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## "I AM A HMONG AMERICAN": AN EXPLORATION OF THE EXPERIENCES OF HMONG STUDENTS IN COLLEGE

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“I AM A HMONG AMERICAN”: AN EXPLORATION OF THE EXPERIENCES OF  
HMONG STUDENTS IN COLLEGE

By  
DUCHA HANG

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULLFILLMENT OF  
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2015

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OF

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2015

## **Abstract**

As the changing demographics in the United States are steadily shifting the student populations in colleges and universities, the focus on retention and college success becomes ever more important. When marginalized and underrepresented students like Asian Americans enter post-secondary education institutions and are assumed to fit stereotypes like the Model Minority Myth which suggests that all Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) students are high achievers, how do these students succeed and continue with their education under challenges including discrimination, language barriers (Lee, 2008) and cultural tension (Xiong and Lee, 2011; Ngo, 2007)? This study explores the experiences of Hmong college students. More specifically, the goal of this research is to describe how Hmong students make sense of their college experiences from their perspectives by examining two research questions: How do Hmong students make sense of their experiences in college? What contexts and situations influence the experiences and success of Hmong students in college? This research uses a phenomenological approach consisting of in-depth interviews with Hmong students from a New England college and Hmong individuals who have graduated from college. The first interview required the participants to respond to questions exploring their family backgrounds, experiences in schools prior to college, and their experiences in post-secondary education. The second interview was facilitated to provide opportunities for participants to elaborate on statements and stories from the first interview and was used for member checking. The students' responses from the interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. Using phenomenological analysis and specifically thematic inductive analysis, the data were

analyzed to develop themes. Three themes emerged from the data and captured how Hmong students make sense of their college experience: navigating the college system, support structures, and living in a bicultural world: “I am Hmong American”. These themes were used to develop recommendations for practitioners in higher education and suggestions for future research.

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that sharing stories is a great way to learn new things, and they have helped me to learn new things about myself.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Statement of the Problem**

Completion rates for bachelor's degrees for underrepresented students in higher education are very different from those of the majority (Carey, 2004). The success of underrepresented students in post-secondary education institutions continues to be alarmingly low. In an analysis of the comprehensive federal database on graduation rates taken from the Graduation Rate Survey, Carey (2004) notes that of the 772 colleges and universities in the United States where approximately 5% of their students are African American, 299 colleges have a graduation rate of less than 30% for African American students. One hundred and sixty four of the 772 colleges have a graduation rate for African American students of less than 20%, and 68 colleges have a graduation rate under 10% (Carey, 2004). Often times, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) are disregarded as students who demonstrate academic need or require support because of the exceptional achievement patterns reported for this population. The academic achievement data for AAPI are aggregated and suggest that all Asian American students perform at high levels of academic achievement. What is not showcased through the AAPI academic achievement data are the experiences lived by the diverse subgroups that make up the AAPI category, particularly groups that rank lower in educational attainment. The real challenges and experiences of AAPI students and for Hmong students in particular can be overshadowed by the aggregated data and the stereotype of the Model Minority Myth. In this study, I explore one understudied AAPI group – the Hmong – and their lived experiences of college to bring to light the

stories that are hidden in the national education attainment data.

### **The Model Minority Myth**

The Model Minority Myth is a stereotype about Asian American and Pacific Islanders who are all assumed to be high achievers and models to other minority groups. The term “Model Minority” emerged in the 1960s during a time when racial equality between African Americans and Whites plagued the country. “Model Minority” was first used by sociologist William Petersen (1966) in his “Success Story: Japanese American Style” in the *New York Times Magazine* in which he shares success stories of Japanese Americans to demonstrate how Japanese Americans served as the model American minority. The term Model Minority was used to place AAPIs as the Model Minority and as an example to other minority groups to follow. The myth suggests that with hard work, other minority groups can be as successful as the AAPI group. In turn, the myth is used to justify African Americans’ challenges and failures in the America. The myth suggests that AAPI students do not challenge those in the dominant culture (CARE, 2008) and promotes a misunderstanding of the actual experiences of subgroups in the AAPI category. Researchers have spent years challenging the Model Minority myth, illuminating the experiences of the individual ethnic groups within the AAPI category, and describing the myth’s impact on the experiences of Asian Americans (Hune, 2002; Kawai, 2005; Lee, 2008; Lee, 1997, 2001; Museus & Kiang, 2009; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Suzuki, 1977; Wing, 2007; Yang, 2003).

AAPI students do not conform to this stereotype. CARE (2008), or the National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education, describes “Model Minority” as a term that emerged in 1966 to define and portray AAPIs as the

“good” minority group. The myth suggests that AAPIs pursue advancement and progression by being hard-working and by not challenging the dominant culture. The myth proposes that AAPIs do not require or need additional support and attention with schooling like other minority groups do. Despite critiques of the myth, many educators still assume that AAPI students, as a group, are generally successful. The specific needs and differences of educational experiences of certain AAPI groups like the Hmong are hidden under the generalized data for AAPI. At face value, what does the aggregated data suggest for the AAPI group?

### **Aggregated Educational Attainment Data for Asian American and Pacific Islanders**

The Asian American and Pacific Island (AAPI) group is used to represent and capture a single entity for purposes of interracial group comparisons. The group itself, however, consists of many ethnic groups with different cultures, social realities, and languages to name a few. Drawn from the U.S. Census Bureau, the National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education, or CARE (2013), shares the racial and ethnic categorization of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders to include the following 29 ethnic groups: Asian Indian, Bangladeshi, Bhutanese, Burmese, Cambodian, Chinese, Filipino, Hmong, Indonesian, Japanese, Korean, Laotian, Malaysian, Nepalese, Pakistani, Sri Lankan, Taiwanese, Thai, Vietnamese, other Asian, Native Hawaiian, Samoan, Tongan, Guamanian, Marshallese, Fijian, other Polynesian, other Micronesian, and other Melanesian. It is evident that the AAPI category consists of numerous ethnic groups with Chinese, Asian Indians, Filipinos, Koreans, and Vietnamese making up about 80% of the AAPI population (Lee,

2005). Other smaller ethnic groups within the AAPI category include Japanese, Cambodian, Laotian, Hmong, Native Hawaiian, Samoan, Pakistani, and Thai.

The U.S. Census Bureau (2009) report reveals that as one entity, the AAPI group has the highest educational attainment of any ethnicity. AAPIs hold the highest numbers of bachelor's, master's professional, and doctorate degrees. As one group, Asian Americans are more likely to complete high school and earn a bachelor's degree or higher (Xie & Goyette, 2004). This aggregated educational attainment data can suggest to decision makers that educational support for the AAPI group is not necessary. Yang (2003) suggests that "policymakers on the state and national levels tend to overlook the specific educational needs of Southeast Asian Americans, and they tend to remain under the influence of the Model Minority Myth" (p.130). Museus (2009) suggests that AAPIs are often omitted in higher education research and discourse. There is cause for concern when aggregated data for a group inadvertently overshadows the experiences and needs of various subgroups, and disaggregating the data for the AAPI group is so important to capture the heterogeneity of the group, particularly when exploring ethnicities, language and immigration stories.

Although AAPIs excel in education attainment as compared to other racial groups (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009), ethnic subgroups within the AAPI category vary by their level of educational attainment. Disaggregating the educational attainment data on adults of 25 years and older taken from the U.S. Census Bureau, CARE (2013) suggests that Taiwanese (74.1%), Asian Indian (71.1%), Sri Lankan (57.4%), Pakistani (53.9%), Korean (52.7%), and Chinese (51.5%) groups had the highest percentage of attainment of bachelor's degree or higher. Vietnamese (25.8%), Hmong (14.7%), Cambodian

(14.1%), and Laotian (12.4%) had the lowest attainment percentages for bachelor's degree or higher (CARE, 2013). The Southeast Asian category consists of ethnic groups of Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, and Hmong (CARE, 2008; Ngo, 2007). These Southeast Asian groups also have a much greater chance of dropping out of high school (CARE, 2013), and a factor leading to the high percentage of high school drop out for Southeast Asian students consists of socioeconomic background.

The Hmong is one of the Southeast Asian groups that ranks low in educational attainment. The Hmong are also overlooked because of the aggregated achievement data of all AAPI students and the existence of the Model Minority Myth. As a Hmong American woman who was a first-generation student at a pre-dominantly, White, four-year, liberal arts institution, I find this topic to be of great importance.

### **My Personal Connection to the Study**

My interest in this topic first comes from my membership in the Hmong community and the aspiration to bring to light the unique and different educational stories and experiences of members of my Hmong community. I was a first-generation Hmong American student whose parents came to the United States as refugees in the late 1970s. Transitioning into a pre-dominantly White, Catholic and private institution was not as easy as I expected. I did not think to consider how different I would feel because I had gone to a very diverse high school in a diverse city. The college experience was culturally shocking to me, and I felt as if I were miles away from home at a college campus that was, in fact, only 10 minutes away. My parents helped me move my belongings into the residential halls. "Study hard", my dad said, and just like that, they were gone. They did not attend university family functions or call me to see



how I was adjusting to living away from home and making new friends. They wanted me to place my focus and attention on doing well academically. I knew their absence was not because they did not love or support me, but it made me question: “Why don’t my parents visit me at campus, send me care boxes, or call me often like other parents do?” I felt different among my peers, and being the introvert that I am, it was hard for me to make friends. My first semester in college was one of the first times I was tested to deal with feeling different because of my background – a first generation Hmong woman who grew up in a lower socioeconomic household. This feeling of being different soon translated in my academic performance, and I began to focus less on school work. I was more concerned about going back home where I felt comfortable than doing well because I was overwhelmed by the academic and social expectations of college.

Not only did I feel different, but I also felt I was labeled a certain way because I was Asian. There was a moment during my sophomore year in college when I was told by an administrator that I was not considered a minority because I was Asian and that individuals of Asian descent had more privileges than African American, Latinos and Native Americans. I attempted to debate the notion and to educate the person on my family’s background, but the feelings of frustration and embarrassment lingered on for a while. It has been my personal and professional goal to serve as an educational advocate and leader to underrepresented students and especially for my AAPI peers. I, too, have been verbally named a Model Minority by others during my K-12 and college years, and although I was not aware of the magnitude of this term at that time, I am now more aware of the challenges and difficulties this term can cause for my Asian

American peers and other minority groups.

My membership in the Hmong community and my personal experiences may be perceived to develop researcher bias. However, I observe this aspect to be a strength rather than a limitation for two reasons: my own experiences as a Hmong American helped to garner insight into the culture of Hmong students, and my connection to the community allowed the participants to develop a level of comfort during the interviews. Thus, from a personal perspective, I hoped that this study would bring about awareness to the different experiences lived by the diverse subgroups within the Asian American and Pacific Island population, particularly the Hmong.

My interest in this research also stems from my role as a higher education administrator. I have spent several years developing structures and programs to support first year students' academic and social transition into college and to support student success and transformation. For students, the first year in college is both exciting and challenging, and colleges and universities must make an institutional effort to invest time and resources in supporting students academically and personally during the first year of college and the years that follow. In addition, understanding a student's background is one of the best approaches to supporting his or her success in college. This study shares the stories and experiences of Hmong students in college as they see it to help inform how a student's culture, lifestyle and background can impact their college experiences.

### **Purpose of the Study and Research Question**

Despite the negative implications of the Model Minority Myth and the low educational attainment of the Hmong, some Hmong students do make it to college and

graduate. The purpose of this study is to describe the experiences of Hmong college students. This qualitative study uses phenomenology as the methodology and addresses the following two research questions: How do Hmong students make sense of their experiences in college? What contexts or situations have typically influenced or impacted the experiences and success of Hmong American students in college?

### **Significance of the Study**

A more diverse student population is now entering our colleges and universities and we, as educators and support staff for student success, need to be ready to assist these students the best we can. A particular group whose challenges are often overlooked is the Asian American population. AAPIs are underrepresented politically and are often times disregarded in the Black and White focus on race in the United States (Wing, 2007). The Model Minority Myth also promotes a misunderstanding of the actual experiences of subgroups within the AAPI population. Higher education research and discourse do not involve an exploration of the needs and experiences of AAPI students (Museus, 2009) because of the success that the aggregated educational attainment data suggests for AAPIs. One of the AAPI ethnic groups performing at a lower rate for educational attainment is the Hmong. There is little research on the experiences and needs of the Hmong in relation to education. By exploring the challenges and experiences of Hmong college students, I hope to communicate an understanding of their lived experiences in college and their notions of success. This study provides an important contribution to the fields of higher education and offers suggestions for support for AAPI groups that experience barriers in the American education system.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **Introduction**

Retention and success of students are topics of great concern in higher education. According to Kuh et al (2008), only 51% of students who enrolled at four-year institutions during the years of 1995-1996 completed a bachelor's degree within approximately six years at the institutions where they began. Because of the increased change in the demographics and needs of our entering college students, student success and retention have become priorities of colleges and universities for several years now. Higher education institutions are examining the changing demography and improving ways to better support and engage students who are now entering our colleges and universities. In a study to determine the relationships between key student behaviors and institutional practices and conditions that foster student success, Kuh et al. (2008) analyzed data sources from 18 baccalaureate-granting colleges and universities that administered the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) between the years of 2000 and 2003. Using the NSSE data, the students' background and pre-college experiences and the students' academic and financial aid information, Kuh et al. (2008) suggest that students' engagement in educationally purposeful activities such as group projects, learning communities and undergraduate research is positively related to academic outcomes such as first year student grades and continuation from first year to second year of college. In addition, Kuh et al. (2008) suggest that while participation in purposeful educational activities benefits all students, the impact is much greater for students of color and students demonstrating lower academic performance. Colleges

and universities should make a concerted effort to provide purposeful educational activities especially for students who are academically underprepared, first-generation students, and/or students who demonstrate high financial need. Findings from research studies like Kuh et al.'s (2008) *Unmasking the Effects of Student Engagement* are extremely important to the success of all students but also of marginalized students.

A particular group whose challenges are often masked by their high aggregated educational attainment data is the Asian American Pacific Islanders (AAPIs). AAPIs are also often missed in higher education research due to both the Model Minority Myth and the positive aggregated educational data of all AAPIs (Museus & King, 2009). The notion that AAPIs do not require academic assistance is only one aspect of the Model Minority Myth. Within the AAPI group, there are many ethnic subgroups having different cultures, languages, history, and socioeconomic backgrounds. One of these ethnic groups is the Hmong.

The Hmong are a semi-nomadic tribal ethnic group from Southeast Asia and are rarely studied. Much research is needed to learn more about the history, background, and life experiences of Hmong college students. Thus, this study aims to explore the experiences of Hmong students in college and to illuminate one group within the larger AAPI category. This chapter presents a review of the literature on the notion and challenges of the Model Minority Myth, the Hmong history and experiences, and the ecological and cultural theoretical underpinnings of development and transition. Before further exploring the history and experiences of the Hmong, an overview of the Model Minority Myth, its origin and the negative implications on the education experiences of AAPIs will showcase some of the challenges AAPI individuals face overall.

## **Unpacking the Model Minority Myth**

### **Aspects of the Model Minority Myth**

The AAPI population has been referred to as the Model Minority for many decades now. The term “Model Minority” emerged in the 1960s during a time when racial inequality between African Americans and Whites was being confronted on college campuses across the country. The term “Model Minority” was first coined and used by sociologist William Petersen (1966) who wrote an essay titled “Success Story: Japanese American Style” for the *New York Times*. In this article, Petersen (1966) examined the Japanese culture and shared success stories of Japanese Americans to demonstrate how they served as the model American minority. Petersen (1966) suggested that Asian American minorities had overcome challenges because of their family values and strong work ethic. In other words, the cultural values and hard work ethic of AAPIs were the key ingredients to their acceptance into the American culture and the reasons as to why they were not seen as “problem” minorities.

The Model Minority Myth is a stereotype about Asian American and Pacific Islanders who are all assumed to be high achievers and models to other minority groups. One of the challenges with the Model Minority Myth is its impact on the AAPI population. I will explore several research studies that examine the impact of the myth on the AAPI population, review the attempts to debunk the Model Minority Myth and explain the experiences of various groups within the AAPI group (Wong, 2007; Lee, 1994; CARE, 2008, Suzuki, 1977; Teranishi, 2010). Another concern about the Model Minority Myth is that it serves as a stereotype – a false assumption that all AAPIs are high achievers. What is a stereotype, and why does it exist?

According to Fiske (1993), a social psychologist who is known for her work on prejudice, stereotypes and social cognition, the purpose of a stereotype is to describe people's beliefs about an individual who is a member of a particular group. Fiske (1993) observes and analyzes two legal cases that pertain to gender stereotyping – *Lois Robinson vs. Jacksonville Shipyards Inc.* and *Ann Hopkins vs. Price Waterhouse*. Fiske (1993) suggests that “stereotyping operates in the service of control” (p. 623). Stereotypes reinforce one group's power over another by minimizing the opportunities for the group that is being stereotyped. Fiske (1993) further discusses two types of stereotypes – descriptive and prescriptive stereotypes. Descriptive stereotypes are false assumptions that tell how the majority of people in a group supposedly behaves and what they are competent in. Prescriptive stereotypes tell how a group should behave, feel, and think. Fiske (1993) suggests that prescriptive stereotypes can include ideas like “women should be nice, African Americans should be spontaneous, Asian Americans should be good a math, and Jews should be good with money” (p. 623). Stereotypes are created because of power, and they serve as a way for one group to control another. Higher education educators need to be aware of the negative impacts of stereotypes on their students and the ongoing existence of these stereotypes. More importantly, it is crucial for higher education professionals to realize that AAPI students do not conform to the stereotype of the Model Minority Myth. What does the Model Minority Myth entail?

The term Model Minority was used to place AAPIs as the “Model Minority” and as an example for other minority groups to follow. The myth suggests that with hard work, other minority groups can be as successful as the AAPIs. In turn, the myth is

used to justify African Americans' challenges and failures in America and to disregard racism and discrimination. The myth also suggests that AAPI students do not challenge those in the dominant culture (CARE, 2008), and the myth develops a misunderstanding of the actual experiences of subgroups in the AAPI category. According to Wing (2007), the Model Minority Myth suggests the following ideas:

- 1.) All Asian students are high academic achievers and perform at a better rate than White students;
- 2.) Asians are naturally good at math;
- 3.) All Asian families perceive education to be highly valued;
- 4.) All Asians are the same and possess the same culture, language and appearance and perform the same when it comes to academic achievement; and
- 5.) Asians do not experience and suffer from racial discrimination like other minorities.

These aspects make up the Model Minority Myth. I will later explore Wing's (2007) research that debunks the Model Minority Myth, but I will first examine Suzuki's (1977) analysis of the Model Minority Myth and his conclusions regarding the myth's suggestions that AAPIs have moved up the social ladder in the United States.

### **The Social Mobility and Socialization of AAPIs**

In his revisionist analysis of the Model Minority thesis, Suzuki (1977) shares that prior to the categorization of AAPIs as the model minorities, AAPIs were portrayed by dehumanizing stereotypes including "yellow hordes". Revisionism is a critical reexamination of presumed historical facts. According to Suzuki (1977), the proponents of the Model Minority Myth suggest that through cultural values, Asian Americans "had



finally succeeded in becoming accepted into White, middle-class society through their hard work, uncomplaining perseverance and quiet accommodation” (p. 24). It was not until the 1960s that AAPIs were seen in a more positive light as a result of the growing dissatisfaction with Blacks and other minorities. To move towards a revisionist analysis of the Model Minority thesis and to debunk the myth, Suzuki (1977) reviews the deficit hypothesis, developed by Arthur Jensen and William Shockley, examines the revisionists’ criticisms of the deficit hypothesis, and explores the theory of cultural determinism developed by Caudill and DeVos. Suzuki (1977) takes the reader through his revisionist analysis of various theories that explain American educational history and suggests that the personality traits shown by Asian Americans are not the result of cultural values but a result of a socialization process “in which the schools play a major role through their selective reinforcement of certain cultural behavior patterns and inculcation of others that are deemed ‘appropriate’ for lower-echelon White collar wage workers” (p. 36). In other words, Asian Americans and individuals from working class backgrounds, through socialization, learn to be obedient and have respect for authority. This obedience and respect for authority is not a result of the cultural values of the group. Suzuki’s (1977) further analysis shows that when socioeconomic data of AAPIs are disaggregated, a different picture is displayed from what the Model Minority Myth suggests. Suzuki’s (1977) analysis showcases that AAPI families demonstrate higher median family income than White families only because AAPI families have more members in the family contributing to the family income. The analysis also reveals that the proportion of AAPIs living below poverty is much higher than that of the White population (Suzuki, 1977). Through his revisionist analysis and disaggregation of AAPI

socioeconomic aggregated, Suzuki (1977) challenged the notion that AAPIs have achieved middle-class status and assimilated into the American culture.

Suzuki (1977) also proposes that the Model Minority Myth was developed to place one minority group on a pedestal as a way to hide the realities of racism and discrimination against other groups. In the context of education and for other minority groups, the term “Model Minority” has caused educators to shift the blame of academic challenge and motivation to the students and away from the individual and institutionalized discrimination that exists in society. The myth supports the belief that if one minority group can “make it” in the United States by working hard and being disciplined, all other minority groups should be able to do the same.

Suzuki (1990) later revisits his analysis of the Model Minority thesis and recognizes that in the 1980s, the Model Minority Myth continued to exist because of the large number of AAPI college graduates reported. With the aggregated data that suggested 38% of AAPIs were graduating from college compared to 20% of the population in the United States combined with the steadily increasing aggregated socioeconomic status of AAPIs, AAPIs were still perceived as successful. The experiences and stories of AAPIs were still viewed through the lens of aggregated data collected for the group. However, the AAPI group is characterized by various ethnicities, cultures, socioeconomic backgrounds, and histories. Stacey J. Lee (1994) conducted an ethnographic study of the experiences of AAPI students as a way to demonstrate the varying experiences of AAPI students and how they see themselves as a result of the Model Minority Myth. What are these experiences and how to AAPIs see themselves as a result of the Model Minority Myth?

## **The Voices: Asian American High School Students and the Model Minority Myth**

In an ethnographic study that includes analysis of site documents and participant observations and interviews with Asian American high school students, Lee (1994) aims to exhibit the different experiences of AAPI students and how they see themselves as a result of the Model Minority Myth. Lee (1994) discovers that Asian Americans at American High School categorized themselves into four identity groups: Koreans, Asians, Asian new wavers and Asian Americans.

At American High School, Lee (1994) suggests that the first group – the Koreans – “identified solely as Koreans and not as Asians or Asian Americans” (p. 416). In addition, Korean students at American High School used their social class as a way to make themselves different from other Asian groups. Lee’s (1994) conversation with a Korean student, Jane, suggests that even though there were low achieving students in the Korean group, they were “still smarter” and that Jane and her friends “believed that being like model minorities Koreans could earn the respect of Whites and move up the social ladder” (p. 417). Korean students saw themselves as this “Model Minority” and used their social class to differentiate themselves from other AAPI students in order to be accepted by the White students. Asians – the second group – are students who represented a variety of different Asian ethnic groups and social class. Lee (1994) suggests that Asians “believe that all Asians regardless of ethnicity share common experiences in the United States” (p. 418). The Asian group also saw themselves as not challenging discrimination and as molding their expectations to fit what they saw were opportunities for themselves. The third group – the Asian New Wavers – rejected any behavior that was linked with “nerds” because they perceived that being academically

successful prevented them from being accepted by non-Asians. These students generally stayed away from anything academic but did enough just to pass their classes. The last and smallest group – the Asian Americans – consisted of students with different ethnic, social class and duration of time in the United States. Asian Americans were more vocal about discrimination and used their education and schooling as a tool to fight racism directly. They challenged the Model Minority Myth. Lee (1994) suggests that “Asians dealt with discrimination by emulating Model Minority behavior, and the new wavers responded by resisting behavior that promoted school success” (p. 426).

The four groups identified in this study demonstrate the different ways in which the groups interacted with and against the majority. Lee’s (1994) work also shows how the four groups of students either conformed to or defied the Model Minority Myth. There is diversity within the AAPI groups, and the Model Minority impacts the experiences and perspectives of some AAPI students. Lee (2001) later explores the Model Minority Myth, delinquent ideology and intergenerational conflict as it relates with Hmong American high school students. I will explore the notion of intergenerational conflict later in this chapter. In addition to Lee’s (1994) work on exemplifying the diversity within the AAPI population, Wing’s (2007) research also shows the real experiences of AAPI students and describes their individual academic performances in high school.

To review, Wing (2007) shares that the Model Minority Myth suggests the following: 1.) All Asian students are high academic achievers and performing at a better rate than White students; 2.) Asians are naturally good at math; 3.) All Asian families perceive education to be highly valued; 4.) All Asians are the same and possess the

same culture, language and appearance and perform the same when it comes to academic achievement; and 5.) Asians do not experience and suffer from racial discrimination like other minorities. In a quantitative and qualitative study, Wing (2007) explores the Model Minority Myth in efforts to debunk the myth. Wing (2007) does this by conducting interviews with students at Berkeley High School located in California and by analyzing academic data which included grades, course-taking patterns, demographic backgrounds, and college eligibility of all members of the graduating class of 2000. Wing (2007) designs her study to closely examine the lived experiences and achievements of Asian students at Berkeley High School in relation to the Model Minority Myth. Wong (2007) examines academic data and interviews six AAPI students representing different ethnic groups including Vietnamese, Laotian, Japanese-White, and Chinese. Wing (2007) discovered that when looking at the individual grade point average of AAPI Berkeley students instead of the aggregated data which suggested a high average, the data show a small percentage of AAPI students who are achieving low grade point averages at every grade level. These data show that not all Asian students have high grade point averages. Wing (2007) also discovered that “Asian females in the Class of 1996 lagged behind White females by 18 percentage points in completion of the University of California and/or California State University admissions requirements, and Asian males trailed White males by 9 points” (p. 463). AAPI students at Berkeley were not necessarily academically outperforming White students.

In addition, a closer look at Wing’s (2007) interviews with six AAPI Berkeley students displays various stories about academic difficulties and experiences. Students

shared stories of being perceived to be good at math by both teachers and classmates, the pressures of marriage before education, and the different career aspirations outside of the sciences. The six students also talked about their varied family and cultural values, their experiences with racial discrimination, and their encounters of having to tell others “we are all not Chinese” (Wing, 2007, p.427). Wing (2007) encourages educators to understand the diversity of AAPI students to overcome the Model Minority Myth. Although the myth appears to be a positive foundation for AAPIs and diligence and a hard work ethic can be seen as positive characteristics, these aspects of the myth can encourage AAPIs to adopt or internalize the Model Minority stereotype (Kawai, 2005). AAPI students who have real barriers may try to conform to the myth resulting in increased stress and pressure (Museus & Kiang, 2009). Along with Wing (2007) and Stacey J. Lee (1994), the National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research Education (CARE, 2008) provides support and research to explain the diversity and facts of the AAPI population in order to improve AAPI participation and access to higher education.

### **Disaggregating the AAPI Data: Bringing the Facts to the Table**

The National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education (CARE) consists of a national commission, an advisory board and a research team at New York University. CARE’s goal is to engage in meaningful and realistic discussions about the educational opportunities for AAPIs and the different race, ethnicities, language and, cultural factors that influence the practices of American schools, including colleges and universities. To further elaborate on the Model Minority Myth, CARE (2008) describes “Model Minority” as a term that emerged in

1966 to define and portray AAPIs as the “good” minority group. The myth suggests that AAPIs pursue advancement and progression by being hard-working and by not challenging others who perhaps are in the dominant culture. The myth proposes that AAPIs do not require additional academic support like other minority groups, including African American, Latino, and Native American students, because AAPIs demonstrate higher levels of academic achievement (CARE, 2008). The myth suggests that AAPIs are not really racial and ethnic minorities and do not experience race challenges as compared to others.

CARE (2008) examines data from the United States Bureau of Census to explain the demographic trends among AAPIs in the United States. CARE (2008) also observes data from 1980 to 2000 from the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and Integrated Postsecondary Education Data Systems (IPEDS). The analysis was conducted across 4,200 higher education sectors that differed by type, control and locale – two year and four year, private and public, and national regional or local, respectively. The aim for the CARE’s (2008) research was to bring forth the facts to some fictions about AAPI students in college.

In response to the fictitious idea that AAPI students are “taking over” U.S. Higher Education, CARE (2008) examines the enrollment data in U.S. higher education from 1987 to 2004 and finds that “the increase in AAPI higher education participation has mirrored the increases found among other populations during the same time period” (p. 5). The increase of enrollment into U.S. higher education reflects the population growth of AAPI, the increased higher education opportunities for all students, and the increased access to college for many marginalized students. It is also important to note

that the percentage of AAPI students is concentrated in various institutions and states. More specifically, two-thirds of AAPI students are concentrated in 200 institutions in the United States. When examining AAPI student concentration by states, two-thirds of AAPI students attended college in four states in 1980 while two-thirds attended college in eight states in the year 2000.

Another important aspect of the research was its challenge on the assumption that AAPIs are a homogenous racial group with the same in educational, financial, cultural, religious, and historical backgrounds. CARE (2008) observes that “there is no such thing as one Asian American and Pacific Islander composite, especially when there are more differences than similarities between the many groups designated by the federally defined categories of ‘Asian American’ or ‘Pacific Islander’” (p. 15). So how are they different?

First and foremost, CARE (2008) establishes from the 2000 U.S. Census data that there are 24 different Asian American and 24 different Pacific Islander ethnic categories because AAPIs consist of people who originate from East Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, Guam, Samoa, Hawaii, and other Pacific Islands. Furthermore, 79% of AAPI students speak a language and/or dialect at home other than English. CARE (2008) suggests that the range of educational attainment and socioeconomic status for all ethnic categories is large. For the Asian American groups, Hmong (7.5%), Laotian (7.9%), and Cambodians (9.2%) have the lowest attainment of bachelor’s degree while Asian Indian (63.9%), Pakistani (54.3%), and Chinese (48.1%) have the highest attainment of bachelor’s degree. Marshallese (5.1%), Tongan (8.6%), and Fijian (8.8%) have the lowest attainment of bachelor’s degree for Pacific Islanders. In addition,



Hmong (37.8%) and Marshallese (38.3%) have the highest percentage of individuals living below poverty. CARE (2008) notes that “among the most economically disadvantaged are Cambodian, Hmong, and Laotian war refugees from the rural regions of Southeast Asian, many of whom struggle with long-term poverty, language and literacy issues, and post-traumatic stress disorders associated with their forced migration” (p. 22). The 48 different ethnic categories in the AAPI group all have different immigration histories, socioeconomic background and education attainment. It is important to not view the AAPI group as one but to recognize the vast differences among the 48 ethnic groups. Educators need to dismiss the myths about AAPI students in order to fully engage students in the experience. One of these educators and researchers, Robert Teranishi (2010), expands on the experience of AAPIs in higher education in his book titled “Asians in the Ivory Tower”.

Teranishi (2010), who also serves as a Principal Investigator for CARE (2008, 2010, 2013), draws from his previous research studies in “Asians in the Ivory Tower”. These studies include descriptive statistics that capture status indicators for individuals, communities, and institutions, and these studies also capture qualitative methods that provide a voice for the lived experience of AAPI students. Teranishi (2010) suggests that “a wide distribution in demographic characteristics within the population means that a single story cannot represent the unique American experience of the many AAPI subpopulations that comprise the population in the aggregate” (pg.147). Teranishi (2010) continues to state that the term “Model Minority” “affects how AAPIs are perceived and treated by others because oversimplified generalizations prevent people from acknowledging the complexities of individuals or subgroups within the

population” (p. 145). The myth allows post-secondary education institutions to overlook the challenges of AAPI students and to accept the aggregated data on AAPI academic achievement without critically examining socioeconomic status, ethnicity, education, and language proficiency of these students. The myth has been detrimental to the experiences of the AAPIs, and AAPIs have been invisible in higher education programs and services as well as state and national policies (Teranishi, 2010). In his analysis and review of AAPIs and America’s equity agenda, Teranishi (2010) suggests that AAPIs are eliminated from equity policy. This omission is very clear in higher education priorities in America. Teranishi (2010) notes that “there is almost no recognition of AAPIs in the community college sector, which is where AAPIs have their highest enrollment in the United States higher education” (p.13). Teranishi (2010) further suggests that AAPIs are at times purposely included in analysis to help support a point about “the relative disadvantage of minority groups” (p. 9).

The conversation about AAPIs in higher education, their individual experiences, and the emphasis on their challenges need to occur more often and more consistently in order for subgroups within the AAPI group to be best represented in higher education agendas and priorities. The differences in the educational attainment of these subgroups within the AAPI population exist, and factors consisting of socioeconomic status, social and cultural capital, and language proficiency (Hune, 2002) can impact the educational attainment of these individuals. Southeast Asian (SEA) students, particularly, experience challenges like poverty, language barriers, and cultural tension, which hinder them from excelling in academic work (Ngo & Lee, 2007). One of the SEA subgroups that lack research and are performing at lower education attainment rates than other

subgroups is the Hmong. A closer exploration of who the Hmong are, their history, their transition into society in the United States, and the challenges Hmong students experience in school can help to demonstrate some of the differences within the Asian American and Pacific Island population.

### **The Hmong**

The Hmong is one of the many subgroups in the AAPI population, and their history, culture, and experiences are different from others in the AAPI group. The Hmong is an ethnic group whose history is unique and whose arrival story of entering into the United States merits particular focus and attention. The Hmong are a semi-nomadic people who originated in northern China approximately 4,000 years ago. Because of their resistance to the adoption of the Chinese culture, the Hmong migrated to the western and southern parts of Asia including areas in Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, and Burma (Trueba et al., 1990). Referring to themselves as “free people”, the Hmong resided in Laos during the time of the Vietnam War. Duffy (2004) explains that in the early 1960s, the United States initiated a ten-year “Secret War” that enlisted the Hmong to assist with gathering intelligence about the North Vietnamese in Laos. Thousands of Hmong men were recruited to fight with the United States, and approximately 30,000 Hmong died during the war (Duffy, 2004). Living in refugee and resettlement camps in Laos and Thailand, the Hmong experienced years of displacement and persecution following the Secret War because of their alliance with the United States. As a result, Hmong refugees fled to the United States in the 1970s. Currently, more than 260,000 Hmong live in the United States with the majority living in California, Minnesota, and Wisconsin (Hmong National Development, 2010).

