FOOD INSECURITY AND SNAP PARTICIPATION AMONG INTERNATIONAL
STUDENTS WORKING ON A COLLEGE CAMPUS

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Abstract

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This study is intended to investigate food insecurity among international students, who are working on a college campus, and to provide greater understanding of the barriers for them and/or their families in accessing SNAP benefits. Twelve individuals who had experience working on campus 20 hours per week as an international student were recruited. A survey based on demographic and financial information and interviews were conducted to identify their financial situation and barriers to access SNAP benefits. The study identified that without the financial support of parents, international students with children face the risk of food insecurity. In addition, barriers for them to access SNAP benefits were identified, which were lack of information to access the program, fear about their immigration status, and feelings of shame about needing benefits. Ultimately, this study is aiming at social justice since this population, as tax payers, has the right to be treated fairly regardless of their immigration status. SNAP eligibility rules need to be changed at the federal level in order to increase access to nutritious foods for this population.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Master’s Committee members at the Humboldt State University, particularly to Dr. Jennifer Maguire at the Department of Social Work for her inspirational guidance, precious feedback, and support during this study; to Ms. Megan Mefford at the Center for International Programs for her attention to detail and commitment to international students at Humboldt State University; and to Dr. Young Sub Kwon at the Department of Kinesiology for his encouragement and motivation. I would also like to thank my husband and children who provided advice and helped me to fully concentrate on my project. Finally, I would like to thank my friends who have supported this project, raised awareness, and proposed solutions to this issue. This project would not be possible without all of them.
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Introduction

Although food, clothing and housing are regarded as basic human needs for survival, many people in the U.S. live in poverty, the leading cause of hunger. In order to dissolve hunger, the federal food and nutrition assistance programs such as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as the Food Stamp Program, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants & Children (WIC), and school meals have been important sources of food assistance for low-income households and children. College students are no exception to hunger since many have first-hand experience of food insecurity during their college years. Many low-income students experience food insecurity. College students in need also have the right to feed themselves in dignity; thus, there is a need for contributing to the end of hunger and food insecurity among college students by helping them gain better access to adequate, nutritious food in order to promote their well-being.

The number of students attending college continues to grow because a college degree is believed to be a passport to a good job and economic mobility. In 2012, about 30 percent of working age adults in America held a bachelor’s degree, a growth from the 11 percent in 1940 when the Census Bureau first collected educational attainment data (The U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Increasingly, students from low-income families can get more opportunities to pursue a college education with various forms of financial aid such as scholarships, grants and loans.
Many college students struggle with tuition costs while competing for a shrinking pool of financial aid. If they come from other cities, their financial burden will be much greater due to the additional expense of the cost of housing and living. Humboldt State University, for example, has a high rate of non-resident students. In fact, the percentage of the local students is only 14.8% of the total undergraduate and graduate enrollment (Humboldt State University Fast Facts Data Center, 2012). If parents are not able to financially support their children throughout the four years of college, some students may not be able to afford to eat. Since the price of groceries has increased more than 21 percent between 2006 and 2013 (United States Department of Agriculture, 2014), students in need have been forced to eat cheaper, unhealthy food. For international students, there is even greater financial pressure since they are classified as out-of-state students, and charged tuition fees three times as much as California residents (Kaur, 2006).

This study is about SNAP (food stamp) participation among international students in the U.S. The overall purpose of the project is to provide greater understanding of the barriers for this population and/or their families to access SNAP benefits. It is also to address the problem of the eligibility criterion of the SNAP program for non-citizens. There is oppression, unfairness, and inequalities under the existing system in the US, and this population has been excluded continually from main-stream society. In particular, many international students work on campus and pay taxes on their earned income. However, they don’t qualify for any public assistance programs, including federally funded nutrition assistance, since they are classified as legal non-immigrants. The federal
law on the basic eligibility rules for SNAP is neither balanced nor fair for legal non-immigrants, especially for international students who have low income and limited assets.

