




2022

CULTURAL AND GENDER SHIFTS: TRENDS AND FACTORS HMONG MALE STUDENTS FACE IN PURSUIT OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Sai Yang Xiong
University of the Pacific

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CULTURAL AND GENDER SHIFTS: TRENDS AND FACTORS HMONG MALE
STUDENTS FACE IN PURSUIT OF HIGHER EDUCATION

By

Sai Yang Xiong

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Educational and Organizational Leadership

University of the Pacific
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2022

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CULTURAL AND GENDER SHIFTS: TRENDS AND FACTORS HMONG MALE
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By

Sai Yang Xiong

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family; my beautiful wife Chu Stacy Vue; and my three children, Ryan, Athena, and Zoey. Without your continuous support, encouragement, and sacrifices over the years, this dissertation would not have been finished and this chapter of my life dream would not have come true.

Secondly, this dissertation is dedicated to my parents, Pao Koua Yang and Koua Vang, and my father and mother-in-law, Chong Vue and Kong Yang. I am eternally grateful that I have loving parents who support me in this doctoral journey and understand how important accomplishing this doctoral degree means not just for myself, but for your sacrifices in bringing us to America for a better life and future.

Finally, I dedicate this dissertation to all my brothers and sisters; brothers-in-law and sisters-in-law; and to the Yang, Vue, Vang, Xiong, and Lee families: Aunties, Uncles, and my first cousin's brothers and sisters.

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CULTURAL AND GENDER SHIFTS: TRENDS AND FACTORS HMONG MALE STUDENTS FACE IN PURSUIT OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Abstract

By Sai Yang Xiong

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2022

The educational trends in the attainment of Hmong American students in higher education have grown significantly over the past 40+ years. However, modern academia is still somewhat new to most United States Hmong refugees since their resettlement in 1975 after the Vietnam War. Hmong students are children of refugee immigrants who came to the United States with no formal schooling, limited English proficiency, and a low-socioeconomic background. Hmong parents believe that having an education will enable their children to seek employment, perform well in society, and gain financial stability. The purpose of this study was to analyze challenges that contribute to Hmong male students with the aim to understand how factors such as education, cultural influences, and life challenges impact the low educational attainment of Hmong male students in college. The research examined (a) How do traditional cultural factors and contributing life challenges affect Hmong male students' education? and (b) What educational challenges are perceived by Hmong