The Hmong endured diverse social and cultural transitional experiences during their settlement in the United States in the 1970s. Several researchers showcase the stories of several Hmong individuals who made the journey to the United States and experienced both assimilation and acculturation (Chan, S., 1994; Trueba et al., 1990). As the Hmong trickled into the United States, they were challenged with transitioning into the American culture. For the Hmong men who fought in the Secret War, facing the physical and emotional impact of the Secret War was an even bigger challenge. For others, the mere aspect of living in a new world was overwhelming and foreign to them. As Hmong refugees arrived in the States and began settling in towns and cities, their children also began entering the school systems. Some of the challenges Hmong students experienced included language barriers, intergenerational conflict, and discrimination. Prior to exploring some of these barriers, it is important to have a better understanding of the history of the Hmong, the story behind Hmong's arrival to the United States, and the experiences of the Hmong as they transitioned into the American culture and educational process. Using Sucheng Chan's (1994) work titled "Hmong Means Free: Life in Laos and America", I hope to provide readers with an overview of these important aspects.

### **History of the Hmong**

Hmong means "free". This definition exactly defines who the Hmong are and describes their attempt to remain free from rule by other nations and countries. The Hmong are an ethnic group that has spent many centuries aiming to remain free from reign by another country. The Hmong held strong to the idea of freely governing itself, holding true to its culture and remaining as its own ethnic group. The Hmong ancestors

originated from southwestern China in the provinces of Yunnan, Hunan, Guizhou, and Sichuan, and the Hmong, for many years, were left alone by the Han Chinese (Chan, 1994). The Hmong are considered to be nomadic tribal people with their own culture and language, and the Hmong lived an agricultural lifestyle. Although the Han Chinese allowed the Hmong to freely live on their own in China, it was not until the last dynasty, the Qing, came into reign that Hmong were forced to live differently. The Qing dynasty reigned from 1644 to 1911 and held the Hmong to different standards (Chan, 1994). Soldiers from the Qing dynasty were ordered to oppress the Hmong. Although the Hmong rebelled against Qing soldiers, political persecutions of the Hmong eventually forced the Hmong to migrate to Southeast Asia where they settled in northern Burma, Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand. It is difficult to account for the exact number of Hmong in Southeast Asia, and there are Hmong who still live in China. Although Hmong are scattered throughout Asia and primarily Southeast Asia, the Hmong currently living in the United States are mostly from Laos (Chan, 1994). In Laos, the Hmong were referred to as “Meo” or savage, and the Hmong found this term to be demeaning and unacceptable. The Hmong who lived in Laos lived on the mountain tops and grew rice and corn as their primary products (Chan, 1994). Why are the Hmong living in the United States mainly from Laos? An overview of the Secret War will help to provide an answer to this very question.

### **The Secret War**

Although the Hmong lived separately on the mountain tops of Laos, they played an important role in the political agendas of Laos. Before the French colonization of Laos, the country of Laos was underdeveloped. Soon after the commencement of

French colonization, the French developed districts in Laos, but as Chan (1994) notes, “the six decades that the French ruled Laos, they did not establish a single high school in the colony” (p. 7). The French did little to help develop the economy for Laos. The Hmong typically did not involve themselves in politics. Chan’s (1994) work shares narratives of several Hmong individuals and their lives in both Laos and America. In one of the narratives, Xang Mao Xiong, a Hmong man who enlisted himself in the Secret War, shares a description of what life was like in Laos before the war. Xang Mao Xiong notes:

Our mothers, fathers, grandparents and ancestors lived in the mountains. The villages were in remote areas in the wilderness. There were no roads for automobiles. We traveled on foot from one area to the next. To survive, we farmed, hunted wild animals, collected edible plants, and raised on our own cattle (Chan, 1994, P. 94).

Xang Mao Xiong continues to share that the Hmong lived in peace before the Secret War. They spent their lives hunting for animals and growing crops. It was not until the 1940s when Hmong became more entangled in political feuds. There were two opposing Hmong clans, one favoring the French regime and the other supporting the Japanese who came to occupy French Indochina. The Lo supported the Japanese while the Ly supported the French regime. This is one example of the Hmong’s involvement in political feuds in Laos. Years later, the Hmong would involve themselves in a war – the Secret War. This war changed the fate and destination of the Hmong in Laos.

The reasons why the United States became involved in Laotian politics is multifaceted, but Chan (1994) explains that in the 1940s the United States created the

Royal Lao Army in Laos to prevent communism from spreading into Laos from Vietnam. The army also worked to delegitimize the work of the Pathet Lao, a resistance movement that drove the common interest of strengthening the work of both the Vietnamese and Laotian communists. As large numbers of North Vietnamese troops came into Laos and occupied several provinces with the Pathet Lao, the United States grew ever more concerned and developed a Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) in 1961. As a result, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) started recruiting Hmong men into a mercenary army. The Hmong were recruited because the Green Berets, U.S. Special Army Forces, observed the Hmong to be strong fighters who not only knew the terrain of the jungle but also of the mountains. Vang Pao, a Hmong military leader who demonstrated successful military defense and attacks, was directly recruited by a CIA agent, “Colonel Billy” (Chan, 1994). Colonel Billy asked Vang Pao if the Hmong would be willing to join in combat with the United States in efforts to drive the North Vietnamese communists back. Citing that he could not live with communism, Vang Pao agreed to fight with the United States as long as the United States supported the Hmong in their success or to help the Hmong find a new home if defeat was the outcome. In Xang Mao Xiong’s narrative, he shares that the Hmong decided to help the United States because they were a powerful country that would hopefully help them in the future. Xang Mao Xiong notes that “though we (the Hmong) were uneducated and without skills, we received no military training before we were sent into battle. We fought first, then trained afterwards. We helped fight the Communists from 1960 to 1970” (Chan, 1994, p. 91). The Hmong were afraid the Communists would take over their land and saw the United States as a powerful ally.

The Hmong Secret Army, which consisted of 40,000 Hmong soldiers, was just the right defense the United States wanted to stop the spread of the Communism. Chan (1994) notes that there were four different aspects to the Secret War:

- 1.) The battle between the Royal Lao Army and the Communist troops around several major towns;
- 2.) The battle between Hmong guerilla and Pathet Lao forces in northeast Laos;
- 3.) The ground war fought by the Hmong and the American B-52 air strikes over northern Laos; and,
- 4.) The air war over the southern vicinity of the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

The Hmong played a significant role in the battle against communism and were key elements of the Secret War that most people do not know about. The casualties were deep in numbers with 17,000 Hmong troops dead and 50,000 Hmong civilians killed during the war. The stories from the soldiers were horrifying.

Xang Mao Xiong's narrative talks about his battlefield experience. After being married for only seven days, he was sent to war for several years. He notes that many soldiers were killed during the Secret War and recalls being shot above the left ear. After waiting for two days for treatment, Xang Mao Xiong finally received care from doctors. He shares that because the doctors assumed he was just another soldier, they did not bother to use pain killers to numb the pain from surgery. It was only after Xang Mao Xiong pulled a gun on the doctor and showed him that he was a commander that the doctor used pain killers on him (Chan, 1994). The stories from Hmong soldiers and refugees range in details, but the magnitude of impact the war had on the Hmong was evident and shared among the Hmong.



When South Vietnam fell in 1975, the Pathet Lao pushed for victory in Laos. Political struggles strengthened, and the United States embassy closed down and the Lao's People Democratic Republic was declared in December of 1975. A small number of U.S. Aid officials stayed in efforts to support the Hmong, but they were soon asked to leave because of fears of danger. Vang Pao was encouraged by the United States to flee the country, but he refused to. Several years later, Vang Pao travelled to Udon to discuss with the CIA options of refuge for the Hmong. Chan (1994) writes that "he (Vang Pao) felt the CIA was obligated to evacuate all Hmong who had fought in the war, but the CIA replied that only the most important Hmong officers and their families could be taken care of" (p. 45). At first, only a thousand Hmong were evacuated to Thailand refugee camps, but more Hmong refugees arrived in the later years. In one of the narratives from Chan's (1994) work, Jou Yee Xiong talks about his experiences fleeing Laos after the war to seek refuge in Thailand. When Jou Yee Xiong and his family reached the Thai border after a 28 day trek, he recalls "the Thai officials would not let us cross. They did not want us to take refuge in their country" (Chan, 1994 p. 70). Although the Thai would not let Jou Yee Xiong and his family cross the border, his son was able to converse with some Thai officials who allowed them to cross the border. They stayed at a Thai refugee camp for three months until they were moved to a camp in Bangkok for another three years.

The Hmong lived in Thai refugee camps for years. While 130,000 Vietnamese were evacuated and flown to the United States in April of 1975 to seek refuge, the Hmong were still waiting for their turn to fly to the United States. In December of 1975, the Hmong, along with Lao refugees, finally obtained the right from the United

States to seek refuge in America. Chan (1994) notes that “by the early 1980s some fifty thousand Hmong had been resettled in the United States” (p. 49). The story of the Hmong’s desired to remain free, their entanglement in politics in Laos, their alliance with the United States in the Secret War, and their strength in combating the consequences while patiently waiting for American support is unique and important to who they are. The Secret War was the first segment of what became the beginning of a new life for many Hmong people. The Hmong arrived in the United States in 1975, and their story of transition and acculturation in the United States merits some review.

### **A New Life: Adaptation to America**

One can just imagine the emotions experienced by Hmong refugees as they landed in a new country miles away from the mountains and lands they were familiar with. The narratives in Chan’s (1994) study not only share the stories of life and war in Laos, but they also disclose experiences with acculturation to the American culture and society. Along with Chan’s (1994) work, other studies were conducted to help showcase the experiences of the Hmong in the American society and the challenges they faced during their acculturation in the United States (Trueba et al., 1990; CARE, 2008; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Lee, 2001; Lee, 1997). These studies reveal experiences and challenges with sociocultural changes, lower socioeconomic attainments, language barriers, and intergenerational conflict during the Hmong’s adaptation to America and the American society.

### ***America: Sociocultural, Socioeconomic, and Language Challenges***

Seeking refuge in the United States of America might have been the best

next step of survival for the Hmong after the Secret War. However, when Jou Yee Xiong landed in airport in Los Angeles, he recalls that “we were the first people of such short stature to come to the United States, so people were very frightened of us. They had been told that we had long tongues and ate humans” (Chan, 1994, p. 72). Jou Yee Xiong’s son, Ka Pao Xiong, has a similar but different experience. Ka Pao Xiong recalls that “when we got off the plane, we stood out from the crowd. People stared at us. The people welcoming us hugged all of the members of my family. That made us afraid [because Hmong people do not hug each other]...we were afraid these people were trying to scatter us so they could steal one of us” (Chan, 1994, p. 83). As Hmong families landed in foreign airports, there were many thoughts and emotions experienced by all. Jou Yee Xiong and his family were greeted by two American Christian sponsors who helped his family for about seven months by assisting in their search for employment. They soon became more familiar with the American way of life but found it challenging to adapt.

Jou Yee Xiong found work at a pharmaceutical company and saved his money to buy necessities for him and his family. He recalls that life eventually became harder when rent for their home increased and too many family members were living under the same roof. It was difficult for Jou Yee Xiong and his family to afford a bigger space, but this was also a drastic difference between the American and Hmong culture. In the Hmong culture, families, including extended families, lived under one roof. Because of the strict residency laws in America, Hmong families were forced to live separately and in different homes or apartments (Chan, 1994). Living in separate homes was financially difficult and culturally different for the Hmong because it interrupted the

dynamics of the traditional Hmong family. Hmong men in particular had a difficult time transitioning in to the American way of life. For years, they were familiar with hunting and serving as soldiers while women tended to their families and domestic duties. In America, Hmong women had to leave their domestic duties and find employment to help make ends meet. Ka Pao Xiong shares that he and his wife had to work at the same time to earn sufficient money to make ends meet in the United States (Chan, 1994). In addition, polygamy is practiced in the Hmong culture but is seen as unlawful in the United States. The expectations of this new culture changed the sociocultural ways of the Hmong.

Disciplining children proved to also be different and difficult for Hmong families. Ka Pao Xiong notes that a problem he faces in America is disciplining his children. Unlike his father, Jou Yee, Ka Pao is raising young children in America. Ka Pao talks about the difficulty behind disciplining his children and suggests that “not only are our children not listening to us, but we parents can be thrown in jail for trying to teach them what is right” (Chan, 1994, p. 100). Although United States citizens would see beatings as cruel, this was a method used by Hmong families in disciplining their children. In America, Hmong parents had a difficult time understanding their children, and they perceived their children to not understand the Hmong culture and the importance of respecting the elders. I will take a closer look at intergenerational conflict later in this chapter, and this might help to further explain the tension that exists between Hmong parents and their children.

In addition to the sociocultural changes, one of the most difficult challenges for the Hmong was living in constant worry about financial needs and expectations.

According to CARE (2008), the Hmong, along with Cambodia and Laotian, are the most economically disadvantaged with 37.8% of Hmong living below poverty followed by Cambodians with 29.3% living below poverty. The Hmong were semi-nomadic farmers who raised corn and rice and practiced slash-and-burn farming which is not possible to do in the United States (Trueba et al., 1990). Transitioning into the American culture was difficult for the Hmong because they lack particular trades, skills and professions (Chan, 1994). Vue Vang shares her story in Chan's (1994) work and talks about her struggles with meeting her financial needs in the United States. Vue Vang writes "I have been in the United States for almost fourteen years now. In the beginning, life seemed very hard...today, I lose sleep worrying about my children, about having enough money to pay all our bills" (Chan, 1994, p. 116). Jou Yee Xiong also says that "my sons and I are not wealthy people. We are just workers who want to survive...we live like poor people but we are happy and do not envy others" (Chan, 1994, p. 75). These stories demonstrate the struggle that most Hmong families experienced when it came to meeting the financial obligations of their new life in the United States. One of the biggest barriers for the Hmong was their inability to communicate with others. Although Hmong were literate in other languages like Laotian and French, the Hmong did not have a written language. The Hmong have relied solely on the oral cultural tradition of communicating and story-telling, and experiencing language barriers has been a challenge for the Hmong in America.

There are 48 different ethnic categories under the AAPI umbrella (CARE, 2008). Of the 48 different ethnic categories, 79% of Asian American students speak a language other than English at home (CARE, 2008). These language data suggest that language

barriers may exist for this percentage of the AAPI students in college. Cultural and structural factors of families have played a part in the educational experiences of Cambodian, Laotian, Hmong, and Vietnamese students (Ngo and Lee, 2007). According to KaYing Yang (2003), former executive director of the Southeast Asian Resource Action Center (SEARAC), Southeast Asian students have limited English skills, and most Hmong parents and elders speak Hmong to their children at home with the expectation that the children speak the native language as well. Yang (2003) identifies that there is a complex communication gap that exists between parents, children and the school. More often than not, language barriers usually cause the separation of these groups, and language barriers among parents, students, and schools become a tremendous challenge for all.

Trueba et al. (1990) conducted an ethnographic field-based study of Hmong students at La Playa Elementary School in La Playa, California to explore the adjustment of immigrant students to school. Trueba et al. (1990) also conducted the study to provide the teachers' perspectives on minority students and to offer suggestions on how schools can help ease the adjustment for both students and families. In their study, Trueba et al. (1990) find that language is a challenge for Hmong students and parents, particularly for one of the students that was observed for the study. Pao, a Hmong student at La Playa Elementary School, was filed by the school as having a learning disability because of a medical condition during his birth, and this diagnosis influenced the assessment by certain school officials like the school psychologist. Because of the language barrier and lack of translators at the school, there was miscommunication about Pao's background which led to his misdiagnosis. After

working with a trusted translator, Pao and his family were able to clarify to the school that it was his brother who experienced the medical condition during birth, not Pao himself (Trueba et al., 1990). This is one example of how language barriers served as a challenge for both Hmong students and parents. As Hmong families are expanding across the nation and their children are entering schools nationwide, there is a need for educators to be aware of the cultural differences. In addition, as the Hmong children are adapting more to the American culture, the tension that is built between Hmong children and Hmong parents that Ka Pao Xiong referred to in his narrative (Chan, 1994) emerges and grows. This tension is referred to as intergenerational conflict (Lee, 2001). It is important to investigate this intergenerational conflict and the discrimination experienced in school from the lens of the Hmong students. A review of the work by Stacey Lee (2001) will help to explain what intergenerational conflict means and describe the experiences of discrimination (Lee, 1997).

### ***Intergenerational Conflict and Experiences with Discrimination***

In a one year and a half ethnographic study of Hmong American students at a Wisconsin public high school, Stacey Lee (2001) explores the complexities of the Hmong American student experience and relationships with the dominant society and the family. Lee (2001) visited the school three times a week, observed and interviewed students, analyzed school documents, observed Hmong parents, and observed Hmong community gatherings. In her work, Lee (2001) suggests that Hmong students do not fall in the stereotypes of either delinquents or model minorities. Lee (2001) examines the experiences of two generations of Hmong American high school students, one of the 1.5 generation and the other of the second generation. 1.5 generation Hmong students

include those who were born in another country but grew up in the United States while second-generation Hmong students are those who were born in the United States and have immigrant or refugee parents (Su, 2008; Lee, 2001). Lee's (2001) qualitative study uncovers some insightful explanations of these groups' attitudes towards education.

Second generation students experience intergenerational conflict (Lee, 2001). This occurs when second generation acculturation is not guided by parents whose acculturation has not "caught up" to that of their children (Lee, 2001). Schools serve as an organized institution for students to learn the social values and ways of American culture. Because children and parents have different views of what it means to be successful in America, tension and intergenerational conflict develops between the children and the parents (Lee, 2001). Second generation Hmong students do not discard their Hmong culture or traditions but are trying to redefine what it means to be Hmong in the United States. Lee (2001) suggests that academic success for these high school students is the product of both cultural transformation and cultural preservation. In other words, Hmong students succeed better when they are able to conform to the values of the dominant culture while maintaining their own cultural identity.

Truancy with second generation Hmong students occurs because they experience discrimination differently from 1.5 generation Hmong students. Second generation Hmong students experience long-term discrimination which impacts their attitude and faith in education while 1.5 generation Hmong students tend to overlook cases of discrimination and place more attention on the positive aspects of life in America. Unlike the 1.5 generation, second generation Hmong students become disengaged in their education because of the impact their experiences with



discrimination have had on their positive outlook on opportunities in the school.

In an earlier study, Lee (1997) examines the cultural, economic, and racial factors that affect Hmong American women's pursuit of higher education by sharing the stories of several Hmong American women. Lee (1997) interviewed twenty-one first generation Hmong women from the ages of 18 years to 32 years of age. Their stories demonstrate their desire to break the gender norms, and their narratives exhibit harsh discrimination from others. The Hmong participants suggest that the media targeted the Hmong to be "lazy", "backwards", "foreign", and on welfare. One participant describes an experience with an elderly White woman who questioned why she did not simply return to her country. The racial and ethnic discrimination caused these Hmong women students to internalize the "racism of the dominant society, questioning their own self-worth and worrying about what non-Hmong Americans think about them" (Lee, 1997, p. 822). Experiences with discrimination impact minority students' adjustment to college. Nora and Cabrera (1996) suggest that "the climate of racism and prejudice harms the cognitive and affective development of minority students" (p.140), and these factors are often the reason minority students leave their institutions. Increased opportunities for activities and conversations among diverse groups of students on college campuses, however, can result in increased sense of belonging at the university or college (Locks et al, 2008). In the case of the female Hmong students, experiences with discrimination impacted their confidence to participate in class and, in turn, hindered their teachers' and peers' perception of their engagement and academic ability.

The Model Minority Myth places all AAPIs in one basket and assumes that AAPIs possess the same experiences, histories and attainments. An overview of the

disaggregated data of AAPIs, the history and culture of the Hmong and the experiences of the Hmong in the United States helps to lay the foundational work of this study. To further frame my research study, it is important to examine the works of Bronfenbrenner (1984) and Lareau (2003). Bronfenbrenner's (1984) ecological framework helps to describe how the contexts of students' environments influence their development and how the environments relate and connect with each other, ultimately influencing the experiences and development of students. Lareau's (2003) work encourages educators to understand the notion that children have developed their own cultural organization of behaviors based on their upbringing, which is influenced by their social class, and this notion is similar to socialization as pointed out by Suzuki (1990) who was discussed earlier. Examining the experiences of Hmong students from the ecological perspective – like Bronfenbrenner (1984) - and cultural lens – like Lareau (2003) - can be very helpful.

#### **From an Ecological and Cultural Lens: Bronfenbrenner and Lareau**

Bronfenbrenner (1984) explores the influence of individuals' environments on their development. He suggests that human development occurs through continuous processes and interactions between an individual and the persons, symbols, and objects in the environment during extended periods of time. These settings or environments are the contexts of development for individuals and consist of different structures which include the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1984). A microsystem consists of the activities and relationships that have direct contact with the individual, and within the microsystem, emotional and cognitive development occurs. A microsystem can consist of parents or schools. Mesosystems

entail the interconnectedness of two microsystems that belong to an individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1984). For example, parents and schools can form a mesosystem. The exosystem is the structure or settings where an individual does not have direct contact but the events within that structure indirectly influence processes within the setting in which the individual lives. An example of this can include the combination of a parent's place of employment and the student's school. Although students may not have direct interaction or exist within their parent's place of employment, their parent's employment (or lack of) can indirectly influence the experiences of students. Lastly, a macrosystem is the ideology or culture of society in which an individual lives (Bronfenbrenner, 1984). There are various ideologies and cultures of society that can be considered when exploring the experiences of students, and these can range from various ideas like democracy, religion and religious institutions, immigration policies, or society's attitudes toward minority groups.

The notion that there are different contexts and settings that influence the development of a student is helpful for this research study. For example, Bronfenbrenner's ecological model is useful in that it takes researchers through the experiences of students from the micro level of interactions with parents to the macro level of connections with ideologies that exist in society. In arguing against the Model Minority Myth and the idea that AAPI students are homogenous, I am able to take Bronfenbrenner's ecological model as a way to illuminate the experiences of Southeast Asian students. For example, parent-child relationship within the microsystem can include the notion of the intergenerational conflict for Hmong students. Stacey Lee (2001) examined the experiences of 1.5 generation and second generation Hmong

students and found that second generation students experienced intergenerational conflict (Lee, 2001). This conflict occurred when second generation acculturation was not guided by the parents whose acculturation has not “caught up” to that of their children (Lee, 2001). Parents’ acculturation strategies can include English speaking skills, but if parents lack this skill, students will have challenging experiences in school. At the meso-level, Yang (2003) notes that language barriers also serve as challenges not just for students’ academic performance but also the relationship between parents and schools. Language barriers usually cause the separation of these two groups, and this lack of interconnectedness becomes a challenge for some SEA students.

Bronfenbrenner’s (1984) ecological framework helps me to gain a better understanding of how the contexts of students’ environments influence their development. This ecological framework also helps to show how the environments relate and connect with each other, ultimately influencing the experiences and development of students. To drill deeper into some of the ways in which a students’ environment influences their development, I turn to Annette Lareau’s (2003) *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*. Her work explores the contexts of the students’ life to look at how social class impacts the experiences of students resulting in concerted cultivation or accomplishment of natural growth.

Annette Lareau (2003) examined the relationship between students’ social class and educational practices and views in the American education system. She conducts case studies of students from different races and social classes and examines the relationship of social class, child rearing and cultural repertoires. Lareau (2003) proposes that middle-class parents raise their children through a belief in “concerted

cultivation” while the working-class parents raise their children through a belief in “accomplishment of natural growth” (Lareau, 2003). Middle-class children experience concerted cultivation because they participate in extracurricular activities and have guided support from their parents. These experiences provide middle-class children with essential interpersonal skills, a sense of entitlement, and increased access to resources based on their social class. Working-class children, on the other hand, are brought up through accomplishment of natural growth (Lareau, 2003). This strategy emphasizes a boundary between children and adults which is defining of the ways in which working-class children communicate with adults in a school setting. Working-class children are less likely to question adults or speak up for themselves. They also do not participate in as many scheduled and programmed extracurricular activities as compared to middle-class students. As a result, working-class children are less likely to obtain the necessary skills or confidence to question adults or advocate for themselves in classrooms and schools.

Lareau (2003) suggests that the students' cultural organization of behavior is tied into their social class. The cultural organization of behavior is the result of experiences gained from the social context that the students live in. Because the cultural organization of behavior is based on the social circumstances in which the students live, educators should view these differences as positive elements rather than negative behaviors that will define their capabilities and potential in learning. Teachers and educators should be aware of the impact social context has on students' academic performance, achievement, and personal development. Most importantly, they should not create social spaces and grouping in the classroom since it deters students from

exercising and meeting their potential.

The implications that emerge from Lareau's (2003) work are valuable to this research study and help to distinguish the experiences among AAPI students, especially when some AAPI groups are performing at higher levels of academic achievement than others. For example, CARE (2010) suggests that of the 15 AAPI groups that were observed, Cambodian, Laotian, and Hmong had the lowest percentages of bachelor's degree attainment (15%), with Hmong being at the bottom (CARE, 2010). Factors consisting of socioeconomic status and language proficiency can impact educational attainment of these individuals (Hune, 2002). Lareau's (2003) work encourages educators to understand the notion that children have developed their own cultural organization of behaviors based on their upbringing, which is influenced by their social class. Individuals in higher socioeconomic status have greater access to services and resources than those in the lower socioeconomic status. It would be also very important to include Bourdieu's (1986) ideas of social and cultural capital when reviewing Lareau's (2003) work as well. Bourdieu (1986) suggests that "social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (p. 248). People who have a common relationship are placed together in a group, and this group together possesses certain resources and privileges. Social capital is also closely linked with economic gain. Bourdieu (1986) continues to note that membership in a group "provides each of its members with the backing of collectively owned capital" and that these relationships "may be socially instituted and guaranteed by the application of a common name (the name of a family, a class, or a

tribe or of a school, a party, etc.)” (p. 249). People have access to resources based on their social connections and networks. Also, the existence and nature of these social spaces create the segregation and grouping that we know today in our society. Within each social space, individuals are then able to produce, gain, and maintain resources and privileges. Social class has an influence on the upbringing of students and plays out in the school systems.

The research literature tells us that Hmong-American students experience intergenerational conflict, language barriers, and discrimination. In addition, the Model Minority Myth hides the real educational experiences of Hmong students and does not provide a realistic picture of their struggles and successes. Despite some of the challenges and barriers that Hmong American students experience in their academic journeys through the educational system, there are some Hmong students who matriculate into college and graduate from their post-secondary education institution. Thus, it is important for us to explore the experiences of Hmong students in college, understand their experiences and responses to challenges and identify and recognize patterns of their success. This is the work of this study.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

#### **Introduction**

The aggregated educational attainment data for AAPI students and the Model Minority Myth do not reveal the different experiences and social realities of the many AAPI subgroups like the Hmong. The goal of this study was to explore the experiences of Hmong college students who succeed in college and to understand their experiences from their perspectives. An understanding of the experiences of Hmong college students can bring to light the real stories of these students and provide suggestions for supporting Hmong students in higher education. This research study used phenomenological methodology to help meet these goals and, more importantly, answer the two following questions: How do Hmong students make sense of their experiences in college? What contexts or situations influenced the experiences and success of Hmong students in college? Chapter three details the methodological steps taken in this study and will describe the research design, timeline, sampling design, data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness, and the limitations.

#### **Research Design**

In efforts to gain a deep understanding of the meaning of the college experience from the perspective of Hmong students, this study was conducted using the methodology of phenomenology. Phenomenology is a qualitative methodology that is grounded in the idea of human existence and what the experience of being human is like. Husserl (1976), Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre were among the top phenomenological philosophers with Husserl (1976) being the founder of



phenomenology (Moran, 2000; Smith et. al, 2009). Husserl (1976) describes phenomenology as the careful examination of the human experience and the ability for individuals to step outside of their everyday experience in order to examine what an experience or phenomenon means. By doing this, the individual may then come to a richer understanding of their own experience of a given phenomenon and, thus, be able to identify the essential structures of that experience. If this is done, the features or aspects of the experience would transcend the particular circumstance of their appearance and might also bring light to a given experience for others (Husserl, 1976).

Moran (2000) suggests that phenomenology emphasizes “the attempt to get to the truth of matters, to describe phenomena, in the broadest sense as whatever appears in the manner in which it appears, that is as it manifests itself to consciousness, to the experiencer” (p. 26). Phenomenology allows for individuals to describe how they experienced the phenomenon, what these experiences were, and how they make sense of these experiences. Husserl (1976) describes phenomenology as the revisiting and examination of the *die vorpradikative Erfahrung*, which is the experience before it has been constructed and expressed with thoughts and judgments. When an individual revisits and returns to examine an experience that has not yet been constructed into judgments, they return to what is known as the *Lebenswelt* or *life-world*. The *life-world* is the world that we “are always already living” and which “furnishes the ground for all cognitive performance” (Moran, 2000). It is not a world that is governed and formed by universal laws but a world that is created by the experiences of an individual. Researchers conducting phenomenology should view the phenomena in their *modes of givenness* or in the manner of which they are given to us by the participants (Moran,

2000). Phenomenology allows for researchers to view an individual's life-world.

Husserl's view of phenomenology – transcendental phenomenology – focuses on the meaning of the lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon. The purpose of transcendental phenomenology is to describe the essence and the nature of experiencing a phenomenon (Moran, 2000). Husserl's (1979) view of phenomenology embraced the belief that it was important for researchers to eliminate all prior personal knowledge in order to better understand the essential lived experiences of those being studied.

Husserl (1970) describes the process of bracketing as a way to bracket out the outer world and individual biases and beliefs in order to clearly understand a phenomenon. It is a process in which the researcher becomes aware of his or her own prejudices and viewpoints regarding the phenomenon being researched; it simply means “to refrain from judgment, to abstain from or stay away from the everyday, ordinary way of perceiving things” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 33). Husserl (1976) argued that our conscious experiences are distorted by the way in which we engage with experience in our ordinary lives, and our assumptions and perceptions of these experiences distort what he viewed as the real essence of that experience. Transcendental phenomenology requires the suspension of the natural attitude, and it requires that the researcher set aside any scientific, cultural, and philosophical assumptions of the phenomenon being examined (Husserl, 1979).

Contemporary phenomenology, specifically interpretative phenomenology, works to incorporate the social and cultural context of the individual's experience. Smith et al. (2009) suggest the notion of lived experience as interpretative by means of the participant's interpretations of their experience and by the researcher's interpretation

of their interpretations. Smith et al. (2009) refer to this as double hermeneutic. In interpretative phenomenology, the researcher explores the texts or descriptions of the phenomenon given by the participants and then transposes their own insights resulting in a story about the lived experience. Contemporary phenomenologists reject Husserl's (1979) notion of epoché or bracketing because they see self-reflection as an important part of phenomenological reflection. Contemporary phenomenologists embrace the historical and cultural aspects of their experience and believe that acknowledging these aspects can help to open up and eliminate developing understandings of the phenomenon throughout the research process. Contemporary phenomenologists examine how their attitudes, experiences, and values impact the research process and findings. In summary, contemporary phenomenologists reject Husserl's idea of bracketing or epoché, and view reflection on both their experiences and the phenomenon being explored as a way to better understand the phenomenon.

Although I do not accept Husserl's notion of bracketing and epoché, I found it useful to identify my personal experiences before beginning the study because of my position working in higher education and because of my Hmong cultural background. As a Hmong college graduate and as someone who works in higher education, I wanted to take the time to revisit and understand my own experiences. Thus, I performed a bracketing-like exercise. During the process of bracketing, I first typed up on a Microsoft Word document my own personal experience as an Asian student and a Hmong former college student. I identified key experiences during college that I saw as barriers and other experiences that supported my success during college. I also listed my prior education experiences and the reasons for pursuing a college education.

Lastly, I documented all the viewpoints, thoughts, and ideas about the phenomenon of Hmong students experiencing college. This process allowed me to revisit my experiences as a Hmong college student and to understand my own lived experience so that I could interpret the participants' interpretations of the experience of being a Hmong student in college.

It is through phenomenology that researchers gain a better understanding of what it is like for an individual to experience a specific phenomenon. I did not choose grounded theory, for example, because I am not aiming to develop a theory that explains Hmong college students' success in college. My research study aims to describe what it means to experience the phenomenon of going through college from the perspective and lens of a small number of Hmong American college students and graduates. With its focus on experiences, phenomenology allows for an empirical exploration into the construct of college success for these particular Hmong American students and graduates.

### **Timeline Overview**

Upon completion and approval from IRB in December of 2012, I began the process of recruitment of participants for this study. I recruited the participants for the study by distributing a flyer approved by IRB. The flyer was distributed to local Southeast Asian organizations and at an Asian American student organization at a local, public four-year institution. The flyers were also distributed at local Hmong New Year celebrations in the region. I also visited a Young Hmong Professionals group page on a social media platform to post the flyer. Recruiting for participants for this study required a significant amount of time because of the lower numbers of Hmong students

who have graduated from college. I spent one year to recruit and simultaneously interview participants for the study. I completed two interviews for each of the ten participants, and all interviews took place between February 2013 and November of 2013. Each time I met with a participant for an interview, I also logged contextual notes to provide more insight and information to the interviews. After completion of the first interview, I scheduled a follow up interview between one to two weeks after the first interview depending on our schedules. I spent a large amount of time listening to the audio-recordings of the interviews before the transcriptions were made. The transcriptions of the interviews were made from October 2013 to December 2013, and I used a professional service for the transcription. As transcriptions were received, I read and re-read transcriptions, line by line, for each participants. It took several months to listen carefully to the recordings and read through the transcriptions. While reading the transcriptions, I observed that some of the words were not captured correctly which led me to make several changes and edits to the transcriptions. Analysis of data was conducted between the months of December 2013 and July 2014. The process of reading, re-reading, and analysis of the transcripts was extremely important and helpful for me to comprehend what participants were saying and to pick up on details that might have been missed.