The research question around which this study is designed asks “Are international students working on college campuses experiencing food insecurity?” This study reports on the results of risk of food insecurity among international students, who are working on campus at least 20 hours per week, and identifies the barriers for international students with families to gain access SNAP benefits.
Literature Review

Studies addressing food insecurity among college students suggest a higher prevalence of food insecurity among this population compared with the general population. For example, a study in Hawaii found that 45% of students were at risk of food insecurity (Chaparro et al. 2008). Another study in Australia found that almost 72% of students were at risk (Hughes, Donaldon & Leveritt, 2011). However, there were not as many studies conducted in the US due to lack of interest in research on college students. A recent study addressed this gap in the research by analyzing the prevalence of food insecurity and identifying correlations among students attending a rural university in Oregon. According to the study “Prevalence and Correlates of Food Insecurity among Students Attending a Midsize Rural University in Oregon,” food insecurity affected 59% of students, and students reporting fair or poor health were more likely to be food insecure. Employed students and those participating in food assistance programs were also more likely to be food insecure. Thus, food insecurity is an indicator of economic hardship that college students are facing. The study also identified that food insecurity among college students attending a midsize rural university was higher than that of the general population (15%), or even other college student populations in urban areas (Patton-Lopez et al. 2014).

College students who face food insecurity are associated with lower academic performance, poor health, and decreased psychosocial function, as they are suffering from financial hardship. Their financial hardship can translate into budget demands that
compete with food budget, such as tuition, textbooks, housing, utilities, and health care, while the price of groceries and tuition have steadily increased (The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). Since food insecurity is deeply related to economic hardship that college students are facing, one study pointed out that without their parents as safety nets, students are often forced to work many hours, some even working full-time while they are studying. Time spent working and lack of adequate food can affect students’ academic success since students who report experiencing food insecurity are likely to report below 3.0 GPA. In addition, food insecurity is an outcome of low-income students’ disadvantaged trajectories. Therefore, food insecurity among college students needs to be addressed by scholars in order for it to be taken under consideration by policy makers in the context of promoting successful higher education pathways (Patton-Lopez et al. 2014).

There has been no study to address food insecurity among the international student population in the US. However, international students might be faced with great financial pressure along with academic stress because they must pay out-of-state tuition and be a full-time student according to immigration law in the U.S. in order to maintain their visa (F-1), which is the U.S. non-immigrant student visa. International students are allowed to work in the United States, but only under certain conditions and in accordance with complex guidelines and restrictions issued by the United States Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS). They are generally allowed to work on campus up to 20 hours per week, but they are not allowed to work off campus during the term of their stay as an F-1 student in the United States (International Student, 2014).
The CalFresh program is California’s version of the Federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Since its goal is to alleviate hunger and malnutrition by permitting low-income households to obtain a more nutritious diet, it has been considered as the cornerstone of government programs intended to relieve domestic hunger and food insecurity (Congressional Digest, 2013). Although the program provided food assistance to low-income households, including legal immigrants, who met nationally uniform income and asset eligibility test, the results of several studies indicate that nonparticipation in welfare programs by eligible households is a common occurrence.

In Humboldt county, the poverty level is higher than the state average, and its household income is one-third lower than other California counties in 2008-2012 (United States Census Bureau, 2014). Using data from the California Food Policy Advocate, the Humboldt County Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) estimated that less than two-thirds of the total eligible individuals are participating in SNAP, known as CalFresh in California, missing out on an additional $1.05 million each month available to households not currently enrolled. In addition, the $12.6 million in CalFresh that Humboldt County leaves on the table for the year translates to a loss of $22.6 million in local economic impact due to low enrollment (California Food Policy Advocates, 2014).

The reasons for these low participation rates are not well understood in large parts due to a lack of adequate data. College students may be no exception to these low participation since the number of students is unknown while the agency does not track
whether applicants are enrolled in college. A previous study shows the reasons why eligible households do not participate in food stamps. According to the study, the reasons for nonparticipation in food stamps fall into five parts: lack of information about Food Stamp eligibility rules, the low food stamp benefits, the rude or condescending attitude of local welfare workers, barriers to access to social service offices due to the distance and the physical condition; and the stigma of welfare dependence based on the fear of a loss of self-respect or the respect of others as a result of using welfare (Coe, 1983).

Accounting for demographic and program effects on participation, the study found that many individuals responded that they did not think that they were eligible because they knew nothing about the eligibility requirements of the program (Coe, 1983). Moreover, nonelderly unmarried men were significantly more likely to report that they had been told by local welfare officials that they were not eligible to receive food stamps since they have been considered as less deserving of assistance by local welfare officials and thus subject to the discretionary application of more stringent eligibility requirements. Never-married, able-bodied adults or households without dependents were less likely than married-couple households to leave the Food Stamp Program, and female and African American headed households also tended to have low exit rates (Ribar et al., 2010).

