially when they are able to share traditional foods communally. In fact, cooking and eating cultural foods with friends and/or family members appears to be central to their feelings of belonging and to the maintenance of cultural identity. Of course, all of this requires ready access both to affordable and culturally appropriate foods and/or ingredients and to occasions for sharing and eating in community. Students are largely open to food diversity as well, particularly when presented with avenues for bonding as international students.

At the same time, there are clearly barriers to the potential for food to enhance belonging for international students, and we have determined (through our writing events) that narrative inquiry might be a way for researchers not to *solve* or *avoid* the barriers entirely, but to strengthen the potential. In this way, narrative inquiry about food, memory, and traditions can contribute to food justice on campus. As Murray et al (2023) put it, "The emerging concept of 'food justice' describes a social movement and a set of principles. It aligns with the goals of social justice, demanding recognition of human rights, equal opportunity, fair treatment and is participatory and community-specific" (para 1).

Our vision in this report thus aligns with Jones (2016), who argues for the need to "move away from considering social justice issues on a purely descriptive level toward research and pedagogy that promotes agency and advocacy and fosters collaboration for and about social change across disciplines, domains, and communities while engaging critical cultural concerns within and outside of the academy" (p. 357). Inviting students to share stories about their own experiences is an ideal way not only to better understand them and their concerns but also to express to them the value of their voices.



RECOMMENDATIONS

This project revealed that narrative inquiry, as a research methodology, readily aligns with food justice issues. Because it is "as much about the *possible* as it is about the actual," this narrative-based approach is well suited to researchers and participants who want to "imagine, discover, or create new and better ways of living" (Bochner & Riggs, 2014, p. 198). Telling stories about food may not have a direct or obvious corollary with food justice, but it can enhance understanding of the barriers faced by these students, it can enhance community for these students, and it can foster communication skills and the confidence required to tackle some of the barriers they face that are related to their capacity to make healthy and sustaining food choices. **We recommend the use of narrative inquiry by researchers at Conestoga as an optimal way to analyze social justice issues facing our students and community.** Increased awareness and training related to this method (as provided by the Conestoga Community-Engaged Writing Initiative) would support faculty as they engage students or other research participants.

Based on our findings and conclusions, there are several recommendations that could enhance the integration and sense of community belonging for international students at Conestoga:

- Many international students view traditional food as having a positive relationship to their cultural identity and belonging, but they also associate food with isolation from their countries and families of origin. **Increased opportunities for international students to cook and eat traditional meals in a communal setting should to some degree alleviate these negative feelings and create and greater sense of community in Canada.** Cooking workshops and/or access to a communal kitchen on campus, as per Lordly, Guy, and Li (2020) and Luongo et al (2018), represent two such opportunities; leveraging *The Great Conestoga Cookbook* (2024), published by Student Success, at on-campus food events would be an additional option.

- However, **there are pressing barriers to overcome before such opportunities can emerge.** International students in particular find both off and on-campus food for purchase too expensive. They are more likely than their domestic counterparts to identify as **food insecure**, and more likely than their domestic counterparts to **rely on food support services**. Unfortunately, at the time of this report, all food support programs are paused at Conestoga College. **As such, the college should, where possible, provide more affordable food for purchase as well as invest in sustainable food support services for students.**

- International students are less satisfied with on-campus than off-campus food for purchase in terms of how it reflects their culture. They are somewhat more satisfied with how food in off-campus and (former) on-campus food support programs reflects their culture. **There is a significant need for affordable for-purchase food and food support programs at the college that can reflect the diverse cultural traditions of its student body. This has the potential to foster a sense of community among a group of students who are facing barriers to both food security and integration.**

- In spite of their dissatisfaction with the degree to which on-campus food reflects their culture and traditions, international students indicated that eating on campus with friends and peers fosters a sense of community and belonging; however, while there is a willingness among international students to eat in community at school, they are less likely than domestic students to participate in food-based community events outside of Conestoga. This may indicate **an opportunity for the college to connect with external partners on food-related activities to bridge the gap between eating in community at school and eating in community in other parts of the cities that house Conestoga students.**

- Our consultations revealed that community organizations want to know more and share more about Conestoga students' needs generally when it comes to food insecurity. Likewise, students would benefit from knowing more about local community organizations involved with food. **We recommend that the college connect with external community supports and share data pertaining to the level of food insecurity among our students, our student demographics and food traditions, and the recent reduction in available food support on campus. We also recommend collaboration with these services.** This could include connecting students with inclusive community food events and spaces such as potlucks, brown-bag lunches, community gardens, communal kitchens, and other opportunities to grow, share, and/or cook food.

- Finally, given the findings of our community consultations, we also acknowledge that **increased government funding could enable the college to enhance capacity for free food programs on site. Organizing such programs through international student groups could provide international students with more autonomy and ownership of their food and ingredient options and enhance community for newcomers through a focus on dialogue and sharing about cultural food practices.**

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