### **Sampling Procedures**

This phenomenological study used a purposive sample because of its focus on information-rich cases that target the central importance of the study (Patton, 2002). Purposive sampling was also appropriate for this study because I was looking for participants who were Hmong and had the experiences related to the phenomenon being

researched. The study was targeted for a purposive sample that consisted of people of Hmong descent who had attended or were still attending a four year, public or private, higher education institution. Using a visual of the “paj ntaub” or “story cloth”, which is a traditional Hmong artifact that uses cloth and sewing to share a story, I created the flyer to showcase the opportunity for members of the Hmong community to share their story of being a college student. In the flyer, I also used the term “we” to create a sense of comfort and to provide a sense of shared knowledge with the potential participants since I am also a member of the Hmong community. I worked with a Southeast Asian advocacy organization in New England to distribute flyers to the Hmong community. I also distributed flyers at a Hmong New Year celebration in the region and provided flyers to other organizations including a New England school department working closely with Southeast Asian families. I also worked with a Student Affairs colleague at a New England public higher education institution to distribute flyers and visit with Asian American students at their Asian American student organization meeting. Lastly, I advertised the flyer on a Facebook group discussion board targeted for young Hmong professionals.

Because of the lower educational attainment of the Hmong, recruiting was challenging at first, and it was difficult to find participants to be a part of this study. I found the most useful method of recruiting participants for this study was through the participants themselves. Some of the participants who participated in the study shared the research information and flyers with their Hmong peers who then reached out to me to participate.

I recruited ten participants for the study and honored the Protection of the Rights of Human Subjects throughout the entire process. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study and were provided with consent forms. The names of individuals presented in this study were altered to protect the identities. Participants were given pseudonyms, but their responses will reflect their own words, descriptions, and experiences. The ten participants for the study are all Hmong. One student, who I call Pang, had received the flyer as a member of an institution's Asian American student organization and participated in the study. Pang is the only participant who was currently enrolled in college, and she was the first to be interviewed. The next three participants were Bee, Sai and May. The three of them are Hmong individuals that I had been acquainted with since childhood, but I have had little interaction with them during recent years. I participated in a Hmong traditional dance troupe with May during our childhood, but we have not interacted with each other much over the years since our childhood. Bee and Sai are also familiar with extended family members of mine. They grew up in the same Hmong community as I did and received the flyer.

Nhai received the flyer at a local Southeast Asian non-profit organization and later received an email invitation from me asking for her participation in the study. She was eager to share her story. I had also posted the flyer on a discussion board of a young Hmong professional group on a social media platform. Maisee and Poua discovered the flyer on the group discussion board on Facebook, and both individuals messaged me via Facebook to indicate their interest. I then arranged times and days with them for the interview.

The eighth participant, Vong, discovered the flyer at the Hmong New Year Celebration and was interested in sharing his experience. He also heard about the study in talking with some of my younger family members who are all of the same age and share similar experiences within the Hmong community. Kunsha and Lee both contacted me via email to participate in the study. They had received information about the research study from Vong and wanted to participate. Because I had reached data saturation after the tenth participant's interview, the recruitment and interview ended with Lee in November of 2013.

### **Characteristics of Participants**

Before examining the findings, it is important to provide an overview of the background of the participants of the study. Although all participants are Hmong, they are varied by gender, approximate age, location of birth, family make up and placement in the family. There were 10 participants. Four of the participants identified as men and 6 identified as women. All participants ranged in age from 19 years to 39 years old with 5 participants in their twenties and 4 participants in their thirties. At the time of data collection, all but one participant had graduated from a four-year post-secondary education institution mostly in New England. One of the participants went to college in California while a second went to college in Georgia. Pang is the only participant who was still enrolled in college while the other nine participants had graduated. As a whole, all participants' parents are Hmong and arrived to the United States as refugees from Thai refugee camps and from the Secret War. They all come from large families. Three of the participants were born in either Thailand or Laos while the other seven participants were born in the United States, resulting in three 1.5 generation Hmong



students and seven second generation Hmong students. 1.5 generation Hmong students include those who were born in another country but grew up in the United States while second-generation Hmong students are those who were born in the United States and have immigrant or refugee parents (Su, 2008; Lee, 2001).

Figure 3.1

*Overview of Participant Characteristics*

Name	Gender	Approximate Age	Place of Birth	College Graduate	First Generation	Hmong Generation	Older sibling w/ college degree	Family size (including self)	Birth Order	Type of College
Nhai	W	33 yrs.	Thailand	Yes	Yes	1.5	No	5	1 <sup>st</sup>	Private
Sai	M	34 yrs.	United States	Yes	Yes	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Yes	7	7 <sup>th</sup>	Public
Bee	M	39 yrs.	Laos	Yes	Yes	1.5	No	6	1 <sup>st</sup>	Private
Pang	W	19 yrs.	United States	In Progress	Yes	2 <sup>nd</sup>	No	11	3 <sup>rd</sup>	Public
Maisee	W	26 yrs.	Thailand	Yes	Yes	1.5	Yes	6	5 <sup>th</sup>	Private
Vong	M	23 yrs.	United States	Yes	Yes	2 <sup>nd</sup>	No	7	3 <sup>rd</sup>	Public
Kunsha	W	24 yrs.	United States	Yes	Yes	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Yes	7	4 <sup>th</sup>	Private
Lee	M	25 yrs.	United States	Yes	Yes	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Yes	14	9 <sup>th</sup>	Private
May	W	33 yrs.	United States	Yes	Yes	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Yes	12	5 <sup>th</sup>	Public
Poua	W	26 yrs.	United States	Yes	Yes	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Yes	14	6 <sup>th</sup>	Private

All the participants identified as first generation college student because their parents had not obtained a bachelor's degree from a four-year institution. Although they were first generation college students, 6 of the participants had older siblings who graduated from college while four of the participants were the first child in their

immediate family to earn a college degree. Lastly, six participants attended private post-secondary education institutions while four attended public universities. The characteristics of the participants – gender, age, place of birth, college graduate, first generation, Hmong generation, older siblings with college degree, birth order, and type of college - can be observed in Figure 3.1.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

The goal of this research was to come to a better understanding of the experiences of successful Hmong students in college. The method of data collection for this study consisted of two separate audio-recorded interviews with each participant. Recruiting the participants through purposive sampling was the first step in the data collection. When a participant was identified, I reached out to them via email or phone to schedule the first interview. I scheduled interview dates and times with them, and participants were asked to meet with me in a location that had minimal distractions and provided a safe place to share their experiences with me. Sometimes, the place was their home, and often times the place was a café. I met with Bee, Sai and Pang in the comfort of their homes in separate rooms that allowed privacy and few disruptions. I met with May, Vong, Poua, Maisee, Lee and Kunsha at a local café, and we sat at tables in areas that were not busy or disruptive. Nhai invited me to meet in her office at her place of employment after hours, and I interviewed her there. All participants appeared to be comfortable sharing their stories with me, and the locations for the interviews were helpful in easing this comfort for them.

During the first meeting and before the interview was conducted, I first thanked the participant for his or her support and help in providing a voice for the Hmong

experience. I provided each participant with information about the study. I also presented and discussed the consent forms needed before following through with the interview and research. I discussed the importance of upholding confidentiality throughout the entire research process, and I answered any questions the participant may have had before the interview started. After these items were completed, I conducted my first interview with the participant

The first interview was aimed at building rapport with the participant. I was familiar with some of the participants so we spent a few minutes chatting before the interview commenced. The interviews consisted of open-ended questions that explored the backgrounds of the participant, his or her experiences in college, and his or her reflections on the meaning and sense making of these experiences. The interviews were semi-structured which allowed the interview to flow according to what the participant presented (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The semi-structured interviews and guiding questions served as a guide for the interview but do not dictate the direction of the interview. The questions were asked to gauge the participant's life history up to the time of entering college, the participant's academic experiences prior to and during to college, and the participant's sense of success as a Hmong college student. Participants were also asked to share how they would describe their college experience to other Hmong students. During the interview, participants were asked to share their family background and how their family started a life in the America. Participants were also asked to describe a typical day in college. Interview questions were worded to engage the intended subjects. Some of the first interviews lasted about an hour while others reached to an hour and a half. The interviews were recorded

using a Samsung audio recorder. The guiding, semi-structured interview questions from the first interview are provided in Appendix B.

After the first interview was completed, I scheduled a second interview before the participants and I departed from our meeting. The second interviews were conducted to ask follow up questions. In interviewing for phenomenology, it is important to have a follow-up interview to expand on certain statements from the first interview, to further explore experiences or to member check (Moustakas, 1994). The second interviews provided an opportunity for me to ask the participants to elaborate or explain a statement, word, phrase or response provided in the first interview. I also used the second interview to member check. I checked in with the participants to verify if I interpreted what they stated correctly and if what they said was explained in the patterns or themes that were emerging as I was listening to the recordings and taking notes. The second interview also provided me with a chance to ask the participants to include any insights or reflections from our first interview. For example, when I asked Vong if he had any thoughts or reflections he wanted to share about the first interview, he stated, "...I'm more aware of myself and what I'm trying to do... I'm setting the bar for myself and have to achieve that, so like me telling you that, oh, I'm this person, or I'm supposed to be this kind of role model, then it just makes me remember that, hey... I can be a role model."

The data gathered from both the first and second interviews met the criteria for phenomenological research which aims to study the experience of the phenomenon. Both the first and second interviews lasted an hour to an hour and a half. The interviews were all recorded using an audio recording device. I also maintained a field

log of contextual notes from the interviews to make sense of any contextual references. All the interviews were sent to a transcribing service for transcriptions. It is important to note that while I was conducting the first and initial interview with some of the participants, I began to conduct the second follow-up interviews with those I had already completed the first interview with. For example, when I began my first interview with the fourth participant, May, I was also conducting my second follow up interviews with Pang, Bee and Sai who were my first three participants. During the summer of 2013, I experienced a lull in recruitment, but recruitment picked up in August and ended in November 2013. Once all interviews were completed, they were transcribed for data analysis. Analyzing data for phenomenology consists of coding and developing themes in order to come to an understanding of the phenomenon.

### **Data Analysis**

To recap, I interviewed ten participants twice about their experience in college as Hmong students and recorded all interview sessions. I was unable to transcribe the interviews in a short matter of time since the recruitment and data collection process took about nine months. Thus, I was unable to begin using the transcripts for identification of codes during the second interview, but I was able to listen carefully and repeatedly to the recordings on a regular basis to begin observing emerging patterns for codes. I made notes of these patterns and shared them with the participants during the second interview. Once all interviews were conducted, the recordings were transcribed using a transcription service called Pioneer Transcription Services. I accessed their services using their website at [www.pioneer-transcription-services.com](http://www.pioneer-transcription-services.com).

To complete the data analysis process, I conducted general thematic inductive

analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) because I wanted to use the data from the participants to gain a better understanding of their meanings. There are several ways to go about developing themes and codes in thematic analysis. This process includes developing thematic codes from theory, prior data or prior research or from the transcribed interviews, or inductively (Boyatzis, 1998). Because the goal for the study is to showcase and explain the experiences of Hmong students in college from their perspectives and lived experiences, I chose the inductive process of developing codes and themes. The codes and themes developed would derive directly from the words provided by the participants. General thematic inductive analysis consists of carefully reading the transcripts in order to become familiar with the participants' words, identifying themes within samples to develop a framework for coding, coding the transcripts, revisiting the codes and transcription for other emerging codes, organizing the codes into categories, developing themes based off the categories, and checking for data trustworthiness. The following points below outline the specific steps I took in analyzing the data from the ten participants:

- 1.) *Reduce the amount of words* – I listened to the recordings continuously throughout the data collection process. I also read the transcriptions carefully to become very familiar with the data, and the transcriptions were extracted from the Word documents to on an Excel spreadsheet. For the transcripts, I made sure to indicate a synopsis and take notes to provide me context when I revisited the lines. This allowed me to be very familiar with the participant's words and recall what the participant was referring to.
- 2.) *Identify themes within samples* – With ten participants and two interviews

each, there was a lot of data to work with and a good amount of transcripts to code. After thoroughly reading the transcripts for each participant and becoming more familiar with them, I was able to identify themes within the sample. I identified these themes as four grouping categories that helped me to develop a framework for coding all the data. These grouping categories included family, prior experiences, college experiences, and Hmong community/culture. I then created a new Excel spreadsheet with tabs representing each of these four grouping categories. Going through each participant's transcripts, I copied and pasted the appropriate transcript lines to the relevant category or categories it fell into.

3.) *Read the transcripts again and code them* – After cutting and pasting the transcript lines from each participant into the four grouping categories, I then went through each individual category – family, prior experience, college experience and Hmong culture/community – and coded the transcripts. I first started with all transcripts that fell in the grouping category of family and then moved on to prior experiences, college experiences, and Hmong culture/community. It is important to note that some of the transcripts were cross-referenced in one or more grouping categories, and I saw this as important because it helped to demonstrate the connections in the participants' experiences. Also, on the Excel spreadsheet and in the row of each transcript or line, I made sure to indicate the participant's initials and the page number of where the quote could be found on the participant's original transcription. Figure 3.2 showcases an example.

- 4.) *Read the transcripts again and look for other emerging codes or eliminate codes* – I went through the transcripts again in each grouping category and revisited the initial codes. I eliminated any codes I thought were no longer important and provided new codes that may not have emerged in the first coding. Once I finished coding again, I pulled out all the codes and listed them. During this step, I had developed 114 codes from all the participants' transcripts.
- 5.) *Review the codes again and develop another set of categories that derive from the codes*– I reviewed the list of 114 codes and the transcripts again. I reduced the 114 codes to approximately 33 categories by clustering the codes to form a category. I had the benefit of a huge wall in my work space, and I used this to my advantage. The 33 categories represented the 114 codes from the participants' raw data. After I formed the 33 categories, I wrote each category on a post-it which was placed on the wall. This process allowed me to visually see commonalities among the 33 categories, and I further examined these categories.
- 6.) *Reduce the categories to a few select themes* - As I examined the 33 categories that were now labeled on post-its on the wall, I began to reduce those codes to a second set of categories. I placed similar and repeated categories together and examined how certain categories were related to each other. Once I grouped the categories together, I began to reduce the categories to three overarching themes that explained the experience of Hmong students in college.



Figure 3.2

*Example of category organization and coding*

College Experiences						
Part.	Page #	Transcript/Line	Notes	Code	Code	Code
K.X.	10 - 11	Because we all, we all, we all came in, we all came in with the same, uh, perspective and, um, same, you know, culture and everything, uh, struggles, same struggles, and uh, struggles of being Hmong and being American. So we, we had a lot of, like, things in common. That's why. Yes.	Having Hmong friends in college and how it helped her.	Friends	Support from Peers	Hmong identity

The last step of the analysis was to verify the trustworthiness of the study which I will discuss in the next section of this chapter. Using general thematic inductive analysis allowed me to approach coding in an organized way and helped to ensure the closeness of the codes and themes to the data provided by the participants.

### **Trustworthiness**

#### **My Role as a Researcher**

I approached this study with preconceived notions about the experiences of Hmong students in college, and much of this was due to my identity and background as a Hmong American and my professional work as a higher education administrator supporting students' first year experience, student success, retention, and engagement. Throughout my life, I have learned a lot about my Hmong heritage, the customs, its history, and the resettlement in the United States because of the Vietnam War. I have always wanted to learn more about my background and serve as an advocate for those

in my Hmong community. In addition, my family has always been particularly active in the Hmong community by supporting the retention of culture, development and advancement in socio-economic realms or celebration of traditions.

I approached this study knowing that many people had little knowledge about who the Hmong are and where they are from. Many people are still unaware of the Hmong's alliance with the United States in the war against communism in Vietnam and Laos, and I often have to use the movie *Gran Torino* as a reference to explain who the Hmong are and where they come from. I also approached this study familiar with the complications of higher education and the barriers that exist that make it challenging for students – particularly underrepresented students – to stay enrolled. I knew it was important for me to think about these perspectives and biases.

I feel that my experiences as a Hmong American college graduate and a woman serve not as limitations to the study but rather strengthen the study because my connection to the Hmong community allows positive engagement with participants to result in rich details regarding their experiences. I share some common experiences with them and am able to understand their successes and challenges. I made every effort to ensure that my participants felt comfortable with sharing their experiences with me. My previous professional experiences and my Hmong identity may bring preconceptions, but I attempted to be middle throughout the interviews. The participants were able to share detailed and close observations and reflections on their experiences while I listened to how they made sense of their experiences in college.

### **Credibility**

To ensure trustworthiness and richness, I used the second interviews with

participants for member checking. During the process of member checking, I shared with the participants the first emerging patterns and themes that I observed while listening to their interviews. As I shared this information with the participants, they were able to provide me with feedback and affirmation about these themes. I also shared a written draft version of the summary of findings with the participants. Kunsha shared her response to the summary of findings and indicated that she is “so encouraged” by the findings and that the themes “hit all points of the experiences of a first generation Hmong adult in college.” The member checking and sharing of the summary of findings helped to increase the credibility of this study.

### **Assumptions and Limitations**

A few limitations existed for this study. The limitation of the study may be the questions I asked which may impact the validity of the interview. For example, when I asked Sai to describe what a typical day in college was like for him, he asked me to clarify which college year he should describe. The wording used in the questions needed clarification, but the participants’ answers were rich. As the researcher who developed the interview questions, I aimed to maintain my awareness of the terminology used in the interview questions. I also member checked with the participants in the second interview to ensure I understood what they shared.

In addition, my membership in the Hmong community and personal experiences may be perceived to develop researcher bias. Rather, I view my membership as a strength rather than a limitation. My experiences as a Hmong American helped to garner insight into the culture, to recruit participants, and to help them develop a level of comfort during the interviews.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

#### **Introduction**

Three main categories emerged from the data analysis described in the data analysis section of Chapter 3. These categories include: navigating the college system, support structures, and “I am a Hmong-American”. The first category or theme describes the Hmong students’ sense of cultural capital in the higher education system and their ability to navigate the college system. They discuss their experiences of being first generation students in college and the ways in which they learned more about the college process and experience. The participants also described dealing with academic transitions, exploring career choices and balancing financial concerns with responsibilities at school. The second theme describes the support structures and types of resources they used during college to achieve success. Participants spoke about various structures that supported their experience and success in college. The third theme – living in a bi-cultural world: “I am a Hmong-American” – demonstrates the Hmong students’ stories of living and balancing the American and the traditional Hmong culture during their years in college. Participants often described the difficulty they faced in trying to maintain both cultural expectations at school and at home. Specifically, the participants discussed the strong traditional and cultural Hmong expectations, the gender issues of concern, the search for what it means to be Hmong, and the connectedness they felt among their peers in college. The participants also expressed their interest in the advancement of the Hmong community as a result of their experiences in college. The participants shared their appreciation of and experiences

with the Hmong community and further discussed their desire to give back to the community. The participants shared their concern for the new generation of Hmong students in terms of education and supporting the Hmong community. In order to describe the data informing the three categories, I use quotes from the interviews I conducted with the participants. These quotes highlight important information that speak to the three categories and demonstrate the lived experiences and life-worlds of these participants from their perspectives. I describe each theme and subtheme in detail using these quotes from the participants, and I provide a summary at the end of each theme to review the findings.

### **Navigating the College System**

The first theme that emerged in this study is the experience of navigating the college system. Several of the participants spoke about their lack of understanding of the college process and the difficulty of navigating the college system. This theme is broken up into four different subthemes: “I don’t think my parents really understand what college is” (Bee); academic transitions; choosing the right major; and “college isn’t easy” (Pang). The participants discussed their parent’s lack of cultural knowledge about college, the academic challenges they experienced, the career decisions they faced, and the nonacademic demands they had to balance with school.

All of the participants identified as first generation college students where neither of their parents earned a bachelor’s degree from a four-year institution. All ten participants are also children of refugees who came to the United States in the late 1970s as a result of the Secret War. First-generation college students bring different characteristics and experiences compared to traditional college students (Terenzini,

Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella & Nora, 1996). Because their parents did not attend college, the participants themselves lacked an understanding of the cultural codes, behaviors and knowledge of the college system and process. Because they were also first-generation college students, the difficulty of understanding and navigating college was a reality for the participants.

Sai is the youngest in his family of seven. Sai has four older brothers and two older sisters. Sai's family was also sponsored by a religiously affiliated organization which supported their transition to the United States. He enjoys his time with his family and currently works in the field of business. Sai was a first-generation college student and described what it meant to him during his first year in college:

As a minority, you know, you're already in a state of mind where, you know... "Oh, you know, I'm already behind the 8-ball." So you want to be able to—to utilize the system. And the—the kind of saying is, you know, we're in a society where it's—they're going to give you a hand up, not a hand-out. It's your choice to see if you want to get out and get out of your same old routine, whether, you know, you're stuck on welfare and subsidized housing and things like that, which a lot of Hmong people are, and you want to get out and do better for yourself and get a career and get a—be a professional and not be faced with subsidized housing like your parents were and to get out of that same old routine and, you know, and set a good example for Hmong people.

Sai saw the difficulty in being an underrepresented and first-generation student in college, but he also saw the potential of growth and the opportunity for success. He

recognized the stories and struggles of his parents and the Hmong community as a push to be successful. The participants saw themselves as first-generation college students and acknowledged the difficulty of being a first-generation student, but most were motivated to meet their goal of graduating from college.

College, for the Hmong participants, was an understood “next step”. Given the history of the Hmong and the way in which Hmong families came to the United States, there was no other option for the Hmong youth but to strive for a better life than the life of their parents, starting with receiving a degree from a college or university. Most of the participants talked about their decision to attend college as “the next step”. Poua, one of the women in the study, said that she “just always knew it was the next step (laughs)”. Poua is the sixth of a family of fourteen. Her parents are no longer together, and some of her siblings live with her father while others live with her mother. Poua’s family consists of eight girls and six boys. During her high school years, she got married and moved to a different state with her husband at the time. She soon divorced her husband and moved back closer to her family where she began attending college. After her first year in college, she gave birth to a baby girl. Poua is currently in a doctoral program for Chemistry. College, for Poua, was seen as the next step after high school.

Bee, one of the oldest participants of the study, echoed the same notion about going to college. He said, “So...I just kind of knew that was like the next step. I just kind of knew that you went to high school, then went to college, and um, you know, I never wanted to just go to high school and then come out and work. I don’t think that was ever one thing I wanted to do.” Bee, who was born in Laos, is the oldest in his

family of six. He has three sisters and two brothers, and his father was a teacher in Laos who highly values education. Bee's family was sponsored by a religiously-affiliated organization, which provided Bee and his family with an American family to support their transition to the American society. Bee majored in biology during college and returned to pharmacy school. He is currently practicing Pharmacy.

Nhai described her decision to go to college as an expectation rather than a decision. She is the oldest sibling in her family, and her family consists of five children. Nhai was born in Thailand and obtained about one to two years of schooling in a Thai refugee camp. She came to the United States when she was six years old. Nhai is currently serving as a Director at a non-profit organization that supports Southeast Asians and is a licensed social worker. In regards to her decision to go to college, Nhai stated, "It (college) wasn't a realization. I think it was always my parents telling us, 'we always want you to do better than what we're doing'. I knew that if I didn't get a high school degree, then I would be doing the work my parents were doing, and I knew that if I didn't go to college, then it would just be very disappointing to my parents." College was an expectation and a "next step" for the participants.

May is the fifth member of her family, which consists of twelve children. She did well in elementary, middle and high school and spoke about her love for school as a means to get away from her big family. May had many responsibilities at home growing up while her parents worked many hours. She currently serves as a Program Coordinator for a nationally known organization that supports the development and empowerment of girls. May also knew college was the next step but shared that she did



not have a clear understanding of the type of planning that was necessary in college due to the minimal discussions she had with her parents about it. She stated:

I didn't look at college as this big, universal, "oh my gosh, I'm changing my world kind of thing". I just looked at it as, it was going to excel me a little bit more. So, as time progressed during high school, I definitely knew that I wanted to go to college, because I wanted to excel. But, it wasn't, in a bigger picture, I didn't look at it overall like, oh my, it was going to—it's going to give me—because I didn't know about all that stuff. You know, you don't learn about degrees when you're in coll—you know, you just learn, OK, she went to college, and she didn't go to college. We didn't know the difference between a bachelor and a masters. You know, you don't learn that stuff until you're in college, and you're trying to find out the wisest person here for four years and plus, and all that stuff. So, to me it was just really like, I was looking to really enhance myself academically, like intellectually. And I just kept taking—so to me it was like—it was like a class to me. It wasn't all like, "oh my God, I'm going to university". It was more like a class.

For May, then, going to college was understood as just attending classes. The process of developing a four-year plan was something she had never really discussed and was not aware of.

From the perspective of the participants, college was a new space and environment with new rules. They had to learn the behaviors and expectations of that new space when they arrived on campus. Cultural capital is an individual's knowledge

of certain cultural codes, how to behave and what works in certain contexts and settings (Bourdieu, 1986). When an individual enters a new field or space, the individual is introduced to the new rules of that particular space and is given a position in that field. This was the case for most of the participants. They lacked the cultural capital to understand what college was going to be like and how it operated. When the participants enrolled at their institutions, they found themselves in a new environment with new expectations. They had to quickly learn how the college system looked and functioned.

The idea of navigation of the college system and learning how the college system worked was a common theme among the participants. The difficulty of navigating college was in part due to the institutions not providing them with the information or meaning of that information. When asked about a challenging time during her college experience, May talked about her first year in college and learning how the scheduling system worked. She shared:

Like I had hour breaks, I would try to study and then it wouldn't do me anything. I would have to review it when I got back later at night so everything was always like review, review, review kind of so to speak so I struggled with it a little bit, with my schedule but like you know with time, you understand what you can and can't do, what you can...because then you start learning about the system, right? About how to drop, how to add, how to put another class in, those types of thing where they don't show you, yea (laughs), which is really sad, but like those are things that you learn, you know, as you go.

It was not until May actually started experiencing these challenges and solving these concerns that she learned more about how things were completed in college. For the participants, navigating college was difficult. An explanation of the difficulty of navigating college is that Hmong students could not rely on their parents or other family members to inform them of what the college experience was going to entail.

**“I don’t think my parents really understand what college is” (Bee)**

As mentioned, the parents of the participants have never experienced college and have not earned a bachelor’s degree from a four-year institution. As a result, many of the parents did not have the knowledge to guide their children in the application to college and the guidance to navigate the college experience. To illustrate the lack of parental knowledge, May explained her parents’ discussion about college to her:

So, for me, my parents never really talked to me about college. They never really—I think my generation, my generation from my mom and dad, first generation, it’s so hard for them to talk about college experience. They always say, “School’s good for you. Go do it”...because they’ve never had that. They always think it’s going to be different. It’s going to help you. But, they don’t know the impact of how it’s going to affect you. They don’t know the student loans. They don’t know any of that stuff. They’re just kind of, “oh, my daughter or my son’s going to college” and that’s that. So, it’s hard for me to—it’s hard for them to kind of grasp that concept.

May’s explanation of her parents’ lack of knowledge of college and what it entails demonstrates the uncertainty and weight that is put on the participants when they

enter college. Most of the participants' parents want the Hmong students to succeed, but the parents have little understanding of what this success actually involves. Bee also echoed this notion:

I don't think my parents really understand (laughing) what college is or what a college, what college should be. Um, I think they just think that you should, it's like, um, like a job. You go there, you do what you have to do and then you come out and that's kind of it. And, um, I think that that's how they look at it. Um, and I think that's how a lot of parents, ah, Southeast Asian parents look at it. They're just like, "You go there. You do that. You get the degree. You come out. You get a job".

Bee described his parents' concept of college as more of a process than an opportunity in which students gain other skills and experiences, meet people and grow personally, socially and professionally. For most Hmong parents, college was seen as a means to an end, and for the participants, the lack of cultural knowledge of college was a reality for them when they enrolled in college.

Bee also talked about his experience of feeling independent because he knew his parents were unable to guide him. He shared that he "was very independent" and had to learn how to do everything himself. Bee further described his parents' lack of knowledge and indirect support for him. He shared:

If there was a problem that needed to be solved, I solved it on my own. At the same time, you felt like--you wish your parents had more involvement. But at the same time, I understood that if there was a

problem, my parents would have no idea how to fix it. If there was a problem with my financial aid package, that I have to go and sign some kind of paper, they had no idea what to do. So I had to figure out what to do and go fix it on my own. So from a college planning standpoint, my parents did not do much at all or they did very little to help me. But from a standpoint of did they back me up to go to college and to do well, they were 100 percent behind me in that sense.

Bee recognized that his parents' absence of support did not reflect any disinterest in supporting him. Rather, it was because they did not know what supporting a student in college entailed. As I reflect on my own experience as a Hmong college student, I can relate to Bee's observation regarding his parents' indirect support. Although Bee's parents did not support him by, for example, financing his education or coaching him through the academic and campus life, he understood they supported his goal of completing college. In the second interview, Bee further shared what his parents' indirect support meant: "I mean because of that my parents didn't have the, um...they didn't have the support in terms of like, ah, the knowledge to help me do certain things but then they always supported the fact that I was going to go to school... so that was never a question". Bee understood that his parent's lack of direct support had nothing to do with an absence of desire to help him but suggested that it related to his parents' knowledge. He explained: "So financially they couldn't really support me the way I, I would have wanted them to, ah, but also I understood that, and I understood that they couldn't support me... when we filled out the financial form, my parents had no idea how to fill that out. Nobody knew how to fill that out. I had to figure that out--

how to do that, what to submit in, what it meant. I had to figure all that out”. Bee continued in describing his parent’s inability to help with more technical aspects of college like writing papers:

Financially they couldn’t really support me the way I, I would have wanted them to, ah, but also I understood that, and I understood that they couldn’t support me. Um, you know, like if I had a question about something, you know, like how do I go about doing a research paper? Of course, you know, I know they’re not going to be able to help me with that. So that’s something that, um, I would have to figure out on my own... That’s, that’s something that you, you don’t expect that your parents are going to be, be able to help you do, so.

Maisee is the fifth in her family of six, which includes two sisters and three brothers. She was born in Thailand but grew up in the United States. She majored in architecture. Maisee’s family was also sponsored by a religiously affiliated organization which supported their transition to the United States. Currently a Project Designer looking to become a licensed architect, Maisee described her parents’ lack of knowledge: “My parents, I mean, I don’t know how they would have helped me, because they don’t understand the words or, like, what they’re asking for. So I just take their, like, financial information and do it (FAFSA). I go, ‘Well, you know, I think it’s right. So I’m going to do it’. But, yeah. That’s right. And my parents didn’t know. So I couldn’t really go to them to help me to do it”. Her parents did not understand the process and also did not understand the cultural terms connected with the process.

In terms of the college experience, particularly with campus life, some of the participants described their parents' lack of presence at their first move-in day to college. Bee remembers the time when he moved into his four-year institution which was located approximately ten to fifteen minutes from his parents' home. Bee explained:

I went by myself. I moved in by myself. And everybody else had family helping them and I was kind of like, 'What's going on?' I mean, I felt bad but my parents just didn't understand the importance of the whole college experience or living on campus or anything like that. So it was just one of those things that you just kind of like knew that that's just the way it was and you just kind of dealt with it, that you just did it on your own.

During his years in college, Bee shared that his parents rarely visited him or asked how he was doing in college. He shared that "they were just kind of like – as long as I was going to school and I was passing, that was good enough for them." He observed that his classmates' parents would "take the kids up", "drop the kids off", and were "calling all the time". Bee did not experience this.

Maisee also had a similar experience during her first move to college. She described her experience: "So they, I took my bin inside and unpacked myself. I...and then they weren't a part of the unpacking". She observed her roommates' moving experience: "I noticed my roommates—I had two roommates—their parents were there all day, like, helping them unpack and do things. And they went out to dinner afterwards." At that particular time, Maisee thought to herself, "Why? Like what's with

all their, like, you're just moving in. It's not that big of a deal'''. However, she has a different perspective on the move-in process now. She explained, "But now I can see. I was thinking, 'If I have kids, I will probably be, be that way. You know? Make sure they get settled in'. But when I was, when I was moving in I was just like, 'Okay. Bye. I'll see you guys in a couple of weeks or something like that'''. When her parents did drop her off, Maisee described what she thought and what occurred next:

I-I'm on my own. I've got to do my own stuff. And I went to the store and bought my, you know, toilet paper and did all the things I needed to do. I think that's also because I, maybe because I had been independent a lot. And so to me I've always taken care of myself. You know? Looked out for myself. Done stuff for myself. I never really went to my parents for anything.

Without the guidance and college coaching from their parents, the participants were somewhat forced to be independent when they arrived at their college campuses. Another aspect with the challenge of navigating the college system involved their academic transitions. Some of the students discussed their experiences of having to learn academic strategies and resources to support their academic success in college.

### **Academic Transitions**

Most of the participants generally enjoyed school. They highly valued education because, to them, education would lead them to a life that was more financially stable than that of their parents. Several of the participants shared with me the academic struggles they faced in college. Their first year in college was



academically difficult, and they often found themselves trying to find the right study skills in order to pass their courses.

For Bee, being the oldest and the first to go to college in his family was difficult. Bee stated: “I think I had a hard transition... you have to do homework and stuff like that (in high school) but it’s nothing like the college level. I think I didn’t really understand that until I actually went to college and that’s when I realized that um...you gotta study hard, you gotta do well otherwise you’ll get kicked out of here.” For Bee, his academic challenge did not stem from his inability to understand the material. Rather, it was a matter of understanding how to study. Bee stated that in your freshman year “you don’t have the right study habits. It’s hard because studying is almost a skill. You know what I mean? It’s not like you just wake up one day and say, ‘I’m going to study.’ It’s a skill. You have to learn how to do it”. Adjusting to the demands of college course work was a challenge for some of the participants, particularly in the first year. They had to find the right study skills and habits and the effective ways to manage their time efficiently.

Sai also had a difficult time in his first year in college. He talked about failing one of his courses during his freshman year:

Freshman year was the only year that I flunked or failed my—the only class that I had, the only class in college. And it was a—a big eye-opener, because I had to take a step back and say, “Wait. I’m paying for this class. I’m trying to go to this class. I’m trying to study for this class. I’m trying to do well in this class. Well, I’m not. And I’m not having my priority—my priorities aren’t on straight.” So I had to just

take a step back and say, “You know what? Next year I have to do better”.