Better educated people would be more informed about the program because of their greater ability to read and comprehend items from the news media and other sources of information. However, since many students are not enrolled in the CalFresh program it can be inferred that poor information is an important factor in explaining
nonparticipation among college students. Poor information concerning eligibility status may be the primary reason for non-participation of all students, but particularly international students since they used to believe they are not eligible to participate. The program has been more focused on children, on working families, and on disabled persons and seniors, as well as on unemployed workers, but less focused on college students.

Since the current status of SNAP categorical eligibility is the product of State choices, California State chose the option to use broad-based categorical eligibility to expand and ease access to SNAP eligibility. California has expanded categorical eligibility in ways that make most households with low incomes in California categorically eligible for SNAP. For example, if a student enrolled in CalWORKs, the student would then be eligible for SNAP automatically. California retains the 130 percent of poverty gross income limit under regular federal eligibility rules (Congressional Digest, 2013). Nevertheless, the program still has structural weaknesses and much room for growth since it never cover the need of non-immigrants.

The Humboldt State University CalFresh Outreach Enrollment, which is the contract between Humboldt County’s Department of Health and Human Services and Humboldt State University, is aiming to expand enrollment in the CalFresh program among Humboldt State students and staff in the campus in order to allow them easy access to healthy and affordable foods. According to the co-principal investigators for the project, California has one of the lowest SNAP participation rates in the U.S. and
colleges in general are viewed as having particularly low participation rates (*Humboldt State Now, 2013*).

No study of international students currently exists to analyze the issue of nonparticipation in food relief programs since this population has historically been excluded from the eligibility for the SNAP benefits. Consequently, those students are often forced to choose cheaper, less nutritious foods over the pricier fruits, vegetables, and whole grains that the government itself says constitute a healthy diet. According to the U.S. Department of Commerce, international students contribute $24.7 billion to the U.S. economy through their expenditures on tuition and living expenses, and they provide significant revenue to the U.S. economy and individual host states for living expenses, such as room, books and supplies, transportation, health insurance, support for accompanying family members, and so on. According to the Open Doors report published by the Institute of International Education in partnership with the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of Educational, the number of international students at colleges and universities in the U.S. increased to 723,277 during the 2010-2011, and California is a top state hosting higher numbers of international students (*Open Doors Report, 2013*).

While about 74% of all international students receive their primary funding outside the United States from personal and family funds (*Open Doors Data, 2013*), other students such as graduate students or postdoctoral students receive their funds from their university in the U.S. as a teaching assistant or a research assistant. Even though international students have financial support from home and through campus jobs, it is
often not enough to cover living expenses and usually food is the first to be cut from household budgets (United States Department of Agriculture, 2007). A number of married international students will face with financial difficulty if their spouses do not have a work visa; thus their income would not be enough for a living while they must pay a tax on their earning income in the U.S. There is a need to support them with the SNAP benefits in order to keep them out of a state of food insecurity and help them complete their studies. Since SNAP, as a critical safety net to alleviate hunger and malnutrition, is a nutrition program run by the USDA and is not considered a welfare program, international students should not be excluded from the eligibility for SNAP (USDA Food and Nutrition Service, 2014).

The CalFresh Outreach program expands its eligibility to students who work 20 hours per week or are eligible for the federal work-study program, which is a need-based program of financial assistance. However, international students who work on campus 20 hours per week and have a net income below 100 percent of the federal poverty guidelines and liquid assets below $2,000 are still not eligible for CalFresh benefits. While the HSU CalFresh Outreach program is targeted at expanding enrollment among the students and staff in the campus, they are able to enroll in the program easily so that they can increase access to healthy foods with the support of the student assistants. International students who have low income and limited assets may also enroll in this assistance programs according to the co-principal investigator for the project. For example, if they have U.S. – born children, they can apply for the benefits for their children because their children are eligible to gain access to CalFresh benefits. However,
There is a question about how they become aware of the program. In addition, international students who currently work on campus 20 hours per week have been labeled as being in eligible to participate in the program while American students who are working 20 hours of doing work studies are qualified for the program.

In order to understand immigrants’ access to public benefits such as SNAP, immigration policy and the terminology associated with immigration status should be understood by social service providers. Immigrants include legal permanent residents “green-card holders,” who have been given permission by the U.S. government to work and reside in the United States indefinitely, refugees, and asylees who have been granted permission to reside and work in the United States because they are fleeing persecution. On the other hand, individuals holding a travel, student or work visa are classified as non-immigrants. Undocumented immigrants are those who either entered the country illegally and whose visas have expired. (Earner, 2007).

