

On the menu: Research helps future restaurant managers reach out to customers with food allergies

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A Kansas State University research team is serving up improved food allergy education for future restaurant managers and staff.

Junehee Kwon, associate professor of hospitality management and dietetics, and Kevin Sauer, assistant professor of hospitality management and dietetics, are co-principal investigators on a project recently funded by a United States Department of Agriculture Higher Education Challenge Grant for more than \$140,000.

"We are developing food allergy education materials that educators in hospitality management and dietetics can use to supplement the education of future food service managers," Kwon said.

A recent national study showed that more than 40 percent of people who have a seafood allergy -- one of the most common allergies in the United States -- have experienced an allergic reaction from eating in a restaurant.

This high percentage of allergic reactions may be from hidden allergens in sauces or from mixed dishes coming in contact with a safe food item, Kwon said. Knowing that such cross-contact has occurred may be difficult to determine and declare to the customer. Additionally, restaurant employees may not often understand the true risks of food allergies for their customers.

"Consumers with allergies are frustrated," Kwon said. "They are actually putting their lives in danger by buying and consuming food prepared by someone else. There is a need for consumer education to make sure the customer clearly communicates what his or her specific needs are to the restaurant staff. But even with that communication, people are still frustrated by the apparent inability of food service operations to assure allergen-free food."

The researchers will use the grant to improve food allergy training for future restaurant and [food service](#) managers. They will develop educational materials to assist students in [hospitality management](#) and [dietetics](#) to be more proactive in working with customers who have food allergies.

"However, we realize that just having knowledge about food allergies is not enough," Kwon said. "Learning more about how food allergies can really impact someone's life can motivate these future managers to take food allergy precautions more seriously."

To motivate students, the researchers plan to use storytelling methods that feature video testimonials from individuals who have food allergies. These videos are meant to appeal to the students' emotions and show how food allergies have affected someone's life.

"For preliminary data collection, we created a short storytelling video and measured students' attitudes toward food allergies before and after watching it," Kwon said. "We saw an increase in how the students perceived the severity of the risks associated with food allergies and their motivation to learn more increased."

With the newly funded grant, the researchers will collect more testimonials, record them and incorporate them into new [food allergy](#) education curricula. In the future, they hope to expand their scope to

work directly with employees and managers currently working in the [food](#) service industry.

Kwon and Sauer will also recruit undergraduate researchers for the project, particularly undergraduates involved in the Kansas Bridges to the Future program, the Developing Scholars Program and the Summer Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program.

USDA Higher Education Challenge Grants support projects that address an educational need through a creative or nontraditional approach. Projects have the potential for regional or national influence and can serve as a model for other institutions.

Provided by Kansas State University

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