Once college started for Sai, he found it difficult to attend this early morning class and keep up with the course work. Eventually he found himself only attending 50% of the course throughout the semester, failing the course and revisiting his purpose and goals. He began prioritizing his studies and got into a routine, and Sai reminded himself that he, in fact, was paying for his college education.

Academic challenges did not just occur in the first year of college. May talked about her most academically challenging time during college. She stated, “I was doing very poorly in one class and I was like really emotional about it because I worked really hard in this class... And I didn’t know why I was doing so bad. And it really, like, bothered me. And so I tried everything. Everything. Like I tried everything.” What was difficult about this particular situation was her effort to seek help and guidance from an advisor staffed in one of her university’s bridge programs. May participated in a bridge program during the summer before her freshman year, and the program required students to continue meeting with their advisors throughout the four years in college. During her senior year, May had received a failing grade on one of her exams for a course she was struggling in and decided to meet with her advisor to seek some guidance and encouragement. The advisor was new to the program and new to May. May described her experience with the advisor:

She said something like, “Oh, it was probably because you didn’t study well enough.” And to me I was just like, “You don’t know nothing about me.” And I was like, “I can’t believe you would say that. You don’t even

know who I am. How dare you.” I said, “I studied.” You know, I was like, “I studied my ass off.” And so I just kind of went a little ballistic on her. And I was like, “Do you know what? I don’t need you. I don’t need you telling me how good I’m doing. I, this is my last year. I can get.” And so I was like, “I don’t need to report to you no more.” I said, “This, consider this my last visit.” And, you know, as a (bridge program) student you ain’t supposed to, like, be telling her that this is your last visit. But I was pissed... I was very upset... Because I don’t need that. Like after I do really bad, like, you don’t need somebody telling you why you didn’t do good enough... And so the, one of the senior counselors called me... and I told him what happened. I said, ‘I’m not coming to see her no more.’ I said, “I don’t want to see her as my counselor. She just, I don’t need her telling me that. I really don’t.”... and he was like, “Well, you know, it’s your senior year. You need to come back.” And I said, “I’ll see anybody else, but I’m not going to see her.” And he goes, “Well, you don’t have to come see her, but you do need to, like, just check in and, and, and just check in. So give her your grades and that’s it. And check in. And that’s it.” And I said, “I’m not going to stay and talk to her like I used to. No. That’s not happening.” And he goes, “Okay. I understand. But she is your counselor, but you have to stick with her.” And I was like, so I would go. “Here’s my grade. Bye.” And that was it. That was my conversation my senior year. Because at that time you’re just like, “What are you really? You’re not a, you’re not

counseling me anything. Like you're not trying to guide me towards anything".

In this particular and detailed story, May recounts the intense emotions and frustration she felt during her attempt to seek advice from one of her advisors regarding her academic performance in a course. Not only was she having a difficult time in this course during her senior year, but she also felt a lack of support and understanding from those she felt were supposed to support her. May felt the bridge program advisor passed judgments on her and so she refused to take advice or support from this advisor during the rest of her senior year. May's story recounts some of the challenges the participants experienced in college, particularly in relation to academic success and achievement. First-generation college students were also less likely to see faculty and staff as concerned for teaching and student development (Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella & Nora, 1996). Being academically successful was extremely important to the participants, but the opportunity to find a mentor, advisor or individual who believed in them was also very important to them. Along with academic transitions, the decision to make the right choice about a major and a career was very important for the Hmong participants.

### **Choosing the Right Major**

For some of the participants, selecting a major was extremely stressful and difficult for them. Pressures of doing well academically and choosing the right major that would lead to a financially stable future was a reality for Hmong students. Kunsha had a family of seven siblings and was placed fourth in the family. She was the first member in her family to be born in the United States. She had two older brothers and

an older sister. Kunsha also had two younger sisters and a brother. Kunsha majored in cross-cultural studies and was working at a non-profit organization supporting the Southeast Asian community in her state. Choosing a major was difficult for Kunsha. She explained that most Hmong parents “force their kids to go to school to be a doctor, a nurse, a lawyer.” She continued by sharing her parents’ suggestion to her about her career and choice of major: “My parents were like, just go to Ocean University or go to Rose College, go somewhere close, and become a nurse and a doctor, and I was like, I don’t want to do that. That’s-that’s boring to me. I’m-I’m not good at math, you know, I’m not-I like science but that’s about it.” For most Hmong parents, prestigious careers in the medical field, for example, were very appealing because of the potential financial success a student would achieve upon completion. However, Hmong parents had little knowledge about the process, or the skills and knowledge necessary to achieve these goals.

Vong had a family of seven and was the third child in the family. He had two older brothers and was the first in his immediate family to pursue a college degree. Vong participated often in the Hmong community and was heavily involved in the youth group of the Hmong church he attended. Currently working in management at an insurance company, Vong majored in Accounting and described his parents’ understanding of his major: “I majored in Accounting and, I majored in Accounting and I minored in Leadership Studies...but, for accounting classes, it was different. Even my parents didn’t know anything about accounting. They didn’t know anything about taxes. We sent our taxes to like, my aunt, and everything, so all these terms are new to me.”

Kunsha, whose parents wanted her to pursue a career as a doctor, lawyer or nurse, talked about her experience raising money during college to attend a service trip to Thailand. She explained her major decision-making process post-trip:

So after going-after going to that-to Thailand, my trip, coming back I started thinking about, I was like, you know, I've always wanted to be a teacher, but, I don't want to do that. And, so, but I want to-I want to create-I want to create like an organization for the Hmong people, because when I was there, it was really hard for them to get education, and some of them were too poor to get an education, and some one-some of them couldn't afford or some of them didn't have anybody at all. So, I wanted to create an education that helped them. I was like, you know, since I wanted to be a teacher, I can major in cross-culture so that I can have a way of studying the Hmong people, and I can also minor in TESOL, Teaching English as Second Language.

Here, Kunsha's experience abroad had a profound impact on her and helped her to make a more appropriate decision about a major that interested her.

For Maisee, choosing a major was also stressful. Maisee attended an institution designed specifically for architecture, and although she wanted to be a teacher growing up, her family felt that architecture was a more prestigious career to pursue. Maisee explained:

Well, I wanted to go into education. And, but my mom said, you know, "You make no money if you." But she said she didn't really mean it...When I was in, a senior, like I had the period of all my life doing,

teaching, summer assistance. You're, like, I was for an education for a career in education. And senior year when I told her I was going to go to college it was just, "if you're going to go to school to be a teacher, you might as well just not go to college, you know, because you're not going to make that much (money). You make as much as someone who didn't go to college." So then I was like, "Oh, fine. Whatever".

Maisee attended her institution for architecture and knew that she was not completely happy or passionate about it. She described, "It was difficult. But then I-I knew I just had to do it. It was like, 'Just suck it up and do it'." Maisee continued, "I just wanted to finish. I was like, 'I can figure it all after I finish', you know? Because I didn't want to start over. And I think with my field I was thinking, you know, I could do many things if I did decide to stay in architecture." In this case, Maisee talked about her decision to stick with the major even though she found it difficult and was not completely satisfied with it. She found herself pursuing a major that was considered more prestigious by her family than a major she was invested in. Maisee eventually completed the major and is currently working in the field. Other participants found themselves exploring majors they were interested in but learned the hard way that majors required more than just the typical attendance at classes.

May was interested in computers and majored in information systems management at the institution she attended. However, she found herself in a career not related to computers because of the lack of guidance she received from the institution on how to proceed with developing a career in information systems. She described:

I was really good at computers, so I kind of stuck with it, and I really

liked it in college. But, when I got—when I got my degree, and I was working in the real world with it, I was just kind of like, oh... Because one thing they didn't tell you about my degree was that, you have to get certification. You have to get certified, multiple different types of certification. And the more certification you've got, the more obviously your level in terms of your pay, and what you're going to be hired for, and that field in itself is so hard to get into in terms of working, that I kind of lost passion. Because nobody ever told me in college, when you're doing this, you should really start looking into certifications. Because I could have done it all along while I was in college, but I didn't. So, it was hard, because the certification process has nothing to do with college. It has nothing to do with your bachelor's degree. It really is a separate entity to your degree. It's career building, that's what it is. So, I was kind of blindsided in that.

Although May was interested in computers and pursued a major she was interested in, she did not receive a needed career building and development component for her major. The participants not only struggled with finding a major that appealed to them and their family expectations, but they also had a difficult time understanding the complete career development portion of the college experience that is so important to future success.

For the participants, academics and decisions on majors were important in their college experience. In addition to successfully transitioning to the academic world of college and making an informed decision about their majors, the participants also aimed



to balance responsibilities with their school. Living on and off campus required Hmong students to quickly adapt and take responsibility for themselves, particularly with the finances of college. Some of the participants were faced with the harsh reality of being a fulltime student and finding ways to make ends meet for their college finances.

### **“College isn’t easy”: Balancing Everything**

First generation students typically come from low-income families and are less prepared to cope with nonacademic demands (Terezini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella and Nora, 1996). Some of the Hmong students made a decision to live on campus while other Hmong students lived off campus for financial reasons. The participants who described their experience living in the residential halls talked about roommate issues, sharing a room with others and the opportunity to meet new people. Other Hmong students – Pang, and Nhai – lived off campus because of financial and personal reasons. Before discussing the experiences of some of the Hmong students’ off campus living, it is important to note that most participants attended their institution of choice because of financial reasons or the financial support their institution provided them.

Bee attended his institution because he had received a full academic scholarship and stated: “I was lucky that I got one of the spots. Yeah, that program pretty much paid for everything...so I was lucky in that respect...that I was able to go to Rose College and not pay for tuition”. Although he received a full academic scholarship, Bee also voiced his experience with financial struggle:

Financially that was also very hard because um, growing up, ah, our um, economic...socioeconomic level...we had no money for college and you know that so...everything was, uh...my parents were able to give me

enough money for me to like to buy food and stuff like that during the week...everything else was just on me. Uh, you know, it was all the financial aid, loans, all that type of stuff.

Bee had made a decision to live on campus to receive the traditional college experience and still had to find financial support during his four years at his college to cover books, for example.

Nhai had intentions on attending a different college out of state:

My first choice actually was Hampshire College, but having to live on campus would be an issue with my parents. I didn't really want to take \$2,000 in loans just to finish that process". As a result, Nhai selected an institution less than 20 minutes from her home and made a decision to commute to campus. Nhai shared: "I did try to do it (living on campus) once. I think I backed out because I was like, 'I don't really want to.' I was going to do that my freshman year, and I'm like, 'Nope.' And then I was like, 'Let's try sophomore year,' and it was like, 'Nah.' I'm so used to commuting at this point. What's the point?"

Instead, Nhai spent her years at her institution living off campus and balancing work and school. For Nhai, the experience in college seemed to be compartmentalized:

I worked throughout college, so it was like, 'I went to school and now I went to work.' For freshman year, I actually volunteered at (a local library) right across the street from us. I was just there tutoring a lot of the kids more in the elementary school and middle school level. I worked at the library for a couple years. I just loved it. You learn to give back. It was sophomore year when I actually worked and go to school at

the same time. It's just work. It's just school at the end of the day.

For her, going to class was just going to class, while going to work meant simply just going to work. Nhai's experience in college was rather unique in that she did not feel a strong affiliation with the institution.

Pang was another Hmong participant who commuted to school. Pang had lived in three different states and was the third of eleven children in her family. She had two older sisters who were also in college, three younger brothers and five younger sisters. Pang was enrolled in college and majoring in Computer Science. She was born in the United States, loved to play volleyball, worked part-time, and resided with her older sisters while her parents lived in another state. Pang hoped to obtain a job in the field of Computer Science and to eventually move to California. Similar to Nhai, Pang chose to commute to college because of financial reasons. She did not take out any loans. Pang described her family as big and cited that her father was "not exactly the greatest role model". Pang's parents and family lived in Oklahoma, miles away from her current location. Pang had hoped to attend an out-of-state institution but could not afford the costs. Pang noted that she ultimately chose her current institution because "it's cheaper" and she knew that her parents "didn't have a lot of money" so she would "just stick with" the college she would eventually attend.

Pang not only chose a college that was not her first choice, she also chose to live off campus with her sisters who were also in college. First-generation college students tend to work more hours per week off campus (Terezini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella and Nora, 1996). Pang, the only Hmong participant who was enrolled in college during the time of data collection, came from a large family with parents who could not

financially support her expenses in college. As a result, Pang spent her days working to save up money for rent and school and studying to do well in her courses: “I’m not under my mom’s insurance anymore so like I have to put it there from the school. Enough to pay in the books because it’s like 900, almost a thousand.” Pang worked many hours at a local restaurant, commuted to college, and shared a car with her sisters whom she lived with: “in between all my sisters...they have their jobs too so I’ll have to take them to work, come back, go to class, pick them up. It’s like a taxi driver plus like everything else...we only have one car.” Her car is her dorm: “It is like our dorm, I don’t know. I, you know how like people they have their own dorm so. I know our car’s always there. (Laughs) I don’t know, just like a dorm.” When asked how balancing work and school was for her, Pang’s description illustrated her reality:

Uh well since, well since this semester I had class like from 8 to 8. It would be like tiring. For computer programming, you have to do like labs and stuff and I always do it right before the class because it’s like late at night. Um my head would be like ‘what’, I don’t know...Um so usually when I come home I’m like “I’m done. Let’s just watch something and go to sleep.” So even though you have like a quiz tomorrow morning. Yeah so um yeah, college isn’t easy.

Pang went on to describe the difficulty with balancing work and taking care of herself. She noted:

It (freshman year) was the worst year. I was like struggling and as I turned 18, everything was like “I can’t do this” um and yeah. My sister had her own things to do. So like she can’t take care of me so I had to

take care of myself and I was like really, I don't know. It was like mind wrecking sometimes and sometimes I'll be like "I can't do this. I'm going back to Oklahoma," and um I don't know because ... I don't know it's like sort of a sense of reality again. I don't know, it's like kind of hard. And getting used to it, I don't know. Mary's (sister) always like...oh my sister... she's always like ... What is that word? Um scolding me. That's right. She's always like... "you should get a job and stuff". I say "Ah I can't do that".

The act of balancing school and work becomes a routine for Hmong students like Pang and Nhai. Because Pang works so much and lives off campus, she does not have a sense of a campus life at her institution. Pang described:

I think that a lot of kids who...don't have jobs...and have like money from their moms or something....to like pay for school, they have like enough time to study and like have more of a campus life but um yeah. I'm pretty sure yeah, like I would stay up the night before because I work like 12 hour shifts now. So like um, sometimes it'll be Friday all day and then Saturday all day and Sunday I do my homework. Monday I have school and I go to sleep....and then...yeah, I think I'd be already too tired to like do anything else.

Here she talked about herself in comparison to others who may have financial support from their parents. She attributes her lack of campus life to the time she puts into working and then catching up on her studies. Another participant, Poua, faced personal matters that created a nontraditional residential life.

After two years in college, Poua got “knocked up” as she described it. As a result, she found an alternate living situation and commuted to school: “I commuted, yeah. I lived in (city), but you know, it was just a train or a bus ride away. Yeah. So, my grades suffered a little bit, but I still did pretty good compared to other students that didn’t have a kid. So, that was good enough for me.” Although her grades were impacted by her commute, she describes the supportive living situation she was able to find: “I had another single mom live with me. So, that was nice, yeah. It was helpful because you know, we couldn't be late, and she babysat for me, and I babysat for her. So, it was really nice. We met through Craigslist. We’re still in touch now.” Poua’s ability to find a support structure particularly as it related with school and her living situation provided a positive experience for her.

Most of the participants faced financial struggles and chose institutions based on the financial packages and/or scholarships offered to them by various college and universities. Some found themselves at their second or third choice while others worked jobs and balanced academics to maintain their enrollment in college. The participants were faced with being responsible, whether it was uncovering the culture of college themselves or working to make ends meet as a full time student. They, of course, couldn’t do it entirely on their own. College is a new field and space for these students, but the support and resources they gained before and during college helped them to be successful as well. The support structure makes the second theme.

## **Support Structures**

The second theme that emerged in this study is the support structures that served as guidance and assistance in the participants' success during their college years. Hmong students are generally first generation college students where neither of their parents have earned a bachelor's degree. Given their parents' lack of knowledge regarding college – the experience and the process – it is usually up to the Hmong students to navigate their way through the college system. All of the Hmong students had support structures that assisted in their success in college whether it be in navigating the college system, doing well academically, growing as an individual. In addition, the participants also gained some cultural knowledge from their affiliation with pre-college experiences and programs, and the knowledge they gained was helpful in their transition to college and college life. The support structures that were common among all participants included pre-college experiences and programs, institutional support, parental support, siblings as role models, and peer to peer support.

### **Pre-College Experiences: Bridge Programs and High School Support**

Although all the participants were first-generation college students, most of the participants discussed the opportunities and programs they explored and took advantage of before attending college. The participants also discussed the impact these resources and support structures had on their transition and experiences in college. These resources included summer programs, challenging college preparatory high school curriculum, and college bridge programs.

Some of the Hmong students participated in programs that continued their engagement and learning and exposed them to college and the college process. Bee

participated in a program that kept him engaged in learning during the summer. Bee spoke about his experience participating in a summer camp program: “I was lucky I got it (summer camp fee) for free because of that program, because of the funding and everything. And it wasn’t a camp or anything like that, but you were actually learning a lot of stuff and you were getting a lot of exposure versus just being home doing nothing so...so even if it was for like a month and a half, it was still better than doing nothing...and it definitely helped a lot”. When asked to share what was helpful about the summer camp program, Bee described it as being supportive in “helping you at a young age, thinking about, you know, school or education, um, just um, trying to get you into a different frame of mind than versus just going home and watching TV or doing nothing all summer”. The summer camp program gave Bee the opportunity to be more invested in his learning and education. Nhai also participated in summer programs which provided her with a community of learners and exposure to information about college.

Nhai talked about her experience in a summer program that exposed her to a college environment, the college experience, and the college process: “I was at Summer Program for a while for those two years in the middle school years, and they helped pay for a lot of the prep materials for the SAT. They helped explain the financial aid process.” She continued to describe her affiliation with another college preparatory program:

Then I was also in this program through (name of University)... it was a weekend program where they really help urban minority youth transition from high school to college... like Summer Program, they took us to



different colleges, but they really taught you about curriculum and what college life is like and the admissions process and the fact that there are other colleges out there and the difference between the colleges. I think they were extremely helpful. They were taught by college students themselves, so I had that almost from middle school onto high school.

Along with these two programs, Nhai also participated in a third program which was a non-profit college preparatory program that was designed as a bridge program. Bridge programs are designed to help provide underrepresented students with the knowledge, experiences, and resources needed for a smooth transition from high school to college. This bridge program provided after-school tutoring and college information sessions for families. Nhai described herself as being “very fortunate to be involved in these programs” and suggested that all these programs “actually turned out to be very beneficial”. Nhai was not the only Hmong student who participated in a bridge program designed to serve underrepresented students and ease their transition to post-secondary education.

May participated in another type of bridge program designed to allow students to live on campus for approximately six weeks during the summer to get exposure to college life. Students would also receive tutoring in areas of English and mathematics. May noted that her time in this bridge program and living on campus before going to college made her first few weeks in college an easier transition. She shared that the first few weeks and starting college “wasn’t a big deal”. May continued to add that she handled living in a new atmosphere with new people well but was particularly nervous about “adjusting to all these new lifestyles” around her, such as her roommate. When

asked to share one of the most impactful aspects of the bridge program, May suggested that her relationship with one of her unit counselors was extremely inspirational:

What really impacted me—not all of them, but some of them. I think the one year that I was there, I don't remember if it was my last year. I believe it was my last year. We also had unit counselors, or, they're called RAs. They were our residential advisor, and they were in charge of our suite. So, these people were college students that, they were also our mentors for certain subjects. So, even when they were living and overseeing our suite, they served as mentors, and they tutored certain subjects. So, the awesome thing about this group of people were that they were college students. And so, I saw how much knowledge they had, and I was just always fascinated. I had this one counselor, I believe her name was Maria, and I loved her. She was my favorite RA of all time. She was just really sweet, really nice. She talked about college a lot. She talked about her experience. And I just saw so much intellect that was coming from her, that I was just like, I so want to go to college to kind of like, you know, to talk the way she talks, sort of view. But, I really think that it had an impact on the individuals, because I think, as much as our age difference, because we were high school students, and they were college students. We definitely related, because we were so close in age. But, at the same time, these were the people that were tutoring us. They were the ones who were educating us on classes that we were taking. So, it wasn't like I was getting mentored and tutored by

a 50 year-old professor. So, I definitely think that, that had an impact on my study habits, and what I wanted to know about college.

For May, the bridge program provided her with an idea and understanding of what living away from home would be like and what college would entail. It provided her with a sense of cultural knowledge about college. May not only viewed the bridge program as a vehicle to gaining knowledge about the process, but she also found inspiration in the people that supported her in the program.

When May was accepted to her university, she enrolled in an additional bridge program that required her to move to her university a few weeks early. She enrolled in a few college level classes as a part of the college bridge program. Sai and Vong also participated in the same college bridge program at the same university. I will refer to this college bridge program as the Student Bridge Program, and it is facilitated and operated by the university attended by Sai, Vong, and May. May, Sai, and Vong all went to the same university but graduated in different years. According to Sai, the Student Bridge Program required students to live on campus during the course of the summer and to complete two courses. Sai described: “I believe I took Accounting 101, and I forget what the other class was. But we had a head start, because the program that I was involved in gave us, you know, somewhat of an insider’s perspective to the campus before the whole campus or the kids showed up, so we have the whole campus to ourselves during that summer course.” May also described her experience in the Student Bridge Program. She stated: “ I was kinda like used to it, so it wasn’t nerve wracking to me...it was just like, what’s going to happened with me and my roommate ‘cuz I’ve heard stories, things don’t always go bad, those were the nervousness but it

wasn't like I was scared. I was already accustomed, adjusting to the whole college atmosphere but now it was like the people that was making me nervous". Because May had spent some time in a previous bridge program during her middle school years and prior to enrolling in college, she was somewhat accustomed to the campus life during her participation in the Student Bridge Program. The Student Bridge Program provided the participants with an understanding of the available campus resources, college living and academic skills development. The program also provided the participants with advisors who supported the students' academic and personal success throughout their four years.

As I reflect on my experience as a Hmong student in college, I was not a part of a bridge program and did not have easier access to resources and academic and personal support. In his first interview, Vong talked about the Student Bridge Program's support in his college experience and specifically spoke about the help he received in showing him how to open himself up and build more confidence. I wanted to gain a better sense of what this support meant, and in the second interview, I asked Vong to describe the impact the Student Bridge Program had on him:

I looked at Student Bridge Program more than just like, like aid and stuff, you know, like, they were very—and most of it was like they built like an intimacy between like us, like a-a relationship, but my advisor, like I said, like I hardly—she's my mom on campus, you know. And she would go beyond just asking questions about grades and stuff, asked me how I'm doing at home or if I'm not feeling well, you know, where can I go get like meds and stuff so she, she was like always—you know, she

was basically always taking care of me, always keeping an eye out on me. If I ever slack she would give me a call, always make sure she pep talks me. If my family is going through a hard time, she'll find resources for it and tell my family and stuff, so it was, it was a very, like, personal relationship... so it became more—it wasn't just like counselor kind of thing. It was just like oh, I feel like, you know, one of my relatives and stuff, you know.

Sai also echoed similar sentiments regarding the counselors in the program. He shared that he also had a counselor and that there was always “a lot of information and a lot of tutors and a lot of helping hands that would, you know, assist you”. When Sai described his challenge of failing a course during his first semester in college, he suggested that his ability to reach out to his program’s staff turned out to be extremely helpful. Sai suggested: “they were responsible for helping me and for guiding me and—and getting me better grades and—and just doing well overall in adapting to, you know, freshman life, fresh—you know, freshman year in college”.

May, Sai, and Vong found their institution’s bridge program to be supportive in their learning about college life and academia. The development of relationships with individuals in the bridge program also positively impacted their success in college. The stories shared by these participants help to illuminate how bridge programs can be an important support structure and influence students’ experience and success in college. Along with the impact of the summer programs and college bridge programs, the Hmong participants’ high school experience and preparation appeared to also be a supportive aspect to their success and transition in to college life.

Some of the participants described their high school to have prepared them well for college. These participants saw their academic experiences in high school as helpful in their transition to college. It is important to note that five of the participants attended the same college preparatory high school – Forest High School. However, they graduated in different years. These participants included Pang, Vong, Bee, Sai, and Nhai. In describing her academic transition to college, Pang acknowledged that her high school was rigorous and really challenged her to do well academically. During her first year in college, Pang took general education classes, and she began taking courses for her Computer Science major, in her second year. She described how Forest High School provided a rigorous experience and a foundation for general education courses during her first year in college:

Oh yeah, college is easier than high school. Well, at least at Forest High School anyways because Forest High School works you to the bones... So like, my first year was like really easy but then like my second year now, I don't know...it's just like harder. Like, you really have to do your stuff. Um you have to know it like eventually anyway so. It's like a wake-up call. (Laughs)... I guess we already have like sort of like a prior knowledge for like gen eds and stuff. But like when it comes to like I don't know, computer programming you can't just know that...unless you have prior knowledge.

Pang saw her high school as academically more challenging than college, and she perceived her high school as providing her with a strong foundation to help her ease into college courses. Bee went to the same high school as Pang, but he graduated

approximately ten years before Pang. Bee also suggested that his high school provided him with a foundation of general education courses that helped him to be prepared for college courses. Bee stated, “Luckily I went to Forest High School which I think kind of prepared me for college. Um, they put more, um, focus on college prep courses. Um, you know, like English, Math, uh, History, like that, that whole, um, like a really good broad diversity of classes so that you’d be more prepared.” Bee’s high school aimed at providing him with different classes which helped to ease him into college courses. He continued to describe the benefits of attending his high school:

I was lucky that I went to Forest High School, as you know, Forest High School was more like college prep high school, so um, I had a lot of the basics down already versus going to like a regular school where they didn’t focus so much on English or math or whatever. I think that we got a pretty good background at Forest High School, you know, with English, math, history, like all the basics.

Although his high school provided him with a good education, Bee also quickly identified a difference between high school and college. He suggested that as a student, “It was kind of like, um, you had to really realize that, um, it’s a different level and you have to work harder and you have to really focus on your developing skills like studying skills or writing skills, things like that, so.” Both Bee and Pang acknowledged the benefit of their high school curriculum which focused on certain general education requirements like English and mathematics. Along with these pre-college experiences and high school preparation, the role of the institution also supported and influenced the experience and success of the participants.

## **Institutional Support**

The colleges and universities that these participants attended offered various support structures that were designed to help students transition and stay at the institutions. Institutional support came in three different forms: campus resources and services, programs, and faculty, and staff. Many of the participants alluded to using one or all of the three forms of resources.

The first form of institutional support is campus resources. General campus resources and services were helpful in supporting the students' success in college. Bee had previously talked about the development of study skills as the most challenging aspect of college for him. He suggested that "the hardest part was just like really making that commitment to like three or four hours a day of homework and making sure you got all your assignments done." For Bee, developing studying skills was an aspect he faced, but he quickly found a tutor and visited the academic services center to hone his studying skills. Vong also talked about using academic services and tutoring. He was extremely appreciative of all the types of resources available to him. He found support in his "school counselors", his "business counselors", his "advisors", and "even the Dean". As Vong described, "I've used every resource I could find". Vong was able to avail himself of the many resources his institution offered.

The second form of institutional support is the various programs available to students. Some of the institutions that the participants attended had programs that supported their success in college. The Student Bridge Program that supported the college transition for May, Sai, and Vong, was a program that was designed by the institution to support its students throughout their college experience. The Student Bridge Program extended well beyond the first semester in college, and May, Sai, and



Vong saw counselors in the bridge program until they graduated. Other participants described other programs that were helpful in their academic and personal success. Nhai and Bee went to the same institution and graduated different years. They were both participants in an academic scholarship program which supported and monitored their progress at the institution. Nhai and Bee met with different scholarship program staff members due to their different graduation years. Bee described his experience with the scholarship program and the support he received:

I mean a lot of it was academic, you know. “Do you need help looking for a tutor for a class or um, you know, I noticed” ... Because they monitor our grades too. So they would be, they would ask, you know, “I noticed ... like you know, if you’re doing well in one class and not, not so well in another they would ask you what’s going on ... if you need help with this”, you know. So from an academic standpoint it was a lot of help. Um, but also, um, I think they were also there to support us like socially too. Like they were there to say, you know, “How are you doing? Is everything okay in the dorms?” You know... “Are you getting along well with your roommates?” Things like that.

Bee found the support helpful in his academic and social life. Nhai also described her experience with the program, but it was of a different tone:

I didn't find it useful at all. Those mandatory meetings that you had to meet with a counselor, I was just like, “This is bizarre.” It wasn't helpful at all because it was not like I was struggling with school. I wasn't having problems on campus. I was like, “OK. What do we talk about?” I think

they tried to encourage me to be a little bit more involved with the school, but I was like, “Show me on my schedule where I can be involved.” I felt like it was just another thing to do.

Although Nhai did not find the individual scholarship meetings useful, she did find support from the Dean of Multicultural Programs who had general oversight of the scholarship program and the director who was expected to regularly meet with scholarship recipients. This point leads into the third form of institutional support – faculty and staff. Nhai explained:

The only person that was most helpful was Dean Smith. For some reason, I had a more positive experience with her than I did with the other... I think with Dean Smith, she was a little bit more understanding because she was always encouraging me to be more. I think the focus was always a lot of the directors were very focused on making sure you survive college, whereas Dean Smith was, “What can you do that gives you a better experience or develop your skill when you leave?” I think that approach worked for me better, because I wasn't really involved or active in college life. She really encouraged me to pursue other things outside of the school. If you didn't feel broken, why do I have to feel this way to talk to you? It was like, “Tell me about your classes. How are you doing in them?” I don't know, I'm getting A's and B's. Is that good enough or is that really bad? Am I supposed to be getting an A now? I think the approach wasn't beneficial. Honestly, I just felt like, “OK, let

me answer the questions so I can leave the session as fast as possible.

Let's talk about this, okay”.

Nhai was a participant in the academic scholarship program, and it connected her with a mentor – Dean Smith. She found Dean Smith to be more supportive because of her style of counseling and encouragement. Nhai described that she later worked with Dean Smith to discuss plans for applying to a national exchange program. This would turn out to be an impactful experience for Nhai who had little connection to her current institution. The college bridge programs, academic scholarship program and connection to staff and faculty helped the participants learn more about college, adjust to the academic life and have a person to talk with. Other participants talked specifically about the support they received from various staff and faculty members.

May spoke highly of her experience working in an office on campus. She found herself learning a lot from the office staff and noted that they supported her by their great sense of humor and general care for her success. She explained:

I definitely learned how to work with different people. I think I had so—so I had this department, but I also had all these varieties of different personalities. I had a—I used to work with this lady...she would walk in, and she would be like, demanding things. And people used to be so scared of her. But, she was the nicest lady to me. I loved her. When she used to talk back to me, I said, you'd better cut it out. And she'd be like—she'll laugh it off, and she was like, “Stop it, May!”... But, so many people—so many people were so intimidated by her. Even students who were coming into housing to talk to her, they would be so petrified.

That's awful. But, she was like the cutest thing ever. I love her, I absolutely loved her. So, I definitely learned how to deal with personality, and that was one of my biggest things, because I deal with a lot of personalities at work, and some people are like, "How do you do this? How do you know when to joke with somebody?" I said, I said, 'because you know, you can't really take anything really personally when it's work. You just kind of have to go with it, and if you feel offended, you've just got to tell them you feel offended'. I said, "it's not a big deal"...And so, I definitely think that, that was one of the biggest thing I learned. I definitely learned how to, to work, the work ethics that I learned in that building, and how to manage myself.

May acknowledged the support of this staff member and credited this individual in helping her develop interpersonal skills.

Along with staff members, faculty proved to be supportive in the success of some of the participants. Bee explained the support of the professors at his institution:

The teachers were very involved with us personally, you know, um, maybe because the classes are so small that they knew you and they wanted you to do well. Um, so in a sense like they were hard on you, they wouldn't just let you pass if you didn't deserve to pass but at the same time you knew that they were pushing you to do really well too so that you could go on and um, you know, do a further degree if you wanted to or a different, or like a different program ...you know after, after college, so.

Having faculty who placed rigorous expectations on him and believed in his ability to succeed was helpful for Bee. Vong also spoke about a professor who believed in him and devoted time to his success. He described the support of professors as a “blessing”. Vong illustrated this professor’s support:

I had one professor my junior year, I was having a really tough time in one of my core accounting classes, a really hard time and I was like, scoring nothing higher than like a C on my exams and I was on the verge of just, like, dropping the class. I went to go talk to her and she showed the greatest grace on me... She was like, English is your second language, huh, but I mean, I mean, I grew up in the States I’m like, no, English is like primary language, but I mean, so I was like, yeah, you know what, like, I don’t really speak English at home and stuff, which is kind of true, because I’m with, I work with the elders a lot, so like, showed a lot of grace and she was like, you know, like, you’re going to make it through this. And she helped me out a lot. And I felt like, in a way, like, my, my background kind of gave me lenience through college, you know. So, it definitely helped me out.

Kunsha also found her professors to be extremely helpful:

So our professors, they, they really dive into your life where they motivate you, like, you know... “We are just not your professors, so we are your parents as well.” And so, um, I like, I, I got real close to, like, all, like – depending on the department, departments of your school, so we only have four – four teachers, um, for our department, so, um, I got

real close to all four of them and, um, and so they would invite us to their house and have cookouts.

She attributed the involvement of faculty to the fact that her professors had an understanding of the background of the Hmong: “Yeah. Uh, so because they, so, like, they, they were, like, before my generation or before my year, like there were Hmong students there like, I don’t know how many years, maybe 15 years, and so, like, these professors are aware of our culture and our, um, our, again, just who we are, you know?” Some of the participants found professors to be helpful when their professors challenged them but believed in their ability to do well. They also found their professors to be helpful when the professors understood their background and acted on their interest in the students’ success.