According to federal eligibility requirements for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), legal permanent residents, refugees or asylees are eligible for the benefits, but visa holders and undocumented individuals don’t qualify for benefits (California Guide to Food Benefits, 2011). Although CalFresh expanded its eligibility to non-citizens, the eligibility criterion for international students is not clear so that it may entirely depend on a case by case basis. Many students would never consider applying for public assistance while in school; that is, it would be hard for them to become aware of it without providing specific information through various channels, especially for
international students. International students would never think about it because they assume that they do not qualify for the program due to their immigrant status.
Materials and Methods

Theoretical Framework

Community-based participatory research is intended increase knowledge and understanding of a given phenomenon and integrates the knowledge gained with interventions and policy and social change to improve the health and equality of life of community members (Israel, Schulz, Parker, & Becker, 1998). Community-based participatory research is also intended to involve selected research issues related to dependence, oppression, and other inequities in need of evaluation, and to reveal strategies that can address community issues so that community needs are evaluated and action is taken with the purpose of social change through development of services and organization (Danley & Langer 1999). Critical social theory is a school of thought which has as its primary objective the improvement of the human condition, and this theory is intended to be a radically different approach which would take into account the human construction of social forms of life and the possibility of their recreation (Myers & Avison, 2002). Critical theory demonstrates the relationship of power to the development of social welfare policy and assumes that social welfare policy is debated and developed in a context of power struggles (McLaren 2003). Community-based participatory research, critical social theory, and critical theory informed this study to resist and change the existing injustice system in the US.
Type of Research

Because international students have different living condition and socioeconomic status while in the US, qualitative methods were used to describe vividly their unique realities and phenomena. Qualitative research is useful to seek answers to the research question in order for in-depth understanding about how their personal experience and perspectives are created and given meaning. By conducting a survey and interviews, a more realistic view of the lived world, which cannot be understood and experienced in numerical data and statistical analysis, could be obtained, and would allow the investigator to describe the existing phenomena in this community. In addition, the participants were motivated to identify issues on the topic by promoting their awareness through exploring of their experience.

Research Problems, Question and Purpose

The topic of this study is food insecurity among international students in order to promote social justice and equality between international students and American students working on HSU campus. International students, who are working on campus at least 20 hours per week have been labeled as being ineligible to participate in the CalFresh program, while American students who are working 20 hours per week or doing work studies are qualified for the program. The research question of this project is, “Are international students, who are working on college campuses experiencing food insecurity?” The purpose of this study is to provide greater understanding of the barriers for them and/or their families to access CalFresh along with the aim of creating social
justice. Since there is no valid research that supports this population, this study will be meaningful to international students by investigating food insecurity among them.

Research Design

Twelve (N=12) individuals, who had experience in working on college campuses as an international student in the US, were recruited through “word of mouth.” To recruit research participants, a staff member in the international office and international professors at Humboldt State University were contacted. They were asked if they can provide the investigator with potential participants’ contact information. The investigator contacted potential participants if they are willing to speak to the investigator by phone call or e-mail to see if they are interested in participating in this study. All of the international student respondents had experience in working up to 20 hours per week on campus.

The investigator read through and answered question about the written informed consent with all potential participants prior to collecting any data. Potential participants understood the nature of the study and the risks and benefits involved when they were to make an informed decision about their participation. Written informed consent was acquired from all potential participants. An unsigned copy of the consent form was given to participants in person. For e-mail informed consent, the consent form was sent via e-mail to the subject who then typed his or her name and date into the spaces provided on the consent form, and returned it to the investigator via e-mail. For telephone consent, the investigator read the informed consent to the subject, and the subject was offered the
opportunity to ask questions. When they agreed to participate, the informed consent form was sent to them and a signed, completed form was obtained by email and letter prior to collecting any data.

Data-Collection Methods

The written informed consent form was reviewed by potential participants and obtained prior to collecting any data. Survey and interviews were conducted by in person, phone call, or email. The survey was conducted in English and interviews were conducted in English and Korean. Before interviews, a survey containing 15 questions was conducted. The survey questions were based on demographic information including age, marital status, number of children, and income. The survey included their participation in food assistance programs, their formal and informal financial support, their perceptions of the existing social welfare system and recommendations for change. During interviews, the participants were given open-ended questions with minimal probing for clarification purposes only. The actual questions posed to the participants were:

- What were your financial circumstances, hardships, and coping strategies during your study period?
- When your income fell short of your expenses, how did you prioritize things and how did you decide what to pay first, second, and so on?
• For some people, there is a big windfall at tax time, because they get lots of tax credits. How about you? How did you spend the money and how did you decide what to spend it on?
• Sometimes within a household, some people are eligible for SNAP, WIC, other programs, while others are not. How about you? How did that affect how you and your family handle?
• People have all kinds of ways to make do when the food budget gets tight. Some skip meals. Others eat at a relative’s house; others go to food pantries or soup kitchens. How about you and your family?
• What do you think/should be done to help international students who struggle to feed their families?

During the interview, notes were made on a blank interview form that allowed the investigator to use the “code” rather than having a participant’s name on the form. Each participant was identified with a code in order to protect the identities of the participants. When this process was completed, similar ideas and themes from the notes made after each interview were grouped and given a conceptual label. The data from all interviews was sorted in files by code names, and the subthemes and the relationships were noted within each summary. In addition, the investigator reviewed her comments with the participant and sought clarification at the end of each interview.
Ethical Considerations

A small risk of loss of confidentiality, small risks of stress and emotional distress were indicated in the consent form. In order to manage such the risks, every effort was made to protect the information the participants gave us, and the participants who were complaining about being emotionally distressed, and inconvenience could withdraw from this study at any time without consequence. For anonymity and confidentiality, research participation in this study was confidential at all times, and the participants’ names and other identifying information was maintained in a locked file and in the Committee Chair’s locked office, available only to authorized members of this study.

Limitations of the Study

This study has many limitations including sample size and exploratory design that affect generalization of the findings and raises questions about reliability and validity. Despite these limits, the study responds to the need to learn about the experiences of international students and/or their families who experience significant economic hardship. They can be faced with food insecurity. This study does identify how they deal with their limited financial resources and family budget on food, or what barriers they encounter in order to participate in the Federal food and nutrition assistance programs, such as SNAP, WIC, and School Meals.

The sample of international students is small and they do not represent all ethnic groups. In addition, the participants are not current international students, but they had experience in working on campus as an international student in the past and have settled
in the U.S. after finishing their study. It was hard to recruit current international students in the local area due to an insufficient number of international students who are working on campus. Therefore readers would be cautious to draw conclusions about the experiences of all international students with food insecurity and food assistance programs based on the finding of this study.

A qualitative, exploratory study design was chosen because there is no information about the interaction between international students and the federal food and nutrition assistance programs. A survey and open-ended interview questions were posed to the participants in order to elicit descriptions about the experiences and perspectives that international students had about their interactions with the food assistance programs. In choosing this approach, the investigator is aware of the approach’s primary shortcoming: the tendency of the data to be subjective and personal. This approach may pose barriers to achieving a high level of reliability (Rubin & Babbie, 1989). To address this limitation, the investigator conducted multiple readings to identify as many emergent themes as possible and used extensive quotes from the participants when presenting the data in order to address validity.
Results

Twelve individuals interviewed for the study were composed of four females and eight males. The participants represented four single head-of-households and eight families, and they all had experience in working on campus at least 20 hours per week as an international student during their studies. All participants were Asian. Eleven participants reported that they were full-time graduate students aged 30 years or more, and had received teaching assistantship and/or research assistantship for their financial aid benefits from their university. This constituted their monthly income during their graduate studies. Only one participant was a full-time undergraduate student in her mid-20s and worked on campus for the university catering services for 20 hours each week (See Table 1).

About 67% of the monthly income of the households was from $1,000 to $2,000 and 25% of the households received a monthly income of between $2,000 and $3,000. Only one household received less than $1,000 (See Figure 1). About 67% of the participants completed their studies in 4 or 5 years; but, only one participant gave up without completing his studies due to his financial difficulties (See Figure 2). For the married students, the seven spouses did not have a job due to their immigration status. About 88% of the spouses had student dependent visas (F-2), and this visa status is not allowed to work in the US. Only one spouse had a student visa since he was a full-time international graduate student (See Figure 3). Every family had at least one child born in the US during their studies.
There was a distinct difference between the single and the married students regarding their financial circumstances during their studies. Single students reported that their financial situation was not so bad. That is, their monthly income was sufficient to cover rent, transportation, and other basic living costs, and they had never experienced food insecurity. They stated that they did not feel the need to participate in any food assistance program. However, they occasionally obtained financial assistance from their parents in their home country when they were in an unexpected financial hardship due to their unplanned expenses.
<table>
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<th>Marital Status</th>
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<td>T/A &amp; R/A</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1: Participants by Monthly Income

- Less $1,000: 25%
- $1,000-$2,000: 67%
- $2,000-$3,000: 8%
Figure 2: Participants by Years of Study

- < 4 yrs: 8%
- 4-5 yrs: 33%
- ≥ 5 yrs: 59%

Figure 3: Participants’ Spouses by Visa Types

- F1: 12%
- F2: 88%
Note: The F-1 visa is a student visa and the F-2 visa is given to spouses and children of an F-1 student.