The participants’ engagement and participation in pre-college and college bridge programs supported their transition into and subsequent success in college. The institutional support of campus resources and services, programs, and faculty and staff also influenced the experiences and success of students. Along with these pre-college experiences and institutional support, it is important to acknowledge the huge role that family members have on these Hmong students’ experiences in college. I will first examine the role of the parents in the experiences and success of Hmong students in college.

### **Parental Support**

All of the participants have been supported by their family members in some manner or form. As previously mentioned, all the participants were first generation college students with some or little knowledge of the college process. None of the

parents of the participants attended and graduated with a bachelor's degree in a four-year post-secondary education institution. Therefore, the parents of the participants lacked the cultural knowledge necessary to guide their children through college. The participants attended college with some knowledge, but college itself was a new space and experience for all as compared to non-first-generation students. Although their parents lacked the understanding of the college process, the Hmong students still found their parents to be extremely supportive in their college experiences. The participants were motivated and supported by their parents in two ways: the moral encouragement and support of their parents and the focus on a better life.

### ***Moral Support and Encouragement***

When May made the decision to attend college, her parents were supportive of her decision. She explained: "I just said 'mom, I'm going to college' and she was like 'okay, where are you going'? I said 'well I applied for x, y, and z. Like my mom...always...like although I did a lot of the...this is my choice kind of thing, my mom was always like, 'oh well if you think it's going to be good for you, go for it'. You know, my dad too... 'ok she wants to do it, let her go for it'." Although May's parents had little understanding of what college was or how to help May apply for college, they provided moral support for her to make her own decisions.

Sai described how his family played a huge role in helping him stay in college. He talked about his father's death and how it motivated him to continue making his father proud of him and his accomplishments. He described: "My family played a huge role. My father died when I was a senior in high school. So it, it basically gave me more fuel to be more successful. He wasn't there, you know, physically. He was there

I'm sure in spirit. So it only taught me to strive to want to be a better person". Sai reflected on his mother's support: "To see that my mom was widowed, you know, at a relatively younger age than the majority of people at 55, and, you know, she's still got, you know, a life to live. So, you know, I wanted to get better for myself and for my mother and for my family, in honor of my family". Sai's parents inspired and motivated him to be successful for the family and for his father's name. Sai described how he saw his mother support him through his college years:

Even though as Hmong, and especially first-generation, we don't show too much affection towards our parents. They're more old-school. Even though we know they love us, they don't really say it. And they don't really exemplify it by hugs and kisses and things like that. But you, you know that, that the intentions are there. And, you know, they're always glad to see you when you come home on a weekend, even though they don't know what you're going through, especially my mom. And so they try to be as neutral as possible.

Sai was aware that his mother fully supported his efforts to excel in college. Similar to May's parents, Sai's parents provided him with the encouragement and support even though they were unable to directly support him through financing his college expenses.

Vong also described how his parents supported his success in college with their moral support and encouragement. He suggested that "even though they didn't understand what I was going through, I kind of always just let them know wh--, what's happening in my life". Vong continued:



So, they would sit there and, even though they don't know what's happened, they would be very encouraging and just knowing that they always have my back and keep pushing me and watching them, like, they'll be like, I'll be ask who, and my dad would get out of work and he would drive all the way up to Ocean University just to drop off a blanket if I was, like, cold or something, so, having that support was awesome. And moral support from my family was awesome.

Lee also talked about how his father supported and guided him throughout college. Lee father's was a captain during the Secret War. His father had two wives, and his mother is the second wife of his father. His father divorced his step mom and continued his marriage with his mother. He has a large family of 14 children and is 9<sup>th</sup> in the family. The total number of 14 consists of siblings from both his mother and step mom. He has eight older siblings above him, and the ages of his siblings ranged from 42 years to 19 years old. Lee was working at a non-profit organization supporting Southeast Asians and had an interest in going back for graduate study in economic development. Lee describes a difficult time during his freshman year the first semester when he was challenged by one of his courses. The course was an upper-level course and turned out to be too difficult for Lee. He explained, "I had to write really big papers and had to take really hard tests. And, you know, I, I wanted, I mean, it's not necessarily like I really would quit school, but I was thinking about withdrawing from classes." When Lee contemplated giving up on the course, he suggested that he was brought back to why he was in college in the first place. He was reminded of the history of the Hmong and the stories of struggle they bring with them to the United

States. Lee further explained: “That’s when I started going back to the videos (YouTube video on the Hmong history), you know. That’s when I started to talk to my dad a lot, you know. And I think it’s, you know, having them be able to kind of talk to you through it and say, you know, like ‘I know it’s hard, but keep going.’” Lee’s father supported him by continually to encourage him to keep trying. Lee stated, “even if they don’t understand like how they could help you, they give you that, just that little bit extra, like don’t-kind-of-give-up kind of talk. And it’s not even a lecture style, but kind of like, and so those moments were helpful.” Lee’s parents also provided him some financial support during college, but it was not easy. Lee described how his father provided some monetary support but reminded him the value of it:

And obviously, money is always very helpful, where I would run out of money for doing stupid things in college, you know. And so having like my dad write letters in Hmong or record like tapes in Hmong that Dad sends me and I have to read it and listen to these things. Yeah, it’s a reminder, like, man, like I have to spend this money correctly. Or, you know, like it just makes you feel really guilty for not doing it correctly. And so, you know, my dad gave me a lot of chances to fail, but also would be there... tell me, like “You messed up. Don’t mess up again.” You know. So he gave me a lot of chances to kind of redeem myself over and over again. That was helpful. I mean, if I didn’t have that, I mean, it would be, I don’t think I would have graduated.

The moral support and encouragement received by some of the participants from their parents helped them to stay in college and graduate. Another aspect of motivation

and support was through the struggle and story of the participants' parents. The participants' parents' story of life in Laos and the struggle of starting a life in the United States also became a sense of motivation for the participants to be successful. The goal at a chance to have a better life without financial constraints was important to the participants.

### ***A Focus on a Better Life***

All of the participants' parents are refugees from camps in Thailand and arrived at the United States in the mid to late 1970s. They all experienced the Secret War, fled warfare and lived in refugee camps. Some of the participants' fathers also fought in the war and are considered war veterans in the United States. The participants shared their parents' story of starting a life in the United States, and about half of the participants referred to their parents' story as a source of motivation and reminder to remain focused on being educated and successful. Nhai, Bee, May, Vong, and Sai, all of varying ages, shared their insights on how their parents' story and struggle encouraged them to strive for a better life.

Nhai, who was not born in the United States and is the oldest in her family, talked about how her parents always encouraged her to be different from them. She described: "I always come back to what my parents say which is, 'I don't want you to do the same thing I'm doing.' In a way, I think that really propelled me to complete college. It's not like I had a plan B where if I drop out from college, I'm going to do X, Y and Z. It was just 'finish college' and that was it." Seeing her father work a janitorial job because it provided better health care benefits than company jobs and hearing her parents encourage her to do something different from them kept her

motivated to do well in school. Bee spoke of the same notion of being inspired to be “better off” than his parents. He shared: “I think when I grew up, my parents expected that I would be better off than them”. This notion is something that Bee has adopted for himself as a father, and he would like to encourage his kids the same. He suggested, “I expect my kids to be better off than me. If my Dad only had a Bachelor’s degree, I should get a doctorate degree or I should at least get a bachelor’s degree”. Being better off than their parents was a source of motivation and supported their success in college. Other participants talked about their parents’ struggle to provide for their families in the United States.

May’s parents had little understanding of what college was, but they encouraged her to do well in school. May reflected on her parents’ struggle and her childhood. She explained:

I definitely had that impact where I always saw my mom struggle, financially. Even growing—doing the emotions of raising us, and everything. So, there was very high expectations of when we went home to do certain things to take care of the family, because she wasn’t there, and my dad. So, I always felt like, why are we going through this? Why, why do we have to share a bed, or why is it that I can’t get a pair of socks, because I want one. Why do I have to share my jeans with my sister? It was those type of things that kind of really opened my eyes, whereas I was like, I’m just not going to do this. It’s not going to be for me, sort of deal. So, for me, my parents never really talked to me about college. They never really—I think my generation, my generation from

my mom and dad, first generation, it's so hard for them to talk about college experience. They always say, school's good for you. Go do it, because they've never had that.

At a young age, May saw her mother working so hard to provide for her family. She also described the times when she would question why she had to share items with her sister, why she could not be free from household responsibilities, and why she always had to help raise her younger siblings while her parents worked. She knew her childhood experience was different from others because her parents were constantly working. These observations served as a sense of motivation for her to do well.

Sai also shared his parents' story of struggle and how it motivated him to achieve his goals of finishing college. Sai first described his parents experience in the refugee camps:

Just from the stories I'd hear from my mom and from my dad before he passed, just, you know, going through the camps, you know, and some nights not knowing where they would sleep and not knowing whether or not they would have food for the next day or not even knowing whether they'll live the next day or their children will live. My mom told me that, you know, they—they suffered, you know, so much—so much like starvation and like stress that they almost thought about selling my sister to someone who would pay—give them money, just so that they could get by, or—and not have to worry about, you know, their livelihood.

Life in Laos and Thailand was extremely difficult for Sai's parents, and they often shared their stories with him as a reminder of the life they left behind. Sai shared his insights on what his parents' story meant and the opportunity that was given to him:

It's something that, you know, we here would never think of, you know, and we would never fathom like, oh, you know, selling our children and, you know, just to, you know, make it through the day or, you know, make sure that they're—they're okay, you know, their future is in good hands. And it's something that us Americans or, you know, first-generation Americans, we take for granted, because this society we live in, you know, the democracy that we're in, you know, where we're basically, it gives us, you know, it's like a hand up.

Vong also used his father's story as inspiration to do well in college. Vong talked a lot about his father's failed attempt to attend college because he had to support Vong's grandfather at the same time. Vong shared that his father "grew up rough" and "had that opportunity" to attend a college but his parents "made him stay behind". As a result, Vong's father supported Vong's grandparents and then later financially supported Vong's uncle to attend college. Vong described:

To see my dad suffer that much and hear him always talk about it and whenever he talks about it, he cries, he remembers how, how much, how hard he worked and at that time, he was trying to raise a family. I think he already had both my older brothers at that time, and my mom, so they would work their butt off just to pay for his books and stuff and this story hurts my dad the most.

As a result, Vong's father expected his sons to "be his successor". Vong shared:

He thought that, you know, Bo (Oldest brother), and them (other brother) would grow up and be his successor and, you know, make him proud again, but then they went on that path and just shattered the heart a little more, and so, by the time it got to me, when I was old enough to understand everything, my dad was broken. Like he, he was weakened with everything, so, that's when, I, it was a very, I remember, and then, yeah, so my sophomore year, when I decided to start changing myself, I sung my parents a song at church and then my dad gave me a hug, or he came for a hug. And he cried. And you know, because after graduation he cried a little bit, but this one was even more...like it was just, he was like bawling, and I was like, wow, and then, that's when it drove me because I'm just like, you know what, if I can make my dad's smile just light up, as much, I will do anything to make, to put that smile back in my dad. And so, it just keeps, it drove me and I definitely could see it, like, the more I try to accomplish and the more I accomplish, like, the more happy they were.... And their hearts don't deserve to be broken any more than they already are, so, it's definitely my job to just keep, like, living up to my parents' hopes and like, bring happiness and youth back into them.

Vong's father's story truly influenced him to accomplish more and to be successful.

The participants explained that their parents played a role in their college success. Although their parents did not have the cultural knowledge to guide them throughout the process or the financial resources to pay for college expenses, the participants' parents provided them with moral support through encouragement and reflection on the life they had as refugees and in a new country. The participants' parents were not the only familial source of support. Many of the participants had siblings who attended college before them, and their siblings helped to ease their transition into college and supported their success during college.

### **Siblings as Role Models**

Having siblings as role models was a great source of support during college for the participants. Four out of the 10 participants were the first in their immediate family to attend college – Vong, Poua, Bee, and Nhai. The other six participants had an older sibling who attended college before them – Sai, May, Kunsha, Lee, Pang, and Maisee. Having an older sibling in college made it easier for the participants to apply for college and get adjusted to college life and responsibility.

Some of the Hmong students talked about how their older siblings set the example for them. Sai explained that his older siblings were his role models:

College to me was not—not going to college was not an option, seeing that my oldest brother went to college and then followed by my second-oldest brother. And then my sister, even though she married at a young age, at the age of 16, she was able to go to a technical, you know, training school and followed by my second sister and my brother, my



two immediately older brothers. So not going to college was not an option. They set the example. They paved the path for me.

Since Sai is the youngest in his family, he was able to see his older brothers and sisters go to college. Their success encouraged him to apply and attend college as well: “They basically said, you know, by seeing what they went through and how their lives bettered, it was, you know, it was basically a, no sign of an afterthought.” His siblings not only set an example for him but they also passed down cultural knowledge about the college process. They helped him with “applying for FAFSAs and applying for college and getting opinions on certain colleges”. In addition, Sai’s older siblings also provided him guidance on how to navigate college. Sai explained that his siblings helped him to “adapt to college because it’s more recent in their memory”. He continued, “so they have a little bit better of a, just a sense of connect to what I am doing. What’s going through, what I’m going through because it was just fresh in their memory.” Sai was able to rely on his older siblings to share information on the college experience, process, and how to navigate the system.

May also found her older brother supportive when it came to learning about college and the way it worked. Earlier in the chapter, I presented May’s description of her frustration with navigating the college system and, more specifically, learning about the process of class scheduling. When asked how she eventually learned about the process and the academic policies, she gave credit to her older brother who was also a student at the university and was two years ahead of her. She stated, “Um, to be quite honest with you, I learned by just talking to older... cuz I also had my brother with me”. May continued to illustrate his support:

My brother was there when I was in college and he had older friends that loved me. Like, all his friends always like “oh you’re Ya’s little sister” and it was always like “I got a name you know, my name is May,” you know (laughs). But I was always called the little sister and so they always came around but they were always, like, look at their schedule and we all know that, like, the more seniority you have, the more you, um, you’re able to like, add your classes or, like, register for your class first so they did all that in front of me so I would always be like “what are you guys doing, how do you do it?” so , it was just me being nosey and so that’s how I kind of, sort of, really learned, just like understanding like when somebody drops and you’re sitting next to me, you want that class. You have to...like you know what I mean, so those were all, like, learning tips I sort of got towards my freshman year, like up until my sophomore year and then it wasn’t until, like, end of my freshman that I knew how that system worked and I was like “god, had I known this I would have never struggled my first, my first semester here”. It was crazy but, like, it’s sad because they don’t teach you that type of thing, they don’t.

May’s brother and his friends provided her with suggestions and tips on how to navigate college and adjust to expectations of college. As I reflect on my own experience as a Hmong college student, I realize that I, too, was provided with suggestions and tips on how to navigate college by my older sister, aunt and uncle. The

passing of this knowledge from one family member to another is helpful in a student's transition to college.

Along with setting an example and helping to navigate the college system, the participants' older siblings also provided some financial and personal support. Sai shared how his older sister would help him from time to time:

And as far as, you know, the older brothers and sisters, like I tell my wife, I recall coming home on weekends, and my sister would always give me \$20, because she'd know that she knows I'm struggling financially and need, and the \$20, you know, will go a long way for a college student, whereas, you know, where she's a working professional, you know, it wouldn't hurt her as much. So my family support system was great. Like I wouldn't ask for anything less, or more, I mean.

Financial support came in other forms. As mentioned, May's brother was enrolled at the same institution two years ahead of her. During her first two years in college, she talked about the financial struggles she experienced in college, and while her brother was working at the university's dining hall, he would often help her out:

We all go through the financial issue when we're in college as college students and I remember there was days that when I was going to school, when I entered my freshman year, he was the manager...he was one of the managers at...actually he was the manager of the (college food store) and so he, he really worked his ass off to get to that position and so there was days that I was like "I'm hungry" and he'd be like "you don't got money"? "No I used my points already" but like, and he'd be like "go to

the back and I'll get you a sandwich" or he'll pop in my room one day and just bring me like a bunch of, like, drinks and to stock, drinks or food, or leftovers or whatever. He just used to always do that and I loved him for it. I loved him for it.

She also noted that her brother would support her in other ways: "he would pick me up, drop me off wherever I need because he had the car so he'd be like 'if you need to go to, like, somewhere off shore, just, if you need to borrow the car to get food or buy food or whatever or if you need to go do something off shore', he was just like, 'just let me know, I...you can, I'll let you use the car'". May was extremely grateful for her brother's help and guidance, and she knew that he was often ensuring her success and wellbeing: "I was always thankful he was there. And so it almost felt like I was close to home, but (laughs) I wasn't there."

Kunsha also had an older brother who attended college. She also attended the same college he attended. Kunsha described her older brother as one of her role models and sources of support during her college years: "Well, my oldest brother was one of my role models, and, so, I would talk to him, it's like I don't know if this is something that I can do. And, so, he's, he's always, he's really supportive." Kunsha was one of the participants who had a hard time deciding on a major that spoke to her passion and her parents' expectations. She also talked often about issues with gender bias at home. Her brother was one of the individuals who helped her through the process. She described his support: "And, so, he's like, you know what, think about it, you know. Think about it and see and just continue to the class and see if you like it or not. Because you never know, you know, what if, what if this is your calling? What if this is

your purpose?” As a result, she continued to take classes she was interested in. She explained:

I started getting in to my major classes, and I was like, I loved it. Um, he, um, encouraged me a lot...and he's like, you know, “Even though you're a girl, um, you can do it, uh, because you know, truthfully, like, now in these days, like, I believe that women can do things that guys can do”, and so he really encouraged me just throughout my college year, and was like, you know, “I believe you can do it” you know, uh, “Don't, don't mind the words that mom said to you. Uh, she was just worried about you, you know, but um, don't take in those word. Uh, she's always supportive of you, you know. She, we talk about you all the time”. Um, when they do phone calls, they call each other, and so, um, “This is why, you know, being, being a lady is going to be hard, you know, especially when you're far away from home, but remember that, you know, I'm here for you and that you can do it”...he also, um, you know, motivated you to say, to stay in it, you know, and to do what you're doing.

Because Kunsha's brother lived close by to where she was attending college and understood her frustration with exploring a major and pursuing college as a Hmong woman, he continued to encourage her to excel in her studies. He often reminded her of his support for her success. Most of the participants were able to receive guidance, financial and personal support and encouragement from older siblings that attended and graduated from college. However, there were four participants who were the first in their immediate family to attend and graduate from college.

Bee, Nhai, Vong, and Poua were the first in their immediate family to attend college. Both Bee and Nhai are the oldest in their family while Poua and Vong fall in the middle of their family line. Although Bee and Nhai did not have older siblings who attended college before them, they both had other family members who attended college. Bee talked about his role models growing up: “I think I had a lot of good role models growing up like a lot of my cousins went to college...And, when I was younger, obviously, I didn’t know what it meant...I didn’t know what it was, um, but I knew that it was something I wanted to do because everyone was doing it. And I think that was...kind of like, you know.” For Bee, his cousins supported his desire and intent to attend college because he perceived them as role models. He suggested that “when you see role models like, you just kind of follow through.” One of Bee’s cousins attended the same college he attended, and this was a reason as to why he chose this college as his choice. Nhai also did not have older siblings who attended college before her because she is the oldest in her family. However, she did have relatives who attended college as well. She shared “I had a lot of cousins who went to Rose College, but I also had a lot of cousins who went to State University. No one went anywhere else....”

Poua also shared how her siblings supported her during her college years. Poua identified herself as the “second to go to college” in her family, but, Poua was actually the first to complete college in her family. She explained: “My older sister never went. My second-oldest, she was married already. My third-oldest went for a few classes and then she dropped out. Then I started going. Then, my younger sister, she just finished with her bachelor’s in education. And then I have a younger sister that lives with me now. She’s divorced. She never went to a college. She might go later.” Although her

older sisters may have not been able to provide her with college advice and although her third-oldest may have been able to provide some advice, Poua's sisters were able to provide Poua with personal support. Poua had a child during her early years in college, and she found herself balancing school and a family. During her busy times in college, Poua's sisters were there to support her in babysitting her child: "When I had my research program at Green University and there were events and seminars in the evening, I couldn't bring (my daughter) or I had to do research and I needed a babysitter. My sisters would babysit. They would drive over an hour just to come babysit (my daughter) just for a few hours. So they were extremely supportive." This was something Poua was extremely grateful for.

Vong had two older brothers who did not attend college. He talked about his oldest brother's journey down the wrong path due to the intergenerational conflict. He often remembers going to his older brother's school with his parents to visit the principal's office because his brother had gotten into trouble. Despite his oldest brother's background, Vong sees his brother as a supportive role model. He explained:

My oldest brother is my role model. I mean, I've always looked up to both my older brothers, but definitely my oldest brother. My oldest brother's name is Steven and you know, he was always, I mean, he got in the most trouble... All right. So, he always got in the most trouble, but he was also the one who paved the path for us. And that's what I think made my life so much easier, like, his mistakes, I realize it and he'll be like, hey, don't make the same mistake I made. I already went through that, did that and he kind of always was there, so he, basic big brother, he

played the big brother role and so he was a big part of my life... But, so I can't really say he was always a mentor, but he was always somebody I looked at and watched, like the way he grew up and I'm just like, saw what he did right, I saw what he did wrong and kind of just followed those steps.

Vong watched and observed what his older brother did and did not do and used these observations as guidance. Vong also recognized that his oldest brother had the hardest time acclimating to both the Hmong and American culture and often went against his parents' expectations. Understanding his brother's challenge and watching him overcome this challenge, Vong views his brother as a role model. Not only did his oldest brother make the first mistakes and provided a blueprint for his siblings, his brother fought through the hard times:

He really turned things around. Got into a temp agency and got like, hit it big with a company and then this company kind of just became his mentor and kind of fed him and said, hey, you're, you have so much potential for so much more and I guess they kind of flipped him around because he started to come, he started to build a relationship with the family so much and my parents became so dependent on him, so he really did start stepping up as a real, real big brother and helping pay bills or any of that stuff.

His oldest brother's ability to turn things around inspired and motivated Vong to be successful. The role that siblings have in the experiences and successes of the Hmong students is evident, especially for students who had older siblings in college



during or before them. The participants also talked about the role their peers had on their experiences and successes in college.

### **Peer to Peer Support**

The participants acknowledged their friends or peers as part of their support system during their years in college. Their relationships with their peers came in various forms, and these friendships began through meeting individuals with similar backgrounds or interests, living together, joining organizations, and mentoring.

Kunsha, one of the younger participants, went to an institution that has a large number of enrolled Hmong students. She shared her appreciation for the friendships she developed in college, and she has continued to maintain friendships with these individuals. Kunsha shared that they “still contact each other”, “still talk about our college years” and “talk about our future.” Her friendships with these individuals are important to her because she has experienced good times and some struggles in college with them. She illustrated how her friends supported her: “We all, we all came in, we all came in with the same, uh, perspective and, um, same, you know, culture and everything, uh, struggles, same struggles, and uh, struggles of being Hmong and being American. So we, we had a lot of, like, things in common.” Because her friends were also Hmong, they were able to relate with each other and understand each other’s needs and challenges. Kunsha further described how she and friends helped each other when it came to meeting other people:

I did struggle with, like, the Hmong students there. Because we were always together and, um, like, people would always say, “Oh, you guys, the Hmong people are always together. They don’t make any friends.

They don't make friends with us". Like, although, uh, Caucasian people would be, like, "Yeah, they never talk to us." You know? And because, because we were like the, the other group of majority group, you know, minority group there, and so they were, so we, we're kind of, like, "Okay, let's go out and make friends". And so we started making friends with, like, all the, like, um, outside of the Hmong community at our school, and so. Um, it was really good.

Nhai also developed friendships with peers who had a shared experience – commuting:

The two individuals that went to my school with me, we were like each other's study partner. I think that made it a lot simpler because we all drove to school. We all lived in the same neighborhood, so it was just easier for us to meet up and say, 'We just need to prep for this exam.' Whereas instead of going to the college and meeting up with someone there and being like, 'I don't really want to go to this dorm area where there's...' or 'we have to go now find a secure location where it's quiet'."

Kunsha and her friends supported each other because they were Hmong and understood each other's history and background. Nhai also found herself connected with two individuals who shared the experience of commuting and living off campus. Other students found their relationships with their roommates to be helpful during college.

Poua, who had a child during her college years, found her roommate as an important part of her support during college. Poua stated: "I had another single mom

live with me. So, that was nice, yeah. It was helpful because you know, we couldn't be late, and she babysat for me, and I babysat for her. So, it was really nice.” The support she received from her housemate provided her the opportunity to complete what she needed for school, and she provided the same support for her roommate. Lee also talked about the support he received from his freshman roommate. He described his roommate: “My roommate was also really cool. Because we were really different, in the sense that I was pretty much the geeky Asian person, while he was like a ... you know, he was a big, Black, sporty kind of person. And he was like the coolest guy ever. And so both of us ... because we were really enthusiastic about meeting new people, and being in a new environment”. Lee suggested that he and his roommate connected well in terms of their personalities even though they were interested in different things. When Lee described how his roommate supported him in college, he explained:

I helped him a little bit with his school work, and he helped me ... he threw me into the gym... I think with my roommate, he understands that kind of social kind of an interaction much more than I did. I was much ... I'm more a bookworm. I'd rather study than ... hitting the library, than go out and play. So he got me very active in terms of the fraternity life. So I joined a fraternity; not in my freshman year, but uh ... The following semester.... I became much more confident in myself, and um especially since I was working out... Confidence was different.

For some students, the social transition into college is nerve-wracking. Lee's roommate supported Lee's social transition into college by helping him develop confidence in himself. Lee gives credit to his roommate for this change.

May discussed her peer support through her involvement with a sorority at her institution. May made the decision to pledge and join a sorority. She explained the decision behind this participation:

I really pledged for more of the bonding experience, more of the sibling. Because it's was so hard in my culture to have that relationship, especially with such a big family. Like, sharing the lively stories of what you go through, as a girl. Talking about boyfriends, talking about the first time having your period, or your first kiss. It was so hard for me, because I never, I love my sisters, but I could never have that, that open dialog. So, it was always scary to me.

When asked to describe how joining the sorority supported her experience in college, she talked about the members' ability to be there as a sounding board on personal issues she was experiencing. Although May came from a very large family, she found it hard to be completely open with her sisters about her personal issues and life experiences. May felt a stronger level of comfort talking with her sorority sisters about personal topics or issues. She had the following to add about the sorority and its impact: "So, it really has changed my life being a part of this organization... But, the sorority itself has just been tremendous to me. I've, it's really opened doors for me, on a whole different, to make me look at things a little different. I've encountered so many wonderful women who are strong, career, professional women, and awesome." Today, May continues to stay involved with her sorority sisters and is on the national board of the organization.

Bee found support from his peers through his academic scholarship program.

His scholarship program consisted of a mentoring program where rising students in the scholarship program provided mentorship for new students in the program. Bee shared that the peer mentors supported him during his first year at his institution: “They also had, ah, like I said they had the, um, the mentors, the kids that were ahead of us, you know, two or three years ahead of us that you could ask them a question, you know. If you didn’t know what to do with something or you didn’t understand what something was, you could ask them. They could direct you on how to, how to go about doing something.” Bee also insisted that even though it was beneficial to have peer mentoring, it was important for students to take advantage of the mentors. He explained:

If you actually took advantage of all of these things, if you just kind of, if you just kind of said, “Oh yeah. Oh I know about that”, and you never did anything about it then you’d, you’d fail out. But if you actually, like, listen to what people have to say ... and took advantage of the, um, things that they, the programs that they have then, then I think, I think you know, that’s how, I think that’s how I did well and I think that’s how most of the kids in the school who graduated did well.

It was important for students to take advantage of the peer to peer support offered to them, and Bee observed this to be true in his experience. Whether the relationships with their peers developed from sharing similar backgrounds or interests, living together, joining organizations or mentoring, peer to peer support proved to be an important support structure for the Hmong students.

The ten participants of this study identified as current or former first-generation

college students where neither of their parents earned a bachelor's degree from a four-year institution. Because their parents did not attend college, the participants themselves lacked an understanding of the cultural codes, behaviors and knowledge of the college system and process. College to them was a new space with new rules, and they had to learn the behaviors and expectations of that new space. They were challenged with navigating the college system and learning the rules and practices of institutions in terms of academics and the college process. Hmong students also struggled with choosing a major that aligned with their own personal interests and aligned to the expectations of their parents. The Hmong students were not only faced with the difficulty of navigating the college system, but some of them had to grow up fairly quickly in order to take care of college finances and balance work with school. In turn, college was not easy for them. Despite the fact that some of the Hmong American students had a challenging time learning the culture of college, some of the participants gained knowledge from older siblings who had previously attended college. Some of these individuals participated in bridge programs which eased their transition into college. The participants found their institutions to be fairly supportive of their success when they were met with genuinely caring professors and higher education professionals. Peers were also important in the social development and social life of the participants. Lastly, although all the participants' parents did not attend college and had little to no knowledge of the college process and experience, all parents showed support for their children. The participants recognized the hardships of their parents and the struggle their parents experienced in the United States. Their parents' story reinforced their desire to excel, to be successful and to graduate from college. Having support

structures like college bridge and summer programs, parental moral support and encouragement, institutional support, siblings support, and peer to peer support influenced the success and experiences of the these college participants.

### **Living in a Bi-cultural World: “I am a Hmong-American”**

The third theme or category that emerged in this study involved the participants’ experience coping with living in two cultural worlds – the Hmong and the American culture – during their college years. The participants discussed their life growing up as Hmong and the difficulties they experienced in trying to balance the behaviors, expectations and values of both their Hmong culture and those of the American society. College was a time that the participants worked to define what it meant, personally, to be a Hmong individual living in America. This theme is broken up into five different subthemes: cultural values and responsibilities; the role of gender as motivation for success; the importance of diversity; college as self-exploration; and, the advancement of the Hmong. Firstly, when the participants discussed their educational aspirations, the details of how they made sense of their aspirations and experiences were often tied with the cultural values and expectations of the Hmong. Their Hmong culture was a large part of their upbringing, and the participants often spoke about its impact on their aspirations and experiences in school. The participants described their experience during college of having to balance their Hmong cultural values and responsibilities with those of the dominant society. Secondly, some of the participants shared how gender played a role in their personal development and in their decisions to pursue a college education. Because the role of gender is closely tied with the cultural values of the Hmong, some of the participants who identified as a woman had a difficult time

breaking from the cultural norm of being viewed as less important than their siblings who were men. Thirdly, some of the participants discussed their experience of trying to fit in during college. For some of the participants, their ability to connect with other students was challenging due to the lack of diversity at their institutions. In addition, the participants perceived college as an opportunity for self-exploration. College was a chance for them to develop their identity as Hmong-American individuals and an opportunity for them to develop skills necessary for success. Lastly, the participants often expressed their desire to support the advancement of the Hmong community and their concern for empowerment and leadership for members of the Hmong community.

### **Cultural Values and Responsibilities**

The Hmong cultural values and responsibilities played a role in the participants' experience before and during college. All participants' parents were refugees who came to the United States in the late 1970s. The participants described being raised by their parents with strict and traditional Hmong cultural values which included the following three: family, respect – particularly respect for the family and the elders, and legacy. The participants talked about their experiences growing up as Hmong in the American society. For example, they shared their experiences of going to school during the day and then having to come home to help the family with responsibilities around the house and to attend and participate in traditional and community events.

Bee's parents were refugees and raised him with traditional Hmong values and expectations. To illustrate the cultural value of family and how Hmong individuals are expected to support and help their family, Bee, who is the oldest in his family, shared the expectations and responsibilities he adhered to while growing up: "I think that when



I grew up, when I grew up, it was just like you were just expected to do things. Like if you're 12 or 13 years old, then you should be washing the dishes, cleaning the floor, mopping the floor, stuff like that. You don't just eat dinner and then go watch TV, you know or if it's 9:00 and time to go to bed, you go to bed. You don't stay up." Bee continued:

Or if your parents are going to be going out to do some chores, then you just go with them. You don't stay home and watch TV and do nothing. You go with them to do chores... I think it is because, I think my parents were very, they weren't very, very strict but they expected me to do certain things, and I just knew that I was expected to do certain things and I did it versus maybe today... when I grew up, it was like if you're 13 years old, you're babysitting, you know, and I'll be back in an hour or whatever.

Growing up, Bee knew he was expected to help around the house with responsibilities, and completing responsibilities with and for your family was a sign of respect.

May comes from a large family, and her parents were also refugees from the Secret War. May described how she had to help support her family, an expectation for all the siblings. She first described her family: "Culture in a way plays a big part, but also my family played a big part because um, because there was so many of us. I was the type of person...I wanted my space, and so in other kids who were like...other siblings who were like literally 11 months younger, or 11 months older, um...you know...I didn't have a lot of space, some privacy." May went on to explain how the

expectation of having to support her family played a role in her educational aspirations.

For May, school was an escape from the expectations she had to meet at home:

So...school to me was like to me a tool in a way. A tool in a way that I kind of escaped from...you know, being the responsible like sister and taking care and cleaning, you know, so it was fun for me. You know what I mean? So I think because we were raised in a certain way to do things because of our culture that culture in a way played a big part, but also my family because I felt like it was my escape route. I think academics came to me so hard because I was such a private person like I wanted, I always wanted my space, right. Like the minute my sister walked out of the room, I locked the door... And you can't have 5 minutes when you have like 6 other kids around, you can't...you just can't. And there's just not enough room for everyone. No, and so to me, school was really my, kind of like, my escape... You know the moment that I set foot in the door, like it was like... "May, put your stuff down, go cook, go clean"... you know. And then, at night it was like...it was an immediate turn off so to me, it was like, "here we go", you almost feel like you have a schedule, you know.

Cooking, cleaning, and making sure there was food on the table when her parents came home were responsibilities May had to complete when she returned home from school. Women in the Hmong culture are expected to help around the kitchen, cook meals, and serve the family. Although the cultural value and expectations required her to support the family, May also recognized that her parents worked second shift

hours which were hours when she and her siblings would be home from school. As a result, May and her older siblings had to constantly supervise their younger siblings during school nights. She shared:

I was the 5th oldest but I still had, you know, when my parents were constantly working and when I got to that age when I felt I had to contribute, I still have younger siblings below me, so, they, you know...as I got older, they're still younger which means I had to take care of them as well.