For the married students, most families reported that their monthly income was not sufficient to raise their children and cover their cost of living since their spouses could not work. About 60% of the participants received financial aid from their parents (See Figure 4). Financial support from their parents and personal savings were necessary to overcome their limited income during their studies. Only one couple was self-sufficient financially since they both were studying and receiving financial aid from the university. Both the single and married students reported that food costs were generally the least expensive, but food insecurity did not happen to them because they had adjusted to living a simple life and knew how to save their limited income to feed themselves and/or their families. Married students reported getting lots of tax credits due to their low income and their children. They described that the child tax credit helped them pay off their credit card debt or save for their basic living expenses.
About 42% of the participants had participated in food assistance programs during their studies (See Figure 5). The four single students had never participated in SNAP, WIC, or other food assistance programs since they were not eligible for them. On the other hand, the four families had participated in WIC and only one family had participated in SNAP (See Figure 6). However, only two families appreciated the benefits of the WIC program, while the other families said that it helped their financial needs a little bit but gave up the program due to the limited option to choose food and their feeling of shame.
Figure 5: Participants by Participation in Food Assistance Programs

Figure 6: Participants by Participation in WIC and SNAP
Data Analysis

Food Insecurity

All participants described that they didn’t experience food insecurity during their studies. Single students reported that their monthly income by working on campus was sufficient for them to buy groceries since they were not burdened with families during the studying period. One of the participants stated:

…I did not feel much stress at that time. It was not because I had sufficient funds, but because I was single without much financial obligation other than myself… However, I made some adjustments in my life styles when the IMF crisis occurred and limited funding was available from my parents. For example, I had my own apartment before the IMF, but after the international financial crisis, I had a roommate and I regularly purchased the goods from local second hands stores to meet my needs.

Married students reported that their monthly income was not sufficient to meet their living expenses; however, they were able to manage their financial hardships with their parents’ financial support and/or personal savings so that they were able to avoid living in an extreme situation of struggling with food insecurity, during their studies. They described:

I had a graduate-school assistantship that was the sole financial source other than my own saving in South Korea. I was reluctant to use the saving because it must be a source to handle any financial emergency in the future, so my financial plan was to maximize the use of school’s financial aid, i.e. reduce monthly expenditures accordingly. When my income fell short of my family’s expenses, there were fixed items that I couldn’t adjust at all, such as housing rental fee, auto loan, insurance, etc., so the only available option to my family was to spend less on restaurants, clothes, food, and so on.

Obviously, I was in tough situation at that time with only little income that I had from the stipend. Thus, I did have financial support from my parents so that I
could live and raise my children. As far as finding additional financial support, I didn’t pursue any other jobs but did try to cut the expenses as possible as I could. The only thing I didn’t reduce to spend my money was about my children so that they could have appropriate food and experience/education that they should have by their ages. However, I did reduce my spending on entertainments first and then cut down travel expenses when I had financial issues.

Although all participants described that they had never experienced food insecurity during their studies, the potential risk of food insecurity among international students, especially for families, was identified:

It took 5 years to complete my study for a Ph.D. degree, and I was occasionally faced with financial difficulties for various reasons while I was studying in the U.S. My financial aid from the university was the sole income for my family and it was not enough to cover our living expenses and to raise my three children. With my parents’ support, I had no problem to feed and clothe my children. However, financial support from the parents in Korea was greatly affected by the financial situation of my parents, the exchange rate, and Korea’s economic conditions. I have read an article in the paper before that many Korean students who were studying in the U.S. gave up school and returned to Korea during the IMF financial crisis in Korea. If it hadn’t been for enough money to feed my family, I would not have stayed in the U.S. because we do not have any relatives in the U.S. to ask for help.

If they no longer have their parents’ support and personal savings, they couldn’t have done their studies and would have returned to their homeland.