What did this mean for May? This meant that she had to grow up fast: We all had to kind of contribute and so growing up really fast, meaning like taking care of the house, taking care of the kids, you know... I almost feel like I've raised my own siblings, you know...my youngest. And so, those are the things that, you know, so I didn't really have...like I had a childhood, like, we would go out and play and it was all great but when it came to like the day my parents were working, those were the things that we needed to take care of, you know, for my parents.

May did have a childhood, but she had large responsibilities placed on her at a young age. She not only had to go to school, but she also had to come home to support her siblings while her parents worked. For May, though, school was a great way for her to escape the responsibilities and expectations at home.

Maintaining respect for their family, parents and elders is also an important cultural value for the Hmong. For example, respecting your father's wishes and respecting the elders were important aspects of the Hmong culture because the father is

the patriarch of the family and the elders serve as leaders of the clan. All members of the Hmong community belong to a specific clan that represents a surname. However, the ability to maintain these cultural values while living in the American society was a challenge for the participants. Kunsha described her struggles growing up in the Hmong and American cultures and maintaining both the respect for her parents and the Hmong traditions:

It was that culture barrier between my parents and us, and, so... there were struggles between the family, it wasn't just me. It was like all my siblings, and we didn't, we didn't understand, you know, why they want us to keep that culture or that tradition in the family. And, yeah, I, I, like, I struggled growing up where just my identity and being a Hmong, you know, and not knowing that, you know, that it's okay, it's okay to, to do western things but to keep the culture within, like, myself.

For Kunsha, growing up Hmong in the American society was a struggle. She continued to describe this experience:

It's really hard as a Hmong-American growing up in a Hmong family, because there are culture differences. My parents, my parents grew up in a culture where everything was based on, like, a gender role and based on tradition and religion and culture. But, and, for them, for them, like, bringing back to the states and trying to make us do it or come in to the culture, like, it was really hard. I had struggles where, like, I struggled where, like, I would go to school and, like, I was still with my American friends, like, all my Caucasian friends, like, they would live a lifestyle

where it's like freedom, you know?

Kunsha's parents held traditional Hmong values, and they expected her to uphold them as well. Kunsha described the comparisons she made with her American friends and alluded to "freedom" as one of the distinctions. Freedom for Kunsha was being able to make choices on her own and not having to conform to the Hmong cultural expectations.

Lee, who is about the same age as Kunsha, also talked about the struggle of balancing both the American and Hmong cultural worlds and maintaining the respect for his parents and elders. He described the shuffle of transitioning back and forth between the Hmong and American culture, specifically when he would return home from college for breaks:

I think like most young Hmong adults, first-generations here...we tend to think, you know, our parents are very much too traditional. And their way of thinking, their way of working, is very, very old. And so we, um ... but old but yet very respectable. And so we would go on to ... you know, we'd go home and we'd try to operate in the same manner, because we just respect them so much.

Vong, who is about two years younger than Lee and Kunsha, experienced the same shuffle of being Hmong in the American society. However, being Hmong in the American society was not the only balancing act for him. Vong was also a member of a Hmong Christian church with beliefs different from the traditional and spiritual beliefs of the Hmong. He explained the different worlds he aimed to balance:

It was my college life and it was the life of living up to society and being

Hmong, and being Hmong even including like, very traditional stuff, like even, I mean shamanism stuff, I have to understand that stuff, because my, all my Hmong cousins are, you know, that's what they are. And then I have this, this church life, this Christian life, so, it was like, I set this object right in the center and kind of just, like weathered them together.

Vong was a college student in an American college system. He was a Hmong man who had to understand certain traditional and cultural Hmong practices like shamanism. Lastly, Vong had to also understand the beliefs and values of Christianity which he had adopted, similar to many Hmong. Having to balance and integrate these three aspects of his life created a challenging first year in college and made him question his purpose in college:

I got to a point where I was just exhausted and I was like, I can't take this, like, it was, they're like, I started like, it got to a point where I just like, you know I'm sitting on the computer I'm going to live, like, a virtual life, now, like, it's like, I couldn't do it. But, it was definitely, after my freshman year, going into my sophomore year, that's when I was just like, I really have to find just one purpose for myself.

Vong's found the road to balance in these different worlds with different expectations to be "a long process" but that he "definitely had a lot of help". I will explore how Vong was able to piece his worlds together in the subcategory of "college as self-exploration," when I explore ways he and other Hmong students talked about college as a time to explore themselves, who they are, and what their skills are.

Based on the experiences of some of the participants, trying to maintain cultural

values and responsibilities with the expectations of being a student or individual in the American culture was a challenge. Some of the participants talked about the experience of having to grow up quickly and having to take on responsibilities around the house to support the family. The participants also shared their struggles of respecting their parents and elders while trying to be a student in the American culture. The cultural values and responsibilities played a role in the development of their education aspirations and in their college experiences. Another aspect of the third theme is the role of gender on their decision to go to college and graduate.

### **Role of Gender as Motivation for Success**

Four out of the six participants who identified as a woman mentioned that gender played a significant role in their decision to attend college and become highly educated. All members of the Hmong community belong to a specific clan, and Hmong families are subcomponents of a clan that represents a surname. Clans also represent a common ancestor that members are related to. Some common clans include Yang, Kue, Xiong, Vang, Her, Khang, and Moua. The Hmong culture involves a patriarch culture where men are the head of the family. Hmong men are expected to carry on the legacy and name of their father and their father before them. Having a Hmong boy in the family meant that there was an opportunity for someone to carry the father's name to the next generation and continue the growth of the clan. Hmong women are expected to be well-versed in cooking, cleaning, tending to domestic tasks, and taking care of the family. Once a Hmong woman marries, she is no longer a part of her immediate family and marries into another clan or family. The four Hmong participants who identified as women and talked about gender as being a barrier or a motivator for success were Pang,

Poua, Maisee, and Kunsha.

Pang knew that she had always wanted to attend college. However, she recognized that traditionally and culturally, Hmong women were expected to follow through with one responsibility. She stated, “Like, the women have to stay in the kitchen, uh-uh”. She further joked, “No, want me to burn the house?” Pang knew that the expectations of Hmong woman served as a barrier for some Hmong women but used it as motivation for her to pursue college.

Poua talked a lot about how gender played a role in her experience and educational aspirations. Growing up, Poua was often told by her parents that she would need to respect and learn the cultural ways of Hmong women: “Growing up it was always, you know, our parents telling us at a young age, you know, you need to learn how to do this, and that you can be a good daughter-in-law, and a good wife...and stuff like that.” This had an impact on her because she felt it was “the only option” she had. Poua did relatively well in school prior to college but spoke of rarely receiving affirmation from her parents. She noted, “They (parents) cared more about the boys’ performance. Because I would bring home my report card, and they would just toss it aside. And with my brothers, they got Bs and mostly Cs, and then they would get yelled at. You know, and I was just not getting that affirmation.” As a result, Poua noted that her grades started to suffer at one point. Poua stated, “I got to the point where like, my parents didn’t care. So, I was like, if they don’t care, why should I care... that’s when like, my grades started to decline.”

Poua also noted that as girls, she and her sisters were not allowed to stay after school while her brothers were able to do so because “they were boys.” When she or



her sister would get into arguments with one of the brothers, their parents would always side with the boys. She felt there was favoritism towards the boys: “I remember this one fight we had in there, where my mom told my sister to stop, and then I stood up to her, and I said, ‘Mom, why do you always take the boys’ side?’ She goes, ‘Because, they carry on the family name, and when you get married you’re not going to be part of our family anymore.’” Being a Hmong woman for Poua was tough, and she always tried to stand up for herself and her sisters. When her father separated from her mother, Poua found herself needing to support her father in taking care of her brothers. She stated, “I graduated from high school I almost didn’t go to college because my dad told me I should help him out with the boys, and then I could always go to college later. So, I said, okay, fine.” Poua “lasted only a month and a half” and because her father was always out, she decided to make a change. She said, “I’m like, I’m not giving up my career for this. I’m not. I’m going back to (name of city), so I can go to school.” Poua’s descriptions and details about the gender issues she dealt with are important because they served as a motivation for her to achieve her goals and defy the expectations of Hmong women.

Maisee also described her experiences of differential treatment based on gender and showed how it motivated her to pursue college. Like Poua, Maisee grew up understanding that women would not carry the name down to the next generation and would eventually get married to become a full member of another family or clan. Although her parents acknowledged that she would eventually leave her family and become a part of another family through marriage, her parents pushed her to be educated while upholding the expectations of Hmong women. She described:

My parents, my mom always said, you know, “You’re grown. One day you’re going to get married to be part of another family. You need to, you need to learn, educate yourself for yourself because we will no longer be your family.” You know? Like “You are now part of a new family.” So they always stressed that. It’s like, “You’ve got to learn how to cook. You’ve got to learn how to do this. Like go to school, do what you need to do”.

Maisee respected her family, parents and culture and often did what she was told. However, Maisee described some of the moments in which she would question her parents and their expectations:

I don’t want to say that I didn’t do any Hmong stuff. I mean I, I still did all the stuff that I was supposed to, that my parents expected me to. But I did it in a very bitter, bitter way. You know? It was like, “Oh, why do I have to do this?” ... I would constantly question and make my opinion known. Where, you know, your, your opinion is not supposed to be known. You keep it to yourself, especially if you’re a woman. But I would constantly tell them what I think... And one time my dad’s like, “You know what? Your opinion doesn’t matter. You need to just be quiet”. But, you know, and I was just always so vocal about, like, what I thought. You know? And to me, that didn’t seem wrong. But to them I was completely rebelling. You know? “Like you are stepping outside of your boundaries as a daughter, as a female”. You know? Like, “what are you doing? And you’re disrespecting us.” Which to me I’m like, “This

is not disrespect. I'm saying it in a very respectful way. I'm just stating my opinion. It just happens to disagree with yours".

As Maisee grew older, she said she eventually dealt with her parents expectations of upholding traditional and cultural values as well as being treated differently because of her gender. She stated, "I think because I realized that this is the culture. I'm not going to change them. You know? This, I have to work with it." Despite her acceptance of her parents' cultural expectations, Maisee still has a strong view on being an independent Hmong woman: "Like I have nieces that believe in that. And they grew up in America. And it's like, 'What are you? Why are you thinking that you need to do this?' 'You should go to college and get yourself educated and stand up for yourself and not blatantly repeat the cycle.' But to them, like, they, they were okay with it." Maisee talked frequently about her concerns with differential treatment based on gender as it played a major role in her desire to do well, attend college, and be successful.

Lastly, Kunsha also talked about how gender was both a barrier and motivator for her attendance and completion of college. Kunsha described her parents as growing up "in a culture where everything was based on, like, a gender role and based on tradition and religion and culture" and having to live under those cultural values and expectations was very difficult for Kunsha. Growing up, Kunsha thought she had little opportunity to move beyond these expectations. She said, "I would look at myself as like man, I am stuck here; I can't do anything because my parents are always controlling, my parents are always wanting me to do this and do that, and I'm born to be a wife, you know, like clean and cook, and, you know, make sure the house is clean."

When Kunsha made plans to attend college, she found her parents to be opposed to the idea. She said, “My parents, they were really, like, there’s this, like, ‘No, you can’t. You’re a girl, and you know, you just can’t do that,’ you know”. Although her parents did not want her to attend college, Kunsha had encouragement and support from her extended family. She shared that her outside family supported her decision to attend college: “I also have, like, the outside family. They were really encouraging. They’re like, you know, like, I have an uncle that came up to me, like, ‘You know, I really know you can do it, you know. Don’t worry. I’m supportive. I’m supporting you. If you ever need anything, you know, I’m here for you’...I was like, ‘Okay,’ you know. I’m glad an uncle can support me.” Eventually her parents supported her decision to attend college. She explained, “Before I left, they’re like, you know, ‘We can’t, we can’t, we can’t stop you anymore, and so if you’re going to go, make sure you go for the right reason, make sure you get good education, um, and you know, we’re here for you.’” For a time, Kunsha thought she would be unable to attend college because she was a Hmong woman and she was faced with expectations to be at home, but her parents opened up to the idea of her attending college. Although four Hmong participants who identified as women shared how gender served as a barrier and motivator for their decision to attend college, a Hmong participant who identified as a man also spoke about the role of gender in his desire to be successful.

Vong had talked about the difficulty of balancing the different expectations of being a student in the American college system, being Hmong and being a member of a Christian church and community. Vong observed the long journey and struggle his father took to provide for Vong’s grandfather’s family and Vong’s family. Vong also

recalled the path that his older brother, Ya, took while his older brother adjusted to both the Hmong and American way of living and taking on more responsibilities as the eldest son. Vong explained what he saw in regards to the struggle his oldest brother experienced: “So my big brother, first born... to young parents, so what do they do, throw everything in his hand and put everything on his shoulders, and when it came to translating, hey, it's you. When it came to reading like what the statements on your bills and stuff, say, hey, it's you. It, it was almost like age didn't become, age wasn't a factor anymore.” Because Vong’s parents were acculturating and adjusting to the American culture, they relied heavily on his oldest brother to support them with responsibilities around the house. In addition, his brother was the oldest son in the family, and it was up to him to help lead the family. Vong described: “It was just like ‘hey, you're our son’, you know, ‘you're the head of this household and we're going to throw everything at you’.” Vong continued:

He was, he was basically the mom and dad of your house, you know... your parents are always working so he was there cooking for you guys, taking care of you guys... until the point where he reached his teens and things, you start to understand more things and people start influencing him because he'll go to school and he'll realize that, hey, you know, these people don't do what I do. How come I have to do what I have to do? How come I have to wash the dishes? How come I have to cook and stuff? And then he just totally quit. He was like hey, one of my friends told me that, you know, this is a woman's job. Why, why am I doing it? All of a sudden he stopped doing dishes. He stopped cooking. And then

they were like, hey, you know, this is, this is how you should live. You should be like a gangster. You should drink, you should smoke and stuff. That's just a, just a cool thing.

Vong explained the pressure that was placed on him and his brothers:

It was, I mean, he (father) always says, "I've raised so many sons". He has four other sons. My, my youngest brother being nine. And he is just, you know, I want to see them succeed and carry the name on, and, and grandpa's legacy on, but at the same time, it's also, so that's the reputation part, and he also wants us to not be issues... But, yeah, that results in just your reputation too, because once you can start to see, you know, a successful family, you know, you get a reputation for your family. Everybody raves about that family and so, I mean, he would love to hear that. He would love to hear someone come up and say, wow, you have a very strong son and you know, or, a, a, a son who can be a leader one day.

Vong also had a difficult time and experienced pressure from his parents to carry the name and the legacy. Vong recognized this and used this notion as a motivator for his success. He is drawn to his father's story and perceives his older brother as a role model because of his struggle with finding balance with the cultural expectations, responsibilities, and pressures of being a son. For Hmong students, gender issues can first become a barrier to their success but eventually become their sense of motivation to attend and complete college.

### **The Importance of Diversity**

The participants described their experiences in college as balancing the Hmong and American cultural worlds. The participants also talked about their experiences fitting in with other students. The support or lack of diversity at their institutions either helped or challenged the participants in balancing these two worlds. The participants talked about their experiences during new student orientation, their experiences sharing their ethnic background with others, and their interest in being in a more diverse campus community. To them, appreciating and acknowledging diversity was an important component of their college experience and experience as Hmong Americans.

Attending new student orientation is one of the first opportunities for first-year students to meet new people and potential friends. Students attend orientation sessions to learn more about campus resources and services, meet students in their class, meet faculty and staff and register for classes. Some of the Hmong students recalled what it was like to attend orientation, and they described orientation as the first time they realized they were different from their peers. Vong remembered his experience at his new student orientation and recalled feelings of loneliness and nervousness:

It was like, freshman orientation and it was like, none of my friends were going, so, nobody from (my hometown city), none of the minorities are coming out, it's just me and all these out of state kids who are basically New Jersey kids and everything, they're just all White and, couldn't find no friends that night. Couldn't make no friends, couldn't do anything. They'll talk about what's going on, they'll talk about Jersey Shore and everything and I'm just like, I cannot relate and I can't be part of, you know, and it was very lonely. The loneliest feeling I've ever had and I

just hated that orientation and couldn't wait until school started so that all my friends come back to school with me and stuff.

Here, Vong recognized that new student orientation was one of the loneliest times he had ever experienced. As I now reflect on my experience at my new student orientation freshman year, I can relate to Vong and his sense of loneliness. I felt lonely because I did not know anyone, and I was not the type to easily approach new people. It was the first time I was on my own without my family or siblings by my side. When I asked Vong in the follow up interview to explain what he meant by feeling lonely, he shared the following:

So, I definitely felt like I failed there, because I'm just like, you know, I can't relate to this question, and their vocabulary and everything is just, is so, it felt like I was a new kid again. Like, I, I just wasn't up there, like even now I still feel that my vocabulary's not there, but it's just like, at that point it was, like, such a cultural shock for me. It was like, well this is, this is like what college is going to be like. Like, it's not like at home anymore where I can always run and hide to my parents and stuff, so, definitely felt like, man, like, even though I got through high school, I don't think I'm educated enough to even continue like college and stuff.

He was surrounded by new people that he originally felt he had little in common with. He added: "Other feelings were, other things that were going through my head was just like, man, when is this going to be over, when can I go back home, or like, not even just going through my head, my mind." Vong continued:

What are these people thinking about me, like, man, I don't have no



Northface jacket, sorry, I ain't been there, man, I, I look like, I'm so poor and everything, and you know, it got to the point where I would watch the way they eat, and I'm just like, man, am I eating right, am I doing something weird, it, it was tough, yeah, I had to stick with like salads and burgers and fries the whole weekend and just like, man, this is not really me, you know.

Vong recognized that there were things about him that were different from the students around him at new student orientation, especially the language and the socioeconomic status of students. Vong not only felt nervous but he also questioned his ability to continue in college.

Nhai had a similar experience during her new student orientation at her institution. Nhai had attended her university because it offered her a better financial package. In addition, Nhai had family members who had also gone to that same institution; her family was familiar with the university. Nhai realized quickly that she did not like her institution when she arrived at the new student orientation. She explained:

I was literally thinking almost in my head, I remember just thinking after orientation, we stayed overnight and everything... It was almost like a light bulb went in my head. I was like, "I hate this place."... "What the heck did I just do?" I think it was just more of the, it could be the first time I'm away from home, but mostly around strangers who don't look like me. I literally felt like a stranger in a strange land (laughs).

Nhai continued to explain her experience at her new student orientation and why

she realized she did not like the school:

When I was there at orientation, I was not that excited. I think what made it even worse was Rose College had no minorities. It was quite a shocker because growing up in our very urban area, it was more like 95% minorities. Now it became 5% minority if we were lucky. It was a very different experience, and I think the socioeconomic background for each of the students I think was probably the biggest gap I've been exposed to for the first time. I didn't really like that first experience and I was a little bit shocked too. It set a lot of my feelings throughout college. I don't think it set the tone that first year or second year. I think it went on for a long time. I was starting to understand, I don't know if I can be in an environment where it's only maybe 2 or 3% minority. It just felt strange because your experiences are so different. I think the only word I come up with is uncomfortable.

Vong felt nervous and lonely at Orientation while Nhai felt uncomfortable. They both realized they were in a new environment with people who did not look like them or come from the same socioeconomic background. For both Vong and Nhai, it was important for them to be in an environment and setting where they felt they could relate with others.

When some of the participants met new people at their colleges and universities, they often found themselves explaining what “Hmong” meant. Maisee and Vong both described how they would respond to other students who asked them what Hmong meant. Maisee mentioned that the type of response she gave depended on the person.

She explained: “Like, Hmong, when people asked me, I would tell them. And if they don’t understand, then I would explain it to them. Like, I, I don’t know why I say it, but, like, I had a short version, you know, I mean, like, for some people because I didn’t want to go into detail. But who are my close friends, like, I, I gave more detail.”

Maisee continued: “But sometimes, I just told people I was Chinese... I guess, like, I wouldn’t see them again or it’s not a big deal, I would just, like, ‘Yep, I’m Chinese,’ you know, or, like, some other race so that I wouldn’t have to explain it because I, it... Yeah, it was just easier just to say, I’m Chinese”.

Vong also shared his experience of responding to others when asked about the Hmong. He shared, “Like when I introduce myself, I tell people I’m Hmong, people don’t even know what Hmong is, and they keep calling me a monk and I’m just like, no, it’s not a monk, and, you know, and, I’m not Mongolian either and it’s just so hard to always explain myself.” He continued:

And I used to always blush and turn red whenever they’d be like, hey, tell us what nationality you are, and I’m just like Asian. And they’re just like, no, we want more than that, like, Asian is such a broad word and I’m just like, oh, well, then, you spend, end up spending like 30 minutes explaining who you really are to them, and so I was always timid, intimidated, very intimidated, actually, and whenever, like, someone would actually try to come up and introduce themselves to me, I would just try to stay like, as casual as I can and then give them really, really simple answers so I can get it done and over with.

Expressing his ethnicity made Vong nervous and intimidated. As a result, Vong

would simply tell others he was Asian without going into details about his ethnicity. For the participants, it was difficult to give a straightforward answer when they were asked about the Hmong. Usually, they would have to provide an explanation of where their parents are from and how they arrived to the United States. Given the fact that Hmong people do not have a country of origin, it is also difficult for others to grasp what Hmong is. Thus, explaining their ethnicity and the origin of the Hmong was sometimes exhausting and frustrating.

The participants had various experiences with their campus life, but the institution's appreciation of diversity was important to their college experience and adjustment. Some of the participants talked about the lack of diversity on their college campuses. Maisee described why she decided to attend her institution in addition to the fact her institution offered her major in architecture. She shared:

This school is giving me a lot of money, and they have an Asian club. Right? So I went because they had an Asian club. But they, when I went, I found out they don't have an Asian club. They just didn't take it off their Student Activities list. So he goes, "Yes." So he goes, "Oh, we don't actually have one. It was, we just didn't update the list." I go, "Oh, okay. No one really told me that." You know? And they even had a table, but no one was sitting at the table during like the school tours or whatever.

When Maisee found this out, she was frustrated and felt misled. Maisee also noted she was shocked to see that her institution lacked diversity of people despite its urban location. Maisee ultimately joined the Multicultural Club at her institution. She

explained: “And at first it, I went to it, but it was very, it wasn’t multi-cultural. It was really just one culture. And I was like, ‘You know, I’m not really interested in it.’ And then the next year the, the leadership... last year, my friend and I, we kind of took over. We were like, ‘We need to make this more diverse.’ And we tried to get different people in.” Maisee found her adjustment to this campus community difficult:

And for me that was hard to adjust to. Like I didn’t know how to talk to these people. Like I felt foreign. I don’t know how to explain this. But it was just strange. It’s, it’s like when you go to a place where there’s a lot of Hmong people and you’re just like, “How do I associate with these people.” You know? But that’s how I was. I, I just didn’t know and I have Black friends and Spanish. Like we’ll all sit together and we’d make jokes, right, about each other. And the White people were just like, “Oh, my god. What are you guys, why are you making jokes about each other like that.” But that’s where I came from. You know?

Lastly, Maisee described why it was important for her to be surrounded by people whom she could relate with. She stated, “It was really hard for me to make the transition. So I was, like, I’m going to join Multicultural so I can find that minority group... that understands kind of like, you know, why your parents come here.” For Maisee, joining a multicultural club gave her the chance to find others with whom she could relate. Because she came from a diverse high school, attending a college that was pre-dominantly White as a culture shock for her.

Vong also described his experience with the lack of diversity at his institution. He specifically talked about his experience as an Asian student and how others

perceived him. He shared:

I was singled out. So, that was definitely something and it was very uncomfortable when they touch a subject on Asian people because it looks like, man, everybody's looking at me while the teacher's talking about, like, the Chinese history or something, I'm just like, oh, it felt really uncomfortable sometimes, you don't want to go fast because you already knew what the subject was going to be about. Or, like, whenever they, like, all right, get in groups to do projects, everybody's like, boom, this kid, you know, and everybody's like depending on you because you're the Asian kid.

Vong talked about a time when he felt uncomfortable during a classroom discussion about Asian Americans. Vong also felt stereotyped by his peers as the smart Asian student. Vong shared another example of how he was stereotyped as being good at chemistry by a few women in his class. He explained:

Next thing you know, like one of them finally nudges over and just like, hey, make sure you leave your test open and stuff, you know. And I was just like, what's going on, and it was like, like, we know, like you aced that test, because I guess someone in that class got an A during the first exam, so they were like, we know it was you and stuff and, it's like, there's no way, so they were going around sharing their scores and I finally told them my score. And as soon as I told them my score, boom. They all leave.

Vong felt "really uncomfortable." He explained: "I even, like turned red and I

was just like, whoa, like, body got all hot and it's like, man, this, this is tough, like, like, that was the only reason why they came over and stuff". He continued, "I felt really bad and, and in a way, when I even heard their scores I felt bad about myself and it was like, man, I'm not living up to what they think I should be, you know, I should be this smart person and I can't even live up to that. So, I felt ashamed, too, and it's like, man, you know, everybody else did good". Vong's experience with this incident led him to feel bad about himself and ashamed. He questioned his ability to do well in the course and became even more conscious about how others perceived him. He described his frustration with being different and his inability to connect with others:

It was very frustrating because it's just like, "why don't you understand me," like what, like "what is it going to take for you to understand me," and it gets really frustrating and you, and you get home and you're just like sometimes you, you feel like you wish you could just like take care your diversity, like and just take it off, like it was clothes or something, you know, just put on a new outfit and stuff.

Vong felt he was different from his peers and thus had a hard time connecting with others. He felt that the ideal solution was for him to "take off" who he was and to replace it with something else. Nora and Cabrera (1996) suggest that "the climate of racism and prejudice harms the cognitive and affective development of minority students" (p.140) and these factors are often the reason that minority students leave their institutions. Vong also spoke about how he eventually began to deal with the lack of diversity and feeling different around most of his peers at his institution. He shared: "I don't know like just, just finding the right people to be around like because there's

always people who will encourage it, and you, you can utilize those people like crazy and you use them as resource like crazy to always... so continue to find people who encourage me and, you know, influence me to, to want to be better.” Vong continued: “And I think that there is one day that when you are like the best, like everyone will just stop stereotypes and everybody just look at you and be like, wow, you know, we want to be like that person, you know... and there is just, there is just no more stereotypes. But to say that is not going to be stereotypes; I can't say that.”

Nhai, who also talked about feeling uncomfortable at her new student orientation, felt her institution also lacked diversity. She talked about a few instances of how the lack of diversity impacted her specifically in the classroom. In one example, Nhai talked about a moment during one of her social work classes when she and her classmates were working on a project to examine family income. When she and the students examined their family's income, Nhai stated that this moment served as an eye opener for some students. As Nhai put it, “That was kind of where I was kind of forced to reveal who I am. I'm like, my family's not anywhere near that median, it's actually far below. I think that was the reality check for many of them, they were like, "Oh wow!" Although her institution made strides to discuss issues of diversity, Nhai suggested that they rarely spoke about diversity from the lens of the underrepresented individuals. Nhai shared an experience she had in a class where she was required to read an article and participate in a discussion about White privilege:

I just remember this article about, we read, I found it a little more intriguing than what's her name... I don't remember her name. I was like, this is a nice article, but there was literally an article that we just glanced



over it. I'm like, "Oh, we didn't read that one". The article I think was called "Counting Beans". Literally it was I think an Asian writer who was telling the story of how wherever she went she was counting beans. She was counting who was a minority in this room, she's counting who's an Asian in this room. I identify more with this article because first of all I don't have White privilege. What does this relate to me? What can I really say about White privilege because we're having a huge discussion about White privilege... okay... good. Then we never talk about how the minorities see the world, such different lenses all together. Rose College is its own different thing too because we don't talk about those things, but then we talk about how are we disadvantaged.

Nhai's illustration of this particular experience in the class demonstrates how the appreciation of diversity is important in her learning experience.

It is important to note that Nhai had a unique study exchange experience. With the support and mentorship of Dean Smith, Nhai participated in a national exchange program and attended a university located in the south. Nhai described her college experience as a more positive experience because she connected more with students at this exchange institution because the exchange institution had a higher percentage of diverse students as compared to Rose College. Here, Nhai shared her positive experience at that exchange institution:

I can tell you that the difference with Exchange State Institution because it's a local Black university, they actually have lectures that were open to the public and really encouraged all the students to attend. I attended one

because slavery has been such a... I mean slavery... Black people, they actually had an international speaker come in and talk about I think how he was sold as a slave, a mundane slave. He talked about his experience. It kind of almost like, you know, it's still here. Our past is very present. Nhai described how this compared with her primary institution, Rose College: It felt safe to talk about it because the presenter really had that experience whereas at Rose College it's like you're having a White person talk about the minority experience, or you're having someone who is, I understand the different minorities, but each minority group also comes from different backgrounds. You can't just have an Asian person leading a discussion what it means to be a minority. Everyone experiences it differently. I felt like maybe that's where it was so disconnected that you were just like, "Why did I bother coming here?" It doesn't reflect who I am and it doesn't really show any maybe someone didn't think this through.

In describing Rose College, she noted, "I think it's also weird when you were saying, 'Oh wow! You guys lived this lousy lifestyle, quite posh and I'm not!' I think a part of it is almost like, you're already the minority, why continue to review that you're a minority?" She continued, "Whereas I think at Exchange State Institution everyone's already a minority. What more is it going to hurt you to be a minority?" For Nhai, Exchange State Institution connected her most closely with her peers as compared to Rose College, and the perception of being a minority was also different.

The importance and appreciation of diversity was a huge aspect of the participants' experiences in college. Concerns and issues with diversity impacted their ability to believe they could continue in college, their learning experiences in the classroom and their overall connection with others including peers and faculty. The stories the participants shared were powerful, and these examples illustrate the importance of diversity for the positive experiences and success of these individuals.

### **College as Self-Exploration**

The participants shared their stories of being Hmong in the American society and having to maintain the cultural values, expectations and norms encouraged by their families. They also described the ways in which diversity, or the lack of diversity, impacted their comfort level, personal development and learning in college. Those who spoke about the struggles of living in two different cultures referred to college as an environment and experience that allowed them to explore and develop themselves as individuals. Participants described their college experience as a time for self-exploration. Some of the participants described college as a self-exploration process where they were able to generally learn more about themselves and develop the skills needed to be successful. In addition, the participants discussed college as a self-exploration process which enabled them to learn how to integrate the two cultural worlds and to understand what it meant to be Hmong and American – Hmong American. Although the some of the participants discussed college as a self-exploration process, others described college as a means to obtain a degree in order to be successful.

***“You Learn More about Yourself”***

The participants described college as a time for them to grow individually and to learn more about themselves. Because college was a time to meet new people, study new fields, and be more independent, the participants were forced to put themselves out there. Some of the participants discussed how they were able to learn more about themselves during their college experience. This is illustrated in Maisee's description:

It's (college) life-changing, especially for those who are not used to that kind of diverse environment where you meet all kinds of people, learning all different things... I think in college, with people coming from all parts of the world, you're really exposing yourself to something different. You know? And I think everyone should experience it. You know? Whether it, not just academic-wise. You know? But outside of the classroom. You know? I think you learn so much about yourself, who you really are. And you, because you're used to seeing so many different people. And I, I know for myself I, I've kind of expanded who I am.

Maisee saw college as a way to "challenge you," to think about "who you are," and "what you stand for". Kunsha also saw college as a way to learn more about yourself. She described:

Yeah, you can have fun, but you know, take life serious, uh, because this is where you're going to find your true identity and what you want to do in life, um, and just, just things that, you know, you don't see during your life in high school or as a kid growing up, you know, because you're an adult, you're in college, um, you're going to see a lot more and

you're going to learn a lot more about yourself, um, especially when you are thinking about your goals in life and what you want to do in life, and um ...

Similar to Maisee, college allowed Kunsha to learn more about herself, define her goals, and achieve them. Vong also shared a similar view on his college experience. He suggested that college was not just about the academic development of individuals but also about their holistic development: "I feel like, it (college education) doesn't only like, make you, like, gives you facts and stuff where you can talk to people, but it just, builds you as a whole. You feel a lot more confident wherever you go. You can talk to people because you know what's going on, you know what they're talking about...."

The college experience for Vong allowed him to go beyond the classroom to develop as an individual and be more confident in himself. Lee considered college as a way to also help build the skills necessary for success. He shared, "it (college) helps you hone in to what you're really interested in. It helps you develop those skills." Lee continued:

I really think you learn more about yourself, and also I mean more about the world in general. I think college is definitely, taken from the real world, and I think that's why it's a time to learn about all sorts of different things. And if you just keep yourself in academics and courses and school work, and within your own friends and cliques, like you will really miss out on, you know, a lot of different things. And so I think my biggest thing was, you know, travel. Like do something abroad; travel somewhere. Or join a ... join some sort of club that you never thought

you would join before. Do something that interests you that you've never done. I just think it's the only time in your life that I think you can really do things, without people questioning you, and without too many setbacks if the risks weren't bad enough.

Maisee, Kunsha, Vong, and Lee shared a common understanding of what college was for them. College was described as a chance for them to learn more about themselves as individuals and an opportunity for them to develop skills beyond the classroom.

Lee, who talked about learning more about himself and his Hmong identity during college, recognized that his idea of college may be different from that of his older brother. His older brother attended college more than a decade before him. College meant different things for Lee than for his older brother. Lee explained:

I think ... my personality is very different from my brother. I think, he was born in Laos, and so the first thing that comes to my mind [that the brother thinks about] usually is, you know, trying to get ahead and doing the right things, and do those first before you do other things. I think for me, though, it's always been like, "I'm going to do the risky stuff. I'm going to do something different. I'm going to experience all these types of things." Obviously, I always did my school work and everything, but I must do something different and crazy. I think it's a cultural thing, and the experiences in our lives determine our interests.

Lee saw his time in college as a chance to experience various opportunities while college to his older brother was a step towards developing a more advanced life than

that of his parents.