Common Barriers to Participate in SNAP

During the interview, married participants were well informed about the WIC program, so a fair number of the households had participated in the WIC program. They described that they were given information about the WIC program from a social worker or nurse in a hospital where their baby was born. They said the benefits of WIC helped them to buy food, but they also expressed its limitation to choose food:
My wife and children did have a benefit from WIC and we enjoyed. In particular, WIC did help me a lot during the summer time when I had no stipend from a graduate assistantship. In Florida, it was very easy to use the WIC check at the grocery stores to buy food that I wanted to buy (could select things that I wanted to buy under the WIC regulation); however, I couldn’t have those various food options when I was in Mississippi. In MS, I had to get all WIC foods from the WIC distribution center with limited selection of the foods. Thus, my family did have lots of benefits to reduce the spending on foods in Florida but not in Mississippi (just little savings compare to Florida).

All married students had children who were born in the US during their studies, but only one household participated in SNAP. Although their children were eligible for SNAP benefits, most families didn’t get SNAP benefits while the five households were participants in the WIC program only. Three common barriers to SNAP enrollment in the US were identified by the participants. These were: 1) lack of information about the program, 2) fear (mostly about the possibility of a denial of their green card, known as permanent resident card), and 3) feelings of shame.

In the discussion about SNAP, some participants were not aware of the program and didn’t know that their children were eligible for SNAP benefits. They spoke openly about international students’ lack of knowledge about immigration status and law and the lack of information about the program. One of the participants claimed:

In fact, I had no idea of detail information of WIC and SNAP. If I had known these programs, I would have applied these to get a benefit. I believe that many international students do not have specific information, particularly about government support programs. If universities or an international office can provide some information regarding government support programs to international students, it can help them gain information according to their needs.

However, the participants also expressed their fear about the possibility that they couldn’t get a green card if they had participated in SNAP. When they were asked about
their willingness to join SNAP, they said that they were unsure whether to participate or not due to their immigration status. One participant expressed his anxiety:

I didn’t apply for SNAP and WIC program because I didn’t want to be involved in any trouble. I was able to apply for SNAP since my two children were born here, but lots of international students in the community were reluctant to apply for the public welfare programs, especially for food stamps. There had been rumors that if non-immigrants had gotten the benefits, it would have been reported to the immigration office so that their application for a green card may be rejected when applying. I didn’t want to take any risk, however small.

Lastly, some participants acknowledged experiencing feelings of shame, discomfort or inconvenience when they were applying for and receiving WIC benefits. Although only one family was involved in SNAP, their feelings and experience can be indicated as a barrier to gain access to SNAP benefits. They described:

…I, my wife and a child who born in the U.S. had to together for participation in the education session. And to purchase pre chosen food at the market was very shame and nervous because I did not have an experience of using food assistant program before.

I just felt embarrassed when I pay for foods by WIC benefits. I gave up the benefits after that time and I didn’t go to the grocery store anymore. Also, I didn’t want to be the focus of public censure. Even some Korean-American often criticizes food stamp recipients including Korean students by saying that immigrants waste the citizens’ taxes.

The WIC program in New Mexico was nice, efficient and used more advance technology, they gave a card to buy food, not check that you have to buy all the food on the check at one time. The WIC offices in Kansas hired more staff, so you have to go through many people for an appointment. It is not a wise use of the taxpayer’s money for the program, and wasted the precious time and energy of young parents for getting some help from the program with food.
Benefits of Food and Nutrition Service

The families who participated in WIC and SNAP were asked if they felt that they or their families had benefited in any way because of their involvement with the food assistance programs. Only one household had participated in SNAP and gained access to the benefits for their two children. The participant expressed his feeling by saying that “it helped us to buy foods whatever we want to buy, including organic food.” And, the four families had participated in WIC, but only two families said that it helped their families to handle food by saying, “We used only WIC before my children turned to five years old. That helped my family a lot, saving money in buying food. We could eat better with WIC. Or else, life would be harder.”

On the other hand, two other families described that foods purchased with WIC benefits didn’t fit their diet since there is a specific list of what mothers can buy in WIC assistance programs. They stated their experience:

- It helped my financial needs a little bit, even though infant formula was a great help. Many supported items by WIC did my family give up because of neither interest nor consumption.

- We used the WIC program only several months because it was not really convenient to my family. The chosen food by program was not really fit to us as an Asian family.

Recommendations for Change

The participants’ suggestions for change focused on increasing financial aid in school, allowing their spouse to work in the U.S. by issuing Social Security Number (SSN), and by increasing access to nutritious foods. They have suggested:
More financial aid need to be offered by increasing a stipend and allowing them to have more opportunity to engage in research project being able to obtain some financial rewards.

I believe if spouses of international students (F-2 visa holders) are allowed to work, it would be a great help for international students struggling to feed their families.

If this is the case for some of the international students, increasing the food stamp funds should be one of the options. It usually takes a long time to finish their studies in order to obtain a doctor’s degree, so I believe government need to consider changing policy in some degree. For example, if international students have been here for three years as tax payers, they should be eligible for public social service.

Information for where they get inexpensive items foods for living and information for community services supporting low-income families would be important and can be helpful.
Discussion

International married students with children born in the U.S. participated in discussions about their encounters with SNAP in the US and identified similar obstacles in their experiences with the system. These included the lack of information to access the program, the fear about their immigration status being denied to renew their visa and the possibility of a denial of their application for permanent residence, and feeling shamed. The stories told by these participants, who are unfamiliar with SNAP, address the problems with accessing information about the program, even though the households were eligible to receive the SNAP benefits due to their own child who was a U.S. citizen. They had little or no knowledge of public social welfare programs and of their rights as parents in America. To make matters worse, most participants expressed the fear and misinformation about the program preventing them from accessing important public benefits. In addition, some participants didn’t want to have the stigma of the welfare recipient, resulting in lower participation in SNAP among this population. The story told by one of the participants expressed his feeling of being poor when he participated in the WIC benefits.

There is a need for support of this population, especially international students with children, to access support for the basic needs of life, including food. Community organizations and public agencies working with immigrants need to recognize the identified barriers to gain access to SNAP benefits and understand the big-picture basics of policy with immigration status and how it affects eligibility for benefits. Also, they
need to help spread correct information for this community through universities and international offices. It should include information that all U.S. citizen children are eligible for SNAP, regardless of the immigration status of the parents, and that an immigrant’s use of his child’s food stamps will not prevent a person from either getting a green card, becoming a legal permanent resident, or becoming a U.S. citizen. Furthermore, states should not require a Social Security Number or immigration status information from parents applying for SNAP for their children in order to reduce their anxiety and fear about their immigration status, since they are mindful of the possibility of deportation when their visa needs to be renewed or when they apply for adjustment of status (green card or permanent residency).

While food insecurity is deeply related to financial hardships that American college students are facing today, this study identified that international students also can be faced with hunger or food insecurity without their parents’ financial support. As safety nets, parents’ support is an important financial resource for international student, especially for students with spouses and children. Without parents’ support, many international students might be forced to eat unhealthy food, or some students may have to give up their studies and return to their home country.

Most of the participants in this study indicated that they are not eligible for any public welfare service, including SNAP benefits, due to their immigrant status. Thus, community-based organizations such as campus food pantries and local food pantries can play a critical role in outreaching to international students and strengthening the capacities of each student to overcome their financial hardships. However, the best way
to help international students get away from food insecurity would be to get SNAP benefits. This study identified that it took the participants a long time (about 5 years) to complete their studies while their spouses could not work in the U.S. due to their immigration status; thus, their financial situation can become worse. International students are required to provide an official bank statement as proof of their financial resources when they obtain a student visa, but their financial conditions can worse during their studies. Policy makers should consider the fact that international students have been largely contributing to both local and national economies through their expenditures on tuition and living expenses. At the very least, international students who are working on campus at least 20 hours per week should be eligible for SNAP benefits since they pay taxes for their income. They have the right to be treated fairly regardless of immigration status; thus, SNAP eligibility rules need to be changed at the federal level in order to support this population to gain access to SNAP benefits.

Implications for Practice and Research

Despite these significant limits, this study would contribute to social work fields. Social work practitioners and scholars will gain comprehensive knowledge in the area of non-immigrants and the federal food and nutrition assistance programs. They will understand this populations’ limitation as non-immigrants, and their difficulties and barriers to gain access to SNAP. For those who advocate for policy change, they will be aware that this population has been marginalized by society along with the unreasonable
social assistance system in the US. Social work professionals need to address the equal
erights for this population through advocating their rights and needs.

More research is needed on international students and/or their families in the food
assistance programs. This should include a larger, more diversified sample to explore
food insecurity as well as their coping strategies in the face of those insecurities. In order
to investigate food insecurity among international students in detail and to learn more
about the connection between food insecurity and academic success, a large-scale
population study is needed based on currently enrolled international students. It is hoped
that this study will serve as an inspiration for more rigorous research concerning this
population and the federal food and nutrition assistance programs.
References


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