Unlike Lee, college for Nhai was a means to a degree. When asked to share what she got out of her college experience, Nhai stated, “I think the most obvious was just the degree.” Bee had a similar view. Because he was the oldest in his family, he felt an obligation to succeed in college, to get a good job and to support his family. Bee developed many friendships during the course of his years at Rose College, but Bee talked about his college education and career as a way to support his parents: “For my family at least, because I was the oldest, too, I felt like I had a responsibility to my family, to my Mom and Dad, that I had to help them out. So I think that you have to choose a career where the job was going to be stable and was going to give you enough income to help out your parents.” Similar to Bee, Sai saw college as doing well academically and building a successful plan for the future. He shared, “The main factor was being able to see myself succeed, do well. Do well and to look at myself and to see that I will do well in the future. Because I’m doing well now in academics, and I’m succeeding and I’m progressing in academics and grades and just overall studies.” Although some Hmong students talked about college as an opportunity to learn more about themselves, others saw college as a means to a degree and a good career.

College, to some of the Hmong students, was also a time of reflection on who they were as it related to their Hmong identity. College was not only a chance to learn more about themselves, but it was an opportunity for them to better understand their Hmong backgrounds, to realize their Hmong identity, and to comprehend what it meant to be Hmong living in America.

***“I have this ethnicity which is Hmong”***

Some of the participants discussed their experience living in two different cultural worlds with different expectations and behaviors. They entered college feeling unsure about who they were, how to act and behave, and how to balance all expectations. The participants described their college experience as an opportunity for them to better understand and accept their Hmong identity and to integrate both cultures into one.

For Vong, going to college initiated several incidents of self-reflection. He began questioning who he was, what his purpose in college was, and if he would be able to continue on with his studies at his university. Vong talked about balancing several worlds: being a college student, upholding traditional Hmong beliefs and values, and being a Christian Hmong. As Vong described his balancing act, he credited the counselors from the Student Bridge Program as the key support in his ability to integrate these worlds. He shared how his bridge program counselors supported him:

When I had my counselors, who always had my back, I got into Student Bridge Program, a very diverse program, so, they were all about diversity, so they, they really helped me out, and they really tried to understand me. I got my internship, and then I didn't just get like, a job internship, I went through, like Inroads, which is like, I think you've heard of it, all right, so, and they just helped embraced my diversity, too and they were just like, we need people like you, and you, you, you guys promote the company and so I got into Inroads... and then, like, really trying to open myself up and not be afraid and building confidence of



who I am. Really helped bring everything together.

His counselors supported his success, understood the importance of his background and showed him how to embrace his diversity. Vong recognized a difference in himself once he was able to find a way to bring his worlds together into one. He described:

I mean, I've noticed, I'll go to church and people will be like, man, you are such a strong person, you have so much confidence, and I'll be in front of Hmong elders and they'll be like, wow you speak such good Hmong, you know, even if it's and it's to the point where, kids are not speaking Hmong any more, that even, even if you can say, like, hello and good bye, the Hmong elders will be impressed, and so, I mean, I definitely can get bad at that, and so that started coming together and now with like, just understanding culture and stuff.

As the years progressed for him in college, Vong allowed himself to open up to others and became more confident to share his background with others. He shared, "...just show everybody who I really am and not try to pretend to be, like, oh yeah, when I'm with society that I'm going to pretend that I'm White, and I forget who I am, stuff. Or when I'm at church I'm just all about like God and stuff, but like really embracing myself because once all that stuff came together, I like, really became who I wanted to be." Vong described college as "an opportunity for change of identity" and suggested that when he was in middle school, he was a "quiet kid" and in "high school, the quiet Asian kid who always get honor rolls and stuff". He explained:

And that's who I was, and I was like, time to change the identity and, you know, be loud, because now, no one knows that I was the quiet Asian

kid back in high school. And be loud and you know, make my, myself known. And that's, that's when I realized it, that, how much it benefitted me too, because I was just like, yeah, I need to make this change, because me being quiet, is, is not getting me anywhere.

Vong watched some of his friends study and go back to their dorms while he began opening himself up to others and talking with peers: "I felt like it wasn't, I wasn't like, creating walls for myself anymore. It felt like I was breaking down walls the more I changed and the more I opened up because it was almost like, my, my, embracing my diversity but also, like sharing it and like making it grow instead of just hiding it to myself." Lastly, Vong shared a tip to Hmong youth thinking about going to college. He explained:

I wasn't afraid of, like, I don't know, I mean, I, I stayed true to myself, so, I remembered that I was always Hmong, but I had fun to the point where it was just like I took advantage of all the resources college brings to you.... Whatever you want to do, they can make it happen. You just have to go find the right people. And so, I love that fact. Like, really, it really developed me and especially for people who, and actually, this, I don't know, maybe, in, all, like, races they have this, or nationalities they have this, but Hmong people specifically, I feel like they're so quiet and they're so to themselves and they feel like that's who they have to be, like quiet and just...so they're very reserved and I'm just like, you don't need to be that. Like, you can go to college to be anybody you want, but just remember to be true to yourself. And make sure you know who's in

the right family, don't go out there and party all the time, but like, so it was definitely fun, and it sounds cliché, but life changing. It definitely changed my life.

College was a life changing experience for Vong. He was able to explore who he was, discover his capabilities, and embrace his Hmong American background.

Lee also viewed college as a chance and opportunity to redefine what it meant to be Hmong. Because Lee went to a school that did not enroll many Hmong students, he found himself often needing to share his ethnicity and background with others. He had realized at one point that he not as knowledgeable about his Hmong background when people asked about it. He shared: "I think definitely much more in college, freshman year, I think, when I started valuing being Hmong much, much more. And I think because, I think the problem was that no one knew what it was, and so that gives you a reason why you should go searching yourself and identify with it, and then teach others what Hmong is." As Lee began meeting new people, he began learning more about the history and culture of the Hmong. Lee explained: "Because you have a bunch of freshmen who are trying to make friends, you have freshmen who are kind of curious about the new, you know, meeting new people. And so it was part of like developing my own story and my own identity, that I wasn't just a guy from Fresno, I was like a Hmong guy from Fresno. And so you kind of had to go back in history, like what is Hmong? And so that kind of helped create your own identity...." Lee spent a large part of his freshman year learning more about his background because meeting new people in college forced him to have a better understanding of who he was. He described a time when he realized, "I have this ethnicity which is Hmong." He shared:

I mean it's (college is) making sense of both cultures, but also it's kind of finding a balance between the two. Kind of like finding who you are and what you are actually supposed to do, and what you can do kind of thing. And so I think in college, I was very unclear of, you know—I always saw those two, you know. It's like either I become very Americanized and kind of leave the Hmong people, or become very Hmong and kind of like forget about the mainstream kind of things. And so only seeing those two as very separate was very difficult, because I wanted to do both. So there's a lot of self-imposed kind of pressures, you know. And so I think through the experiences, I was able to learn how to kind of like blend the two a little more, where you don't necessarily have to leave the Hmong people behind, but you don't necessarily have to be like completely in the culture to help the community. And so... I mean, it was all the way to senior year till I started realizing how to do it correctly. I mean, it takes a lot of failures, you know.

Kunsha, who shared her experiences of growing up a Hmong woman and struggling with living under expectations of the Hmong and American culture, also shared how college was a chance for her to learn how to balance both worlds. Kunsha shared a story about a time in middle school when she felt bullied by her peers. She stated, "Everybody just thought I was Chinese, so everybody was always making fun of me, and I really, that really, I really took that in a lot, and that really brought me down, as a young girl, you know." This experience "scarred" her, and Kunsha stated, "so,

from that I just, like, you know, I don't want to be Hmong anymore, and I just hated it, you know.”

Kunsha described how her college experience helped her to come to terms with her Hmong identity and her ability to balance both cultural worlds. Kunsha first realized she began to miss everything about being Hmong when she entered college. From the food and from hearing the term “Hmong”, Kunsha realized being Hmong was a part of her:

Like the food and, like, uh, just hearing Hmong words, and um, everything about Hmong, you know. I was like, “Oh man”, like, “I guess, I guess I can't, I can't stay away from them”, you know, because I need that, you know, because it's something that, it wasn't, it wasn't, like, something that was like a habit or it wasn't, like, something that was a norm, but it was, it was, like, it was a need, you know. It was a need and, in my life where, like, “Okay, I need the Hmong people because it's something that, it's something that not because I'm used to it but something that, you know, will help me”, because I was, like, “Oh, I've been, I'm going to need them to help me in, in, like, in my work, you know, in my homework and all those other stuff, so”.

This was profound for Kunsha. Growing up, she had a difficult time accepting her ethnicity because of how others treated her. In addition, she had challenges with growing up as a Hmong woman and balancing the life of an American student and a Hmong daughter. When Kunsha left for college and entered a new environment, she began to realize that being Hmong was always and will always be a part of her.

According to Kunsha, her institution had a larger percentage of Hmong students enrolled, and she found herself connected with other Hmong peers because of the shared commonalities they had. She shared: “we all came in with the same, uh, perspective and, um, same, you know, culture and everything, uh, struggles, same struggles, and uh, struggles of being Hmong and being American.”

During her college years and specifically when Kunsha was exploring majors, she re-discovered her Hmong roots when she visited Thailand after fundraising for the trip:

I was like I'll just take a trip to Thailand and see how it is there, maybe work with Hmong people, you know. And, so, I had fun that year, went to Thailand and loved it. Like, I just fell in love with the Hmong people and lifestyle there, and I was like this is why my parents struggled so much, you know. You know, struggled so much getting seven of us prepared for life. Because I went there, I got to see the hardship there, and I got to work with an orphanage, and, so, parents that left their kids on the street. And there's all Hmong people, and, so, kids that were abandoned or abused by parents or, you know, everything, like horrible stuff.

As a result of the trip, Kunsha had a better understanding of the struggle her parents faced every day to ensure their kids' success in United States: “I was like wow, so this is the reason why my parents struggled so much to get all seven of us to prepare for life, because that's what they were going through, you know, starvation or trying to survive, you know, in a life, in this life. Because that's what Hmong people understand

is just surviving for that day, you know?” This trip during college allowed her to reflect on herself and understand what it meant to be Hmong American:

And, so, I, I went there and I fell in love with Hmong people, and I started coming back to my, like, it's a, kind of like evaluating myself again. I was like you know maybe, maybe I shouldn't hate my roots... Maybe I should learn from it, you know. Yes, I am a Hmong-American, but, you know, there, I can still live in the life of an American and a Hmong by keeping the culture within me, and knowing what is the culture, you know?

Kunsha's experience in college, like Vong and Lee, provided her the chance to learn more about her background and helped her embrace being Hmong American. College for some of the participants was a chance for self-exploration and realization and acceptance of their Hmong identity. As a result of their experience in college and their experience of defining themselves as Hmong Americans, the participants also shared their desire to support the advancement of the Hmong community.

### **The Advancement of the Hmong Community**

The participants often talked the Hmong community as a whole and reflected on the importance of giving back to the community. Many of them described the Hmong community as a close-knit community that was adapting to the new life in the United States. Their parents' stories were seen as motivation for their desire to succeed in college. College was a time for self-exploration and an opportunity to revisit who they were as Hmong and specifically as Hmong Americans. Exploring these aspects during college also encouraged their desire to support and advocate for their close-knit Hmong

community. In sharing their reflections, they also recognized and observed a difference in the way Hmong youth approach education and success. In addition, there was a general agreement that Hmong individuals with an education should give back to the Hmong community.

### ***Differences in Experiences***

In terms of recognizing the differences in experiences and approaches to success by the Hmong youth, May compared her experiences with that of her nieces. May encourages her nieces to participate in outside activities like the Girl Scouts. She described the benefits of the Girl Scouts to include giving back to the community, engaging in programs to promote learning in math and science and participating in activities like camping and baking. May described her inability to participate in extracurricular activities as compared to her nieces:

I think it's just the... the generation that we're in. You know? We didn't have that [extracurricular activities]. Like I didn't know about Girl Scouts until, like, I'm at this age and I'm like, "What do you all do? Like you guys have been doing this around for how many years?" "Oh, we've been around for many years. You didn't know about us?" And I'm like, "No. I don't know. My parents never told me. I never knew about you guys". But it's a different generation. It is. Like all my nieces and nephews get involved with, like, all these sports.

May observed that she did not have the ability to join extracurricular activities like the Girl Scouts because of her parent's lack of knowledge of these types of opportunities. Because May is aware of the organization and has knowledge of this



resource, she was able to share it with her nieces and nephews. May continued to acknowledge the differences in experiences of herself and her younger brother:

I think even, I look at our generation, right, and then I look at my younger brother's generation, and I'm just—wow. Our expectation, even if it was my choice to go to college, we knew it was our expectation to do well. For them, it was like, I'm just going to go to college and just kind of do it. And it wasn't expected to do extremely well, or not to do it. And they just kind of like, "oh, well, May will help me with my financial"... So, it's almost like they're, I want to say, what's the word I'm looking for? It's almost like they're privileged in a way, because they have us. So, they don't work as hard as we do, you know what I mean?

May suggested that one of the reasons for the youth's privilege is the sharing of the knowledge that has been gained over the years by the Hmong who have entered the school system and succeeded:

So then, now, they're, the cut-off is really, is the Hmong culture is, that we're so educated now, and we're teaching them and doing things for them, and they're so privileged, that it's kind of like going down, because, what are they teaching, what are they teaching the others, because we're constantly helping them, because, it's almost like, you know how they, you know how people talk about when you're rich, you're rich, and you spoil your kids. And they're like, oh, they don't know, they don't know right to wrong, and what it means to be poor.

May observed that the privilege the Hmong youth have now is developed through the sharing of knowledge and experiences with them. Compared to her experience growing up, the Hmong youth have access to more resources and knowledge.

Bee also observed a difference in the Hmong youth as compared to his experience growing up. He shared, “I think that my Dad really did understand that, and I think that was one of the things that he always pushed me to do when I was a kid. He always pushed that on me, that that was important. Don’t screw around with that. Make sure you finish it. Make sure you finish whatever you’re doing. If you’re doing a project or you’re working on something, make sure you finish your goals.” He continued, “I think that it really is one of the important things that a lot of kids today, I think they don’t emphasize as much on anymore. At least, I don’t see it. Once in a while you see a kid do really well, but the majority of them, I don’t see that.” Bee suggested that the motivation and discipline of some of the Hmong youth parented by parents from his generation are different from that of individuals from his generation because the parents do not push them as hard. He credits his father, who wanted Bee to “be better off” than him, for giving him the motivation and discipline to succeed. Sai’s explanation might bring light to Bee’s observation.

Sai also observed a similar difference in the way the Hmong youth perceive and approach education and goals. Growing up and finishing college was a goal of his because he understood his parents’ struggle coming from Laos and starting a life in the United States. He suggested:

There is a bigger gap. So they, they don’t use that (parent’s story of

struggle) as fuel to do better for themselves. Because if they saw that, if they saw the struggles and the adversity that, you know, their parents or their older siblings or their grandparents faced. Then it would be some sort of a factor and they can say, look, you know, I, I don't want to go through what my grandparents went through. I would like to better myself, and because of that gap, you know, it could be possibly why. Whereas we're, we're more close to the first generation, you know. From, you know, the 30s to the 45s. You know, the age range there. We have more connection with, you know, their struggles. So we kind of use that to our benefit in trying to do well for ourselves.

The Hmong youth growing up in the United States today have relatively little understanding of their parents' story of fleeing from war and starting a new life in a foreign country with little education and no financial resources. Sai used his parents' story of struggle to motivate him to plan for and graduate from college. Because the Hmong youth are too far removed from their parents' stories of seeking refuge and starting a life in a new country, they are less able to see their parents' story as a motivator for success.

The participants talked about the differences in the way the Hmong youth perceive success and plan for their future in college. These differences exist because of the increase of knowledge on resources and educational opportunities. The participants also acknowledged that the differences in experiences and approaches to success were also due to the widening gap of understanding their parents' (or grandparents) stories of the secret war, refugee camps, and a new life in the United States. In terms of the

advancement of the Hmong community, most of the participants were concerned about the future of the Hmong and supporting the Hmong youth in their success in college.

The participants spoke about the importance of giving back to the Hmong community.

***“If I don’t love the Hmong people, then who’s going to love the Hmong people”***

Some of the participants discussed at length the importance of giving back to the Hmong community through advocacy and support. Kunsha described college as an opportunity to explore who she was, to learn how to balance living in a bi-cultural world, and re-discover her Hmong roots. After her trip to Thailand and seeing the Hmong in Thailand, Kunsha grew more passionate about the Hmong and supporting her community. She shared:

So after going, after going to that, to Thailand, my trip, coming back I started thinking about, I was like, you know, I’ve always wanted to be a teacher, but, I don’t want to do that. And, so, but I want to, I want to create, I want to create like an organization for the Hmong people, because when I was there, it was really hard for them to get education, and some of them were too poor to get an education, and some one, some of them couldn’t afford or some of them didn’t have anybody at all. So, I wanted to create an education that helped them. I was like, you know, since I wanted to be a teacher, I can major in cross culture so that I can have a way of studying the Hmong people, and I can also minor in TESOL, Teaching English as Secondary Language.

Kunsha came back from her trip with a stronger desire to support the Hmong community. She observed that some of her fellow Hmong peers have a lack of interest

in helping the Hmong community: “Hmong people don’t want to do anything with the Hmong community, uh, to society, or even, even help out the Hmong people, and so I was, like, you know, you’re a Hmong, you know, you should know that, you know, this is your people.” She continued: “You shouldn’t be ashamed of it, um, and you should take a step back and say, you know, ‘I’m proud of my race. I’m proud of being Hmong,’ and find ways to help out the community.” Her pride for her Hmong culture and background developed over the course of the years during college, and Kunsha is extremely passionate about supporting her community. She stated:

I learned that, you know, if I don’t love the Hmong people, then who’s going to love the Hmong people? If, if I’m not going to help the Hmong people, who’s going to help the Hmong people? Yeah, there’s, there’s going to be a lot of people out there helping Hmong people, but then there’ll be less one person if you don’t help each other, and so, that, that’s my understanding...that, you know, in the Hmong community today, like, we need to learn how to help each other.

Vong also spoke often about supporting the Hmong community by giving back. Vong is fairly involved with his Hmong church and was elected as the youth president of the church’s youth group. Vong viewed himself as a role model for the Hmong youth and wanted to support them in their plans to be successful in college. He explained why it was important for him to serve in this capacity: “you are that person that went to college and now all these people are looking up to you and especially because you’re their president, but now they have to look up to you because you have that title, and they’re just like, oh, we have to follow that path. We’ve got to do that.... If I can give

back to the Hmong community, awesome.” However, similar to Kunsha, Vong also recognized that there is a small number of Hmong supporting the Hmong community:

It's just like no one wants nothing to do with the Hmong community...and doesn't, almost feels like they're not Hmong you know. And I was just like wow, you know like, like you should be like helping out like these, these, these younger people right here who really need your assistance, so, you know, you're right. I, I definitely will try and let's see, so let's keep an eye out on everybody...because this community, I don't know, there's, there's going to be a lot more of us.

Like Kunsha and Vong, Lee talked about the need to support the Hmong community. Lee talked specifically about providing more community activism and community development initiatives: “You need to do more of the, you know, the community activism and stuff. Beyond just, you know, doing community socials. They need to do community activism...community development, you know, through the young adults. Because I think that’s the next stage, especially for the Hmong community. We’ve been here for, what is it, 30 plus years?” Lee continued:

And so I, you know from what I’ve seen is, a lot of the young adults here, they either do their tournaments or social events, or they do very ... just like a support. They just support the elders in, what is it, tech or in doing paperwork or doing things like that. It’s still kind of minimal, where it’s not at the higher level where you’re changing an agenda at a meeting; you’re figuring out what kinds of things you’re going to talk about you know, and also how do you position the Hmong community?

Things like that. I think you need ... you know, you need the elders to be there as well, but you need young folks to come in and talk, too, you know?

Lee described at length the need for existing Hmong organizations led by Hmong adults and elders to include young Hmong professionals as well. For years, organizations have been focused on helping the Hmong survive in a new country, and lately, Hmong organizations have been focused on hosting social events like the Hmong New Year celebrations and sporting tournaments. Lee described the importance of using the knowledge and experience of those who have gone through the school systems and have graduated from college to mentor others. Offering this type of mentorship can provide members of the Hmong community with increased knowledge, support, and guidance on education and help to advance the Hmong community and success of the Hmong youth. He described:

You're established as independent now, and you want to help, not giving all your time and money, but in some way get involved and at least talk about it. Um, and I've seen other smaller communities where they have like small groups, um, that work with like high schoolers, or college students, um, to start community dialogues, you know? And then they get involved with the Hmong New Years, and they get involved with like the Hmong associations, you know? And I feel like that's something ... because I feel like I haven't met too many.

Lee understood that at times it is difficult to commit to supporting the Hmong community: "We're finding more and more young professionals in Rhode Island, who

are interested in it. But you know, are afraid to commit, because of either past experiences, where it just took too much time and money, or it wasn't worth the time in the past." He continued:

You see the sports, and you don't see the academics...young adults are, you know, going ... the ones who are going to academics, or the ones who are trying to do things, you know, big things, you know? We don't see those, at the New Years. We just see them come and participate and they just kind of sit there. And so I feel like there's a big need for young Hmong adults there to help, especially like high school students, to either be you know like great at sports, and focus on sports only, or you know, do well and then just come back and kind of help celebrate with the elders. But there's not like a big push to like educate our community; let's help our community be active. Let's, you know, let's figure out how can we, you know, pull our community up, you know? And so I think that's where we need to start focusing on, especially the ones who can with the young adults, who are young professionals, who have gone through college, or have gone through kind of like a working life. And they kind of understand the ins and outs a little bit more than some parents. Um, and they have better jobs; you know, financially and time-wise, a little bit more.

Lee observed the lack of engagement and involvement of Hmong professionals in giving back to the Hmong community and, like Vong, suggested a need to support the Hmong youth in promoting education and serving as role models to them.



Because college was a profound experience for the participants to rediscover their Hmong history and culture and to define what it meant to be Hmong American, the participants found it important to help support and advance the community in the United States. Many of the participants described how the Hmong youth differently approach education and success. Whether these differences exist because of the widening gap of knowing the struggles of parents or grandparents before them or the privileges Hmong youth have gained over the years, there is a clear concern from the participants about supporting the Hmong youth and mentoring them towards success. In addition, the participants also described the lack of involvement of Hmong professionals in community events, development, and support.

To summarize, college as a time to explore, define and embrace what it meant to be Hmong American was the third theme for the study. First, the participants' often described how being a part of two cultural worlds impacted their decision to attend college, their personal development during college, and their perception of what college meant to them. They discussed how certain Hmong cultural values and expectations impacted their educational planning and decision to attend college. Second, the participants talked about the role gender played as a key motivator to their decision to attend and graduate from college. Third, the participants also explained how appreciating diversity was important in creating positive experiences for them in the classroom and in connecting with peers. Lastly, for some of the participants, the college experience was a time of self-exploration. The participants saw this process of self-exploration in two forms: 1.) learning more about themselves, and 2.) understanding what it meant to be Hmong American and deepening their Hmong identity. The Hmong

participants described the college experience as an opportunity for them to learn more about who they were and to learn more about their goals and the skills necessary for success. The participants also perceived college as a chance to learn more about their Hmong background, accept, and celebrate their Hmong identity and understand how to balance living in a bi-cultural world. In celebration of their Hmong identity and the embracing of being Hmong American, the participants also saw a need to support the advancement of the Hmong community.

### **Summary**

In summary, three themes emerged from the study. In addition, subcategories or subthemes also emerged from the study with the participants. The first theme is the difficulty of navigating the college system. The participants were all first generation students with little knowledge about the college process and system. In terms of navigating the system, students described their experiences with little parental knowledge about college, academic transitions, choosing the right major and balancing nonacademic demands with school. Compared to non-first generation students, the participants' parents had little knowledge of the college experience and have never attended or graduated from a four-year institution. Most of participants viewed their college experience as a somewhat challenging time, particularly in their first year, due to their lack of knowledge about the culture of college. They experienced some challenges navigating college and often learned about policies or practices later in their college years. They also experienced frustrations with certain classes but were able to find resources to support their academic transition. In addition, the participants had the pressures of choosing a major that fit the criteria of passion and prestige. Hmong

parents typically only knew of prestigious and well-paying careers in law or medicine and expected their sons and daughters to pursue high paying careers. When they enrolled in college, some of the participants faced the responsibilities of balancing school with work and other personal obligations. Participants who lived off-campus because of financial constraints were less involved on campus and spent much energy balancing work and school.

The second theme is the direct and indirect support structures that assisted and guided students during their college experiences. Although the students faced a difficult time transitioning into college and continuing their studies, they had various forms of support that provided assistance and guidance during college. These forms of support included pre-college programs like bridge programs, institutional support, parental support, sibling support, and peer support. Many of the participants' parents had little knowledge about how to guide them, but the participants were motivated to succeed because their parents wanted a better life for them.

The third theme – living in a bi-cultural world: “I am a Hmong-American” – consisted of the participants' reality of living in a bi-cultural world and learning how to be Hmong American during college. Being Hmong meant living up to the traditional and cultural values of the Hmong, but it also meant maintaining and balancing these values and beliefs with that of the American culture. The role of gender, particularly for the participants who were women, influenced their decision to attend and graduate from college. At first, the role of gender served as a barrier for the Hmong participants who identify as women to pursue college but later served as a form of motivation for them to attend and graduate from college. Hmong men faced some pressures of helping

to lead the family and carrying on the name and reputation of their father's surname to the next generations. Living in a bi-cultural world was challenging, but the participants saw college as an opportunity to learn more about themselves, re-discover and appreciate their Hmong identity and learn to balance living with their Hmong and American cultures. Many of the Hmong students struggled with being Hmong and fitting in with the other students at their institutions. The institutions' appreciation of diversity made a positive impact on their college experience. Through the re-discovering and learning of their cultural backgrounds and with the support of peers and staff, the participants were able to use college as a way to understand what it meant to live in bi-cultural world and be Hmong American. As a result of their experiences in college and the redefinition of the Hmong American identity, participants expressed a desire for the advancement of the Hmong community. As the participants described the importance of college in helping them solidify their understanding of what it meant to be Hmong American, the importance of advocating and advancing the Hmong community became apparent. The participants shared an appreciation for the history and culture of the Hmong. They described their interest in supporting Hmong youth as they pursue their educational goals and aspirations but acknowledged that there are some differences in the way today's youth approach education. This can be explained by the notion that Hmong youth are losing grasp of the parents' or grandparents' stories of struggles. In addition, the participants observed the Hmong youth to take their parents' stories of struggle in Southeast Asia and starting a new life in the United States for granted. Overall, the participants supported and acknowledged the need for the advancement of the Hmong community. There is a lack of involvement of Hmong

professionals in leading the Hmong organizations to promote community development, activism and education, and the participants expressed a need for more Hmong adults to give back to the community.

The participants in this study described their college experience to be somewhat challenging, as they had to deal with learning how to navigate the college system on their own. Because their parents' lacked knowledge about the college process and experience, the participants were faced with finding support on their own, making hard decisions on majors that appealed to them and their parents and balancing school with work to ensure their continued enrollment in college. Despite their difficulties in navigating the college system, most of the participants had one or more forms of support that helped them to prepare for college or guide them throughout the process. What was interesting was their description of college as a way for them to learn how to live in both the Hmong and American cultures. Because of their challenges with balancing both worlds, the participants found themselves using college as a way to learn more about themselves and rediscovering their roots. The significance of these findings and their implications for research are discussed in Chapter Five.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

The Southeast Asian (SEA) college students as a group experience challenges like poverty, language barriers, and cultural tension, which hinder them from excelling in academic work (Ngo & Lee, 2007). The Hmong, a Southeast Asian subgroup, perform at one of the lowest education attainment rates compared to other subgroups (CARE, 2008), and there is a lack of research on the Hmong and their experiences in college. My professional work in student success and retention in higher education and my identity as both an AAPI and Hmong woman, encouraged me to conduct a study designed to provide Hmong students with an opportunity to share their voices on their college experiences. The study aimed to answer two research questions: How do Hmong students make sense of their experiences in college? What contexts or situations have typically influenced or impacted the experiences and success of Hmong American students in college? Using phenomenology as my research methodology, I interviewed ten participants who have attended a four-year post-secondary education institution. There was one Hmong participant who was currently enrolled in college. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and analyzed to generate codes that developed overarching themes representing the experiences of these Hmong students in college. The themes included: navigating the college system, support structures, and living in a bi-cultural world: “I am Hmong American”.

#### **Discussion of Findings**

The research aimed to explore the meanings of the experience of college from

the perspective of Hmong students. I have considered the findings and the three overarching themes through the lens of Stacey Lee's (2001) notion of intergenerational conflict, Bronfenbrenner's (1984) ecological model, and Lareau's (2003) explanation of accomplishment of natural growth. These considerations lead to a few important points that help to answer the two research questions: How do Hmong students make sense of their experiences in college? What contexts or situations have typically influenced or impacted the experiences and success of Hmong American students in college? Intergenerational conflict, the construction of the meaning of college, and the role of family in navigation of college and independence help to answer the first question of how Hmong students make sense of their college experience. The role of college preparatory and bridge programs and the institutional support with sense of belonging help to answer the second question of the types of contexts and situations that influence the experience and success of Hmong students in college.

### **The College Experience Seen Through the Lens of Hmong Students**

Navigating the college system was relatively difficult for students because they had little knowledge about the college process and experience. In examining the experiences of students' navigation in college, I return to Bronfenbrenner's ecological model. Bronfenbrenner's (1984) ecological framework describes how the context of students' environments influence their development and how the environments relate and connect with each other, ultimately influencing the experiences of students. This ecological framework can also be used to answer the second question of what contexts and situations help to support the success of Hmong students in college, but the framework also helps to illuminate the interactions the participants had with various

individuals and objects in an environment for an extended period of time. These environments or contexts consist of microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, and macrosystems. A microsystem consists of the activities and relationships that have direct contact with the individual, and a microsystem can consist of parents or schools. Mesosystems entail the interconnectedness of two microsystems that belong to an individual and the exosystem is the structure or setting where an individual does not have direct contact but the events within that structure indirectly influence processes within the setting in which the individual lives (Bronfenbrenner, 1984). The macrosystem is the ideology and cultures of society. These environments – microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, and macrosystems – help to explain the experiences of Hmong students in college. In terms of this study, all participants had direct contact with individuals, or microsystems, before and during college. Their microsystems impacted their college experiences, particularly with their experiences of navigating the college system. Their meso- and exosystems also influenced their college experiences and navigation of college.

When it came to learning how policies and procedures worked in college, some participants had a more difficult time than others. All participants' parents lacked an understanding of what college entailed and thus were unable to directly support the participants. However, some participants had older siblings who attended college before them, providing them with some knowledge of the college process and the college experience and even the inspiration to attend college. When individuals are exposed to or actively engaged in an activity others are doing, they become inspired to take on similar activities (Bronfenbrenner, 1984). This engagement is also known as



“ongoing activity” (Bronfenbrenner, 1984) and can be described as the tasks or activities an individual sees others doing or participates in himself. The participants who had older siblings in college a few or more years ahead of them indicated their interest in following the same path. They also were able to look for support from their older siblings during their college years. Their older siblings’ attendance in college allowed their siblings to gain cultural knowledge about the process and experience. When individuals have gained cultural capital through experience, they may also gain social capital or social connections. People have access to resources based on their social connections and networks (Bourdieu, 1986). Participants who were the first in their immediate family to go to college or had no older siblings in college, had a harder time navigating the college system because they did not have the cultural knowledge or the social connections. They often looked to others for support, and this type of support came from supportive staff and faculty who understood their backgrounds.

All the participants’ parents lacked an understanding of the college experience and were unable to provide direct guidance to their children. The participants did not experience seeing their parents engaged in the activity of going to college and thus gained little knowledge about the process. The participants had to look for guidance and resources in other ways, and several participants participated in college preparatory programs. The participants’ parents’ interrelationship with other microsystems like their colleges also impacted their college experiences. The interrelations between two microsystems creates the mesosystem. Some participants found it interesting that parents of other students were so heavily involved during their students’ move in day or academics. The participants shared their experiences of their parents’ lack of

connection with their colleges, and they also shared the minimal communication that took place between them and their parents during their college years. Their parents were also busy working to provide for their families, and their parents' struggles with making ends meet motivated the students to excel in school (mesosystem). Although their parents lacked knowledge about college and the college process, the parents did not lack interest or care and provided emotional and spiritual support.

The participants all had different experiences and different contexts and situations that impacted their development. Overall, the key environments and contexts that influenced the participants' experience of navigating college consisted of their direct relationships and connections with their parents and siblings. For the participants who had older siblings in college, navigating college was much easier, while students who did not have an older sibling in college experienced more frustration and challenge in navigating college. All participants' parents lacked an understanding of the college experience, and the participants became immediately responsible for their own success in college. The role of family impacted the participants' ability to navigate college and to face independence and responsibilities. The participants' parents also influenced the experiences of the Hmong students, and I will examine this from the lens of intergenerational conflict (Lee, 2001).

Stacey Lee (2001) defines intergenerational conflict as the tension second generation Hmong students experience when the second-generation Hmong students' acculturation is not guided by their parents whose acculturation has not "caught up" to that of their children. The 1.5 generation Hmong students include those who were born in another country but grew up in the United States, while the second generation Hmong

students are those who were born in the United States and have immigrant or refugee parents (Su, 2008; Lee, 2001). According to the research data and the interviews with the participants, Bee, Nhai and Maisee are considered 1.5 generation Hmong students because they were born in either Laos or Thailand, while Vong, Lee, Kunsha, May, Poua, Pang and Sai are considered second generation Hmong students because they were born in the United States. The participants themselves were not aware of these two definitions – 1.5 and second generation Hmong students – but saw themselves more as the traditional first generation college student (Pike & Ku, 2005), the typical term used to define a student whose parents have not earned a bachelor's degree from a four-year college. Figure 3.3 displays the participants who discussed intergenerational conflict.

Lee's (2001) notion of intergenerational conflict was relatively correct for most of the participants, particularly for Poua, Kunsha, May, Vong, and Lee who would be characterized as second generation Hmong students. For Maisee and Sai, Lee's (2001) notion of intergenerational conflict did not hold to be entirely correct. Maisee would be characterized as a 1.5 generation Hmong student because she was born in Thailand but experienced intergenerational conflict with her parents. Sai was also born in the United States but did not discuss his challenges of dealing with cultural tension with his parents. Sai, however, is the youngest in his family of seven while Maisee is the fifth of six children in her family. Placement in the family may have an impact on the intergenerational conflict.

Lee (2001) also suggests that second generation Hmong students experience discrimination which impacts their attitudes in education, while 1.5 generation Hmong

students tend to overlook cases of discrimination and place more attention on the positive aspects of life in America. This is relatively true for the participants. The second-generation Hmong students talked about their experiences in college as feeling “different”, being stereotyped and feeling a need to connect to those who are similar to them. For one of the participants, Vong, the struggle with feeling different and dealing with diversity led him to question his continuation in college.

Figure 3.3

*Participants’ Discussion of Intergenerational Conflict*

<b>Name</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Approximate Age</b>	<b>Place of Birth</b>	<b>College Graduate</b>	<b>First Generation</b>	<b>Hmong Generation</b>	<b>Older sibling w/ college degree</b>	<b>Family size (including self)</b>	<b>Birth Order</b>	<b>Discussion of Intergenerational Conflict</b>
Nhai	W	33 yrs.	Thailand	Yes	Yes	1.5	No	5	1 <sup>st</sup>	No
Sai	M	34 yrs.	United States	Yes	Yes	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Yes	7	7 <sup>th</sup>	No
Bee	M	39 yrs.	Laos	Yes	Yes	1.5	No	6	1 <sup>st</sup>	No
Pang	W	19 yrs.	United States	In Progress	Yes	2 <sup>nd</sup>	No	11	3 <sup>rd</sup>	No
Maisee	W	26 yrs.	Thailand	Yes	Yes	1.5	Yes	6	5 <sup>th</sup>	Yes
Vong	M	23 yrs.	United States	Yes	Yes	2 <sup>nd</sup>	No	7	3 <sup>rd</sup>	Yes
Kunsha	W	24 yrs.	United States	Yes	Yes	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Yes	7	4 <sup>th</sup>	Yes
Lee	M	25 yrs.	United States	Yes	Yes	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Yes	14	9 <sup>th</sup>	Yes
May	W	33 yrs.	United States	Yes	Yes	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Yes	12	5 <sup>th</sup>	Yes
Poua	W	26 yrs.	United States	Yes	Yes	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Yes	14	6 <sup>th</sup>	Yes

According to Lee (2001) schools serve as an organized institution for students to

learn the social values and ways of American culture. Because students and parents have different views of what it means to be successful in America, tension and intergenerational conflict develop between the children and the parents (Lee, 2001). Second generation Hmong students did not discard their Hmong culture or traditions but were trying to redefine what it meant to them to be Hmong in the United States. Lee (2001) conducted her study with high school students, but this study demonstrates that the intergenerational conflict continues to exist as Hmong students enter college. For the participants, college served as a vehicle for the participants to work through the intergenerational conflict and redefine what it meant to be Hmong American. In addition, as the Hmong students met new people, rediscovered their Hmong culture and became more independent during college, they not only gained a better understanding of their parents' acculturation and struggles but they also learned to embrace and integrate their two cultural worlds as Hmong Americans. The intergenerational conflict for the Hmong participants diminished during and after college.

In terms of this study, all the participants were focused on graduating from college to make their families proud, get a degree and find a good job. Those who did not experience intergenerational conflict – the 1.5 generation Hmong students – saw college as a means to a degree and a better life for themselves. They were focused on doing well in their courses and talked minimally about their interactions with others as it pertained to their Hmong identity. The participants who were second generation Hmong students and experienced intergenerational conflict perceived college as a time to explore who they were, re-discover their Hmong culture and roots, and learn to balance living in two different worlds. College to them was a place where they could

work through this intergenerational conflict and redefine what it meant to be Hmong in the United States. Often, the participants returned home to their families and parents during college to learn more about their history, and they used this cultural rediscovery as a way to motivate themselves to continue their studies. The participants who experienced intergenerational conflict and rediscovered or redefined their Hmong identity during college all stated that they now knew what it meant to be Hmong American. The second-generation Hmong students were able to confidently state their Hmong identity and background to others instead of stating they were “Asian” or “Chinese”. It was also really interesting to see that all the second-generation participants of this study indicated a deep interest in giving back to the Hmong community. They saw a huge need for more Hmong professionals and young adults to support their community in order to provide leadership and support for the youth of the Hmong community as well as all members. The rediscovery of their Hmong culture and their understanding of what it means to be Hmong American have encouraged them to advocate for the success of the Hmong.

It is also important to discuss the findings and the participants’ experiences as they relate with the Model Minority Myth. CARE (2003) notes that the Model Minority Myth suggests that AAPIs are high achievers and do not need additional academic support because they perform well academically. The participants of this study were relatively successful and had entered college and graduated from their institutions. Their success may appear to perpetuate the Model Minority Myth, but the participants’ experiences show that they did not conform to the myth. All of the participants experienced difficulty during their college experience. Navigating college was a

challenge for them because their parents lacked the cultural knowledge of the college experience. May, Vong, Lee, and Sai talked about the academic difficulty they faced and the ways in which they had to navigate the college system and seek out support for academic and personal success. The Model Minority Myth also suggests that Asians do not experience and suffer from racial discrimination like other minorities (Wing, 2007). This was not the case for some of the participants. Maisee, Nhai, and Vong talked about their struggles with their ethnic differences and expressed the need for a more diverse and supportive campus community. Wing (2007) also suggests that although the myth places AAPIs as diligent and hard workers which can be seen as positive characteristics, these aspects of the myth can encourage AAPIs to adopt or internalize the Model Minority stereotype (Kawai, 2005). This was the case for Vong. Vong had a hard time with Chemistry and was assumed by his classmates to perform well in the course. When he tried to conform to his classmates' perception of him but did worse than them on an exam, he felt frustrated and embarrassed. The participants' stories showcase experiences that do not conform to the Model Minority Myth.

Overall, college was described as a challenging time for the participants in terms of navigating the system and balancing the expectations of their Hmong culture in the American society. But college for the participants was not merely about the challenges they faced in learning about the culture of college and the academic skills necessary for success. College, through the lens of the Hmong students, had been an opportunity for them to work through intergenerational conflict and understand what it fully meant to be Hmong American. In looking back during the interviews, they saw college as a time when they were able to integrate cultural expectations from their Hmong heritage and

the American society. The participants who were second-generation Hmong and experienced intergenerational conflict perceived and described college as a time when they were able to explore who they were, re-discover their Hmong culture and roots, and learn to balance living in two different worlds. They were also encouraged to develop their advocacy and support for their Hmong community. College was a step towards success for them and their families, but it was a time for personal reflection and growth for the participants.

### **Supporting the Success of Hmong College Students**

This study not only aimed to explain how Hmong students make sense of their college experience but it also sought to describe the contexts and situations that influence success for Hmong college students. The key points that help to answer the second aspect of the research question include the role of college preparatory and bridge programs and the institutional support that provided a sense of belonging. In addition to these two points, it would also be important to include the impact of having increased knowledge of college on the Hmong students' success in college, and this was described in the previous section of this chapter. Having an older sibling in college eased the transition during the beginning of college and provided ongoing support during college. It also provided the participants with more resources and a larger network of support.

In the previous discussion for the first research question, I explained that microsystems and mesosystems can influence the development and experiences of individuals. When Hmong students observed their older siblings engaged in going to college, they were inspired to also attend college. In addition, parental knowledge and understanding of the college experience can also help to support students in college.



Despite some of the barriers the participants faced in navigating college, becoming responsible for their own education and developing into young adults, the participants were always reminded of their parents' struggle during the Secret War and their hard work to start a new life in the United States. Most of the participants shared their parents' stories of working low paying jobs, going to work for second shifts or growing up in a low-income household. For some Hmong students, the pressure of finishing college to meet their parents' expectations of pursuing a life free from financial constraints also influenced their success in college. Aside from the support and encouragement of family members and their history, the role of college preparatory and bridge programs had an influence on the experiences and success of the Hmong students in college.

Some of the Hmong students were able to participate in programs that supported their transition into college and their success during college. Some of the Hmong students had more social and cultural capital than others. For example, some participants' families were sponsored by religiously affiliated organizations that provided them with an American family to guide their transition into American life and society. Their connection to this American family or network of support increased their social and cultural capital. It increased their access to resources, networks of people and knowledge of certain information, behaviors and policies. Some of the participants were also able to attend college preparatory high school and participate in college preparatory and bridge programs funded by either the state or non-profit organizations. There were several benefits to college preparatory and bridge programs, and these included increased knowledge of the culture of college, identification of appropriate

resources and long-term support from higher education professionals.

The college preparatory and bridge programs first supported the participants in the development of their knowledge of the college process and the college experience. Some programs introduced and guided students throughout the application process, including the financial aid application. In addition, the bridge programs specifically provided the participants with the experience of living away from home, being in a college classroom and developing study skills. By attending their institution during the summer prior to their beginning fall term, the participants were able to experience what college would be like before all other students arrived on campus. Sai, for example, stated “we had a head start, because the program that I was involved in gave us, you know, somewhat of an insider’s perspective to the campus before the whole campus or the kids showed up, so we have the whole campus to ourselves during that summer course.” The college preparatory and bridge programs helped them to increase their knowledge of the college process and experience.

Secondly, the college preparatory and bridge programs supported students in their ability to identify resources for support. This was important for the participants because of their limited experience of participating in extra-curricular activities during their childhood. Lareau (2003) suggests that students’ cultural organization of behavior is tied into their social class. Students raised in working-class families are typically raised through “accomplishment of natural growth” which suggests a boundary between the child and the family. A child raised through accomplishment of natural growth has little participation in extracurricular activities because of the lack of resources, and this leads to inability of the child to experience opportunities that help to develop his or her

negotiation or personal skills. In contrast, raising a child through the middle class approach of “concerted cultivation” involves a child’s participation in extracurricular activities like soccer leagues and boy scouts. Raising a child through concerted cultivation increases the child’s ability to develop negotiation or personal skills (Lareau, 2003). Some participants talked about their inability to participate in activities because of expectations and responsibilities at home, their limited knowledge of the types of existing educational programs and their inability to pay for them. Those who did have the knowledge of and connection to resources and programs during their childhoods were able to benefit from those programs. They were able to experience more than staying at home and watching television and were able to gain more information about other opportunities. Participation in college preparatory and bridge programs not only increased their knowledge about the college experience but it also helped them know, identify, and access resources available to them during college.

Lastly, the participants said that college preparatory and bridge programs provided them with long-term support from higher education professionals. Some of the participants talked about their ability to seek help from a higher education professional from their bridge program throughout their college years. Often times, the higher education professional was either a counselor or advisor, and some participants saw these higher education professionals as mentors or parental figures. They felt comfortable to talk with their counselors and advisors about their successes and challenges – academic or personal. Having support from a staff member in their bridge program who understood their experience as first generation, underrepresented students was extremely supportive for Hmong students.

College preparatory and bridge programs were not the only aspects that influenced the success of the Hmong students. As discussed previously, 1.5 generation Hmong students viewed college as a means to getting a degree and building a better life than their parents had, while second generation Hmong students perceived college as a time when they were faced with redefining who they were as Hmong in the American society and a place where they could learn how to feel comfortable and be confident in balancing the Hmong and American culture. Whether they were 1.5 generation or second-generation Hmong students, the participants discussed how the institutions provided or did not provide support for them. When institutions consisted of supportive and encouraging faculty, dedicated higher education professionals supporting the personal and holistic development of students, and an inclusive campus environment, the Hmong students were able to flourish and continue their educational studies at their institutions.

Encouraging and supportive faculty members who understood the experiences and challenges of the participants supported the success and experiences of the participants in college. Vong, for example, talked about how it was extremely helpful for him to have a professor who worked closely with him on improving his performance in one of his classes. Understanding that English was not his first language, his professor guided him through strategies and methods of improving in the class. May, Sai, Kunsha, Poua, and Bee also suggested that their professors were positive support structures for their success in college. When the participants were challenged in their classes or needed some guidance on major choices, their ability to have encouraging and understanding faculty members proved to influence the success and experiences of

Hmong students in college.

In addition to supportive faculty, having dedicated higher education professionals at their institutions provided the Hmong students with an environment that promoted their self-reflection, supported their development of goals, and provided conversations for personal and holistic development. Many of the Hmong students talked about college as a time for self-exploration. Given their need to rediscover and redefine their Hmong identity and to learn how to live in and integrate two cultural worlds, the mentorship and support of understanding staff were crucial to the success of Hmong students in college. For example, Vong shared his experience of talking at length with his bridge program counselor about the academic and social experiences he was facing in college. He described his counselor as being his “second mom” who helped him map through his social experiences during college and helped him to embrace his diversity. May talked about a negative experience with a staff member who did not take the time to get to know her, and this impeded her ability to stay focused and motivated in one of her classes. It is important to have higher education professionals who take the effort to learn more about the students and their backgrounds, to support the academic success of the students, to provide holistic and social guidance for the Hmong students and to celebrate their diversity. Providing Hmong students with this type of environment influences and supports their success and experiences in college.

Institutions that provide and promote an inclusive and welcoming environment influence the experiences and successes of Hmong students in college. Some Hmong students often described feeling different when they first arrived at their institutions. They observed cultural organizational behavior and socioeconomic differences, and

they began to question their ability to relate with their peers and their ability to finish college. They also experienced being stereotyped as a Model Minority. According to Solorzano (2001), racial stereotypes continue to impact our students, and educators need to identify the resources and strengths of students of color to position them in the center of our teaching, curriculum, and research. Encouraging and supportive faculty and higher education professionals are important in the success of Hmong students, but they must also be understanding, caring and have some level of cultural competency. Institutions that practice and promote inclusivity and diversity support the success of the Hmong participants. Nhai discussed how some of her academic courses lacked diversity in their curriculum or the opportunities to share different perspectives. Nhai described a time an article regarding White privilege was assigned to the class and a discussion took place regarding White privilege from the perspective of White students. She shared that nowhere in the discussion was the topic discussed or analyzed from other perspectives, particularly from the lens of underrepresented groups. This not only hindered her learning in the course, but it also deprived her classmates of the experience of diversity of thought and perspectives. Increased opportunities for activities and conversations among diverse groups of students on college campuses can result in increased sense of belonging at the university or college (Locks et al, 2008). An example of a type of opportunity for conversations among diverse groups of students is the inclusion of topics and ideas analyzed from different perspectives and not just one perspective. Institutions also need to provide more opportunities for students to meet diverse groups of students in and out of the classroom. Providing an inclusive campus community that offers support for all students and promotes diversity of thought

encourages the success of Hmong students.

In summary, the participants could not separate their parents' struggles from their decision to pursue a college education. They used their parents' stories of refuge and acculturation as motivation for success. How did the Hmong participants make sense of their college experience? College was a step towards success for the Hmong students and their families, and at times, navigating through the college system proved to be a hindrance and a challenge. College to Hmong students meant more than just obtaining a degree. College was also a time for personal growth and development. Specifically, when these Hmong students attended college, they perceived college as a time to explore who they were as Hmong individuals, re-discover their Hmong culture and roots, and learn to balance living in two different worlds. Forced to be in a new environment with new cultural behaviors and expectations and little knowledge about how to transition into this new environment, the participants redefined who they are as Hmong in the American society, learned to integrate both their Hmong and American worlds and developed confidence and comfort with who they are as Hmong Americans. The participants who saw college as a time to rediscover their Hmong identity also developed a strong interest in advocating and supporting their Hmong community.

There were also contexts and situations that influenced the success of the Hmong students. Having an older sibling in college prior to their own attendance in college supported the transition into college and the guidance throughout the college years. College preparatory programs and bridge programs also provided students with increased knowledge about college, the ability to identify resources and the direct guidance of supportive higher education professionals and advisors. The level of social

and cultural capital gained before college influenced their success, but the lack of social and cultural capital did not deter a student from success. Institutions that provided programs and individuals who helped the participants gain knowledge about college influenced the experiences and success of these Hmong students. Providing an inclusive campus community that offered support for all students, supporting a diverse campus and helping students to celebrate and embrace their diversity encouraged the success of participants. Inclusive and supportive campus environments encouraged Hmong students to develop a sense of belonging that helped in their understanding of what it means to be Hmong American.

### **Reviewing the Methodology**

In efforts to explore how Hmong students make sense of their college experience, this study employed the methodology of phenomenology. Phenomenology is a qualitative approach that is grounded in the idea of human existence and what the experience of being human is like. Phenomenology is the examination of the human experience. It offers individuals a framework to step outside of their everyday experience in order to examine what that experience means. Phenomenology was useful in this study because it allowed me as the researcher to make sense of the participants' college experiences directly from their words, descriptions and meaning-making of the experience. It allowed me as the researcher to have them revisit their life-worlds and to tell their experiences as they recalled them. The findings were derived from their perspectives on their own experiences in college.

Data collection was completed through the facilitation of two interviews per participant. The interviews consisted of open-ended questions that explored the



backgrounds of the participants, their experiences in college, and their reflections on the meaning and sense-making of these experiences. The interviews were semi-structured which allowed the interview to flow according to what the participants presented (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The semi-structured interviews and guiding questions served as a guide for the interview but did not limit the direction of the interview. As a new researcher, I am still adapting to and learning the art of interviewing. As I progressed throughout the data collection process, I was able to ask better follow-up questions that helped an interviewee to elaborate on an experience, incident or feeling. In addition, in the process of interviewing the participants during the first interview, I spent some time inquiring about their family dynamics and demographic information. Reflecting on my data collection, I realize now that the use of a demographic sheet or form to be completed by the participants prior to the interview could have allowed me more time to ask deeper questions. Lastly, the interviews were held throughout a span of nine months. This was due to the fact that recruitment for this purposive sample was difficult. This long span of time of interviewing participants made it challenging at times for me as the researcher to recall the first few interviews that took place in the beginning of the interviewing and data collection phase. Therefore, I had to spend a good amount of time re-listening and revisiting the audio-recordings and transcriptions from the first few interviews. Although this was challenging, it provided me with the time necessary to really understand and know the participants' experiences and transcripts.

### **Implications for Practice**

AAPI students do not conform to the Model Minority Myth, and many

researchers have conducted research to defy the Model Minority Myth and to showcase the experiences of students within the AAPI group ((Hune, 2002; Kawai, 2005; Lee, 2008; Lee, 1997, 2001; Museus & Kiang, 2009; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Suzuki, 1977; Wing, 2007; Yang, 2003). The Model Minority Myth suggests that AAPIs pursue advancement and progression by being hard-working and by not challenging the dominant culture. In addition, the myth proposes that AAPIs do not require or need additional support and attention with schooling the way other minority groups do (CARE, 2008).

One of the lower academically performing AAPI subgroups, the Hmong, have had little opportunity to showcase their voices on their experience in college and what these experiences mean for them. Hmong students, like other subgroups within the AAPI group, possess different lived-experiences that are influenced by social, cultural and historical factors. Although the Model Minority Myth places all AAPI students – including Hmong students – in a positive view, it in turn denies Hmong students the support they need and omits the challenges and experiences they go through during college. The main purpose of this study was to provide an opportunity for Hmong students to voice their stories about their experiences in college and to share the situations and contexts that influence their experience and success in college.

As a higher education administrator with experience in both academic and student affairs, I think it is vital to use the findings of this research study to offer suggestions and recommendations for practice in colleges and universities. I offer recommendations for faculty and academic and student affairs professionals, higher education administrations and students. I also offer suggestions and words of

encouragement to the members of the Hmong community.

### **Faculty and Academic and Student Affairs Professionals**

Faculty are a central component of universities nationwide. They work alongside higher education administrators to lead the institution and work closely to develop and facilitate the academic curriculum of the institution. Faculty have a direct role in the classroom where learning takes place, and they also work closely with students in regards to academic planning and career development. Academic and student affairs professionals also have a direct relationship with students on college campuses. They either direct, coordinate or facilitate programs that influence and impact student experiences and learning outside of the classroom. Academic and student affairs professionals also work closely with students individually to guide them through their college experiences. In order for both faculty and academic and student affairs professionals to successfully work with their students, it is important for them to know who their students are and understand how certain factors play a role in their college experiences.

As indicated in the research, the participants experienced challenges of navigating the college system. Compared to “mainstream” students, they have different social, cultural, and financial backgrounds which impact their ability to have access to resources, people and knowledge about college. Both faculty and academic and student affairs professionals who supported the participants in their college experience were described as supportive, helpful, and encouraging. The participants noted professors who pushed them to do well, motivated them to excel, and understood their life experiences. The participants were successful in college also because academic and

student affairs professionals were described as individuals who “looked out for them,” developed personal connections and relationships with them, and supported not only the academic success of the student but also the personal and holistic success. As a result, it is important for faculty and academic and student affairs staff to consider all aspects of a Hmong students’ life – family, work, culture, financial condition – in the planning of programs or one-on-one advising and meeting sessions.

Faculty, in particular, have a lot of influence in the classroom and institutional curriculum. It is important for faculty to develop curricula that speaks to the experiences of all students. The participants experienced the challenge of balancing two cultural worlds but were not given the opportunity in college to define what it meant to be Hmong in the American society – to be Hmong American. They are faced with new people and a new environment, and it is important that faculty create a classroom environment that does not contribute to their “feeling different” or as “outsiders”. Faculty should work to build a learning environment that encourages the cultural competency of all students. Encountering course curricula that promoted diversity of thought encouraged the participants to participate in class and encouraged other students to learn about perspectives different from their own.

Staff members in both academic and student affairs influence the experiences and success the participants. In addition to being supportive and encouraging, staff members should also be inclusive and have a level of cultural competence. The participants experienced intergenerational conflict or tension with living in the Hmong and American cultures. They spent time during college to evaluate and find ways to balance the two worlds. Academic and student affairs staff professionals might develop

formal and informal ways of guiding Hmong students through this process of self-exploration so students are not left to do it on their own. One way to do this, as shared by Vong, is to support and guide students in embracing their cultures, values, ethnicity, and differences.

Lastly, academic and student affairs professionals need to work closely together to develop informal and formal programs to support students in their transition to college. In addition, they need to work closely with faculty in supporting Hmong students. Whether it's the continuation or the development of a bridge program, staff members from all offices and support services need to work together to ensure the success of Hmong students.

### **Higher Education Administrators**

Higher education administrators make up the institutional leadership team of universities and colleges. They make decisions that influence enrollment and retention of students and the expansion as well as the elimination of academic programs. If there is an interest in retaining higher percentages of students, particularly after a student's first year in college, higher education administrators must make the more effective decisions to meet this goal.

Some of the Hmong students participated in bridge programs designed and facilitated by their institutions to support the transition to college for underrepresented students. These bridge programs were extremely important in the success of the participants as many of the participants emphasized and discussed the guidance, coaching and support they received from the program. The bridge programs allowed the participants to gain increased knowledge of what college would be like and to be

more readily able to identify resources for support. The bridge programs also provided them with a community of learners and support system throughout their four or more years in college. Because Hmong students are arriving at college with little knowledge about the college system, institutions need to provide avenues and bridges where Hmong students can slowly adapt to the physical and social aspects of the campus and the expectations of academia. Higher education administrators need to make an effort to invest in programs that help to increase cultural knowledge of college for students. They should invest in the continuation or establishment of these types of bridge programs. Higher education administrators should also look to working closely with middle and high schools in their region to provide these younger students with the experience of being on a college campus. They should work closely with high schools in the region to provide students with the opportunity to develop skills necessary for college success. Higher education administrators can do this by developing programs that provide high school students with mentorship offered by current undergraduate students who not only have an understanding of the college experience but also possess similar life experiences. Higher education administrations could also support the hosting of group discussions for students on important college topics such as time management, campus resources and academic study skills. Approving decisions and programs that provide Hmong students with the experience of visiting colleges and advice and mentorship during their earlier stages before college supports their success and experiences in college.

### **Students**

The participants are proud and enthusiastic about their achievements, and they

have many reasons to celebrate their success. Hmong students have a unique opportunity to build community and support for the success and achievements of members of their Hmong community. Hmong students also can play a significant role in making changes and supporting the success of Hmong students on their college campuses. If Hmong students have the honor of attending an institution that has a large number of Hmong students, the development of an organization or support group would be important for the success of Hmong students. However, it is important to note that having a large number of Hmong students is not necessary to achieve this initiative. Rethinking the goals and intentions of such multicultural clubs like the Asian American club, for example, can help to illuminate the experiences of Hmong students in college. Students can develop forums that speak to the shared experiences of AAPI students and the different experiences by the different subgroups within the AAPI population. Hmong students are encouraged to not complete these tasks alone. It is important that they continue to voice their stories and experiences to help eliminate the misperception of a homogenized AAPI group. Hmong students can also use social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter to provide advice, share updates and voice experiences with other Hmong students.

Hmong students, because of their strong connection with their Hmong communities, could develop support groups to speak with their peers or the Hmong youth about their experiences in college. Annual celebrations like the Hmong New Year festival or the annual Hmong picnics can be used as venues for support groups. For example, some members of the Hmong community rent tents to serve as vendors and sell food, and present music and arts to those attending the festivals. Hmong students

can host a tent where other students who aspire to attend college can drop in and ask for advice and suggestions. They can share advice and tips on college success and serve as mentors to the younger Hmong individuals. Some Hmong individuals may belong to Hmong churches, and youth programs can also be established through their participation with the church. Whether supporting the success of Hmong college students is facilitated formally or informally, on campus or off campus, Hmong students have a huge opportunity to support each other with their educational goals and aspirations.

### **Members of the Hmong Community**

The participants have a strong desire and interest in supporting the advancement of the Hmong community. As more and more Hmong students enter college and make sense of their identity as Hmong Americans, they are eager to share their stories and make a movement to support their peers. Hmong students talked eagerly about the importance of education and how life-changing college was for them. I encourage Hmong students to continue their enthusiasm and interest in supporting the Hmong community.

I also suggest a few words of encouragement to the Hmong community. Although Hmong students were challenged with navigating the college system and balancing the cultural expectations of both the Hmong and American cultures, they completed college and have developed a better sense of who they are as Hmong Americans and members of the Hmong community. Education to them has been a life-changing experience both personally and professionally, and they have high hopes of supporting the community as long as the community is open to support. The Hmong



community, particularly the Hmong organizations designed to celebrate and maintain the cultural values of the Hmong, can bring in the Hmong college graduates to provide insight and recommendations for supporting the Hmong youth in their advancement in education. Members of the Hmong community must be open to allowing Hmong Americans and second-generation Hmong students to share their experiences with the youth as well as the elders. Intergenerational conflict exists with second-generation Hmong students, and those who have experienced intergenerational conflict and college have a lot to offer to their peers. The passing on and growth of knowledge is important in the success of Hmong students, and it is crucial for the Hmong community to take advantage of this great resource.

### **Implications for Further Study**

This study provides suggestions for practices that can be incorporated in college campuses by higher education administrators, faculty, academic and student affairs professionals and students. This study also provides implications for future research. The possibilities for future research include the perception of faculty and academic and student affairs professionals of the Hmong experience. The Hmong have a unique background that involves the Secret War. Some faculty and staff may not be aware of the Hmong and their interesting story, but other faculty and staff have had the chance to work with Hmong students. It will be interesting and helpful to understand their perceptions and attitudes about Hmong students and the Hmong experience in college. Examining this piece of research will provide a bigger picture of the Hmong experience in college.

In addition, future research can include the exploration of other aspects of the

college experience to help mitigate intergenerational conflict and to influence the development of individuals' Hmong identity as Hmong American individuals. In examining how the Hmong students make sense of their college experience, I was struck to see that many of the participants saw college as a time to better understand who they are as Hmong Americans and how they learned to balance the cultural expectations of both the Hmong and the American culture. As a result, the question of what aspects of the college experience influenced the development of their identity as Hmong Americans is intriguing to me. In other words, what were the key elements and factors that helped the participants to get to the point where they felt they had a better grasp of what it meant to be Hmong American or Hmong living in America?

### **Summary and Concluding Thoughts**

This research study provided me with new insights about the Hmong experience in college. The study reminded me of the importance of allowing students to share their stories so that practitioners can help make changes and modifications on their college campuses to support student success. I also gained a better understanding of how Hmong students make sense of their college experience. Lastly, I was able to reflect on my own experience and see how privileged I was compared to other participants.

One of the things I learned during the research study is the importance of providing students with a voice that can explain their experiences from their perspective. Many of the participants were excited about participating in the study because they wanted to share their stories. They had never been asked before to share their reflections and experiences in college as Hmong students, and they saw the importance and relevance of this topic. Thus, it was crucial for me to ensure that the

findings represented what they shared with me. It was also important to me to help share this information with others – higher education professionals, faculty, administrators and students – about the lived experiences of Hmong students.

An aspect of this study that struck me the most was the strong sense of affirmation from the group that their college experience was more than just the achievement of obtaining a degree. They all wanted to be successful for their families, but college was described to be a process of self-exploration. Intergenerational conflict (Le, 2001) exists for second-generation Hmong students, but college was the opportunity for them to find ways to transcend this conflict. College was an opportunity for them to revisit their Hmong roots, develop a way to integrate their Hmong and American cultures and be Hmong American. I learned how important it was for Hmong students to use their experiences in college as a way to feel more confident about their Hmong identity, and I was also amazed by their enthusiasm and interest in supporting the Hmong community. Their college experiences were not just about academic achievement but were also life changing experiences that encouraged them to give back to their community.

As I reflected on my own experience as a Hmong student in college and reviewed the preconceived notions that I noted prior to conducting the interviews, I realized a few things. I understood that many of the participants would share their parents' stories of starting a life in the United States as a driving force for their advancement of education and pursuit of a college education, and they did. I also understood that some of them would discuss their challenges with transitioning to college, and they also did this. Some of the participants experienced more challenge

than others due to their social, financial and cultural backgrounds (or micro-, meso- and macrosystems). Although they all experienced difficulty with navigating the college system, their level of knowledge of college – whether increased by an older sibling’s prior attendance in college or participating in college preparatory or bridge programs – influenced their success. Those who did not have siblings in college had a harder time navigating the college system, particularly in the first two years. This study highlighted the reality that, although the Hmong students are all first-generation college students and their parents have little knowledge about education, some Hmong individuals are more privileged with knowledge and resources – social and cultural capital – than others. Some participants grew up in environments that promoted accomplishment of natural growth but had older siblings who supported their transition into college. Some participants had access to resources and connections because of their association with being sponsored by an American family during their family’s move to the United States. This study helped me to acknowledge that although I did experience challenges with navigating the college system, selecting a major and getting adjusted to the academic demands of the courses, I was, in fact, more privileged than other Hmong students. My mother worked for the school department in the city and had easier access to resources – summer programs and college admissions process information to name a few – that supported my planning for college and transition into college. In addition, I had an older sister who had started college one year ahead of me, and she was able to provide me with some guidance during the college process and my first year in college. I also had aunts and uncles who attended college before me, and they were able to provide me with advice and moral support during my undergraduate years. Lastly, I was enrolled in

a college preparatory high school which helped to prepare me for college. I always knew I was connected to more resources during high school and college, but this study delineated the different ways in which some Hmong students are more privileged than others.

This research study was a rewarding experience for me personally and professionally. I am honored that the participants were willing to share their stories with me, and I am also encouraged by their enthusiasm to support the advancement of the Hmong community. As I continue to share and comprehend this study with them, members of the Hmong community and colleagues, I hope to support the participants in their support and advancement of the Hmong community.

## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer

Rhode Island College and University of Rhode Island

# Are You a Hmong College Student or a Hmong College Graduate?

As Hmong Americans, we have a unique history and culture. Although the number of Hmong students in college is slowly increasing nationwide, the numbers are still relatively low.

The *pajntaub* is a story cloth that tells the story of the Hmong during their days in Laos and Thailand.



Join me for a research study and tell your story as a college student. Help others gain a better understanding of the Hmong experience and what it's like to be Hmong and a college student.

Participants must be:

- Of Hmong descent
- Current college students or students who have graduated from college
- Available for an interview lasting up to an hour and a half
- At least 18 years of age

*Together we can produce a pajntaub that tells the stories and experiences of Hmong students in America today.*

If you are interested in participating, please contact Ms. Duchang at (401) 536-1662 or email at [duchang@gmail.com](mailto:duchang@gmail.com).

This research is conducted under the direction of Dr. Carolyn Panofsky, Educational Studies at Rhode Island College.

*Participation in this project is voluntary. Participation and information gathered in this research will be kept confidential at all times.*

**Rhode Island College Institutional Review Board**  
Approval #: 1213-01      Expiration Date: 12/31/2013



## Appendix B: Interview Questions

- 1.) How would you describe your family or your family background?
- 2.) How did you come to the realization that you wanted to pursue a college education?
- 3.) Given the history of the Hmong as refugees who came to the United States in the 1970s because of the secret war, how did your family start a life in the United States?
- 4.) How is it like growing up in the United States as a Hmong American?
- 5.) As a Hmong student in college, were there times when you felt left out or overlooked? Tell me about those.
- 6.) How would you describe your first year in college?
- 7.) How would you describe your connection with your classmates or peers in college?
- 8.) How would you describe your connection with the faculty or staff at your college?
- 9.) What is a typical day as college student like for you?  
(Alumnus) What was a typical day as a college student like for you?
- 10.) What kinds of experiences made staying in college difficult to do?
- 11.) Describe a time, if any, when you felt you were being discriminated against during college experience?
- 12.) What is your support structure while you are in college?  
(Alumnus) What was your support structure while in college?
- 13.) How does your family play a role in your college experience?



- (Alumnus) How did your family play a role in your college experience?
- 14.) What makes your college experience easy?
- (Alumnus) What made your college experience easy?
- 15.) Given what you have said about your life before you entered college, how have your past experiences played a role in your decision to stay in college?
- 16.) What things in life are important to you or mean a lot to you?
- 17.) How would you describe your experience as a Hmong American student in college?
- 18.) What drives you to do well in college?
- (Alumnus) What drove you to do well in college?
- 19.) What does having an education mean to you as a Hmong American?
- 20.) What keeps you here in college?
- (Alumnus) What aspects have helped you to graduate from college?
- 21.) If you had to explain to other Hmong students what college would be like and offer suggestions for them, what would you say?
- 22.) Where do you see yourself a few years from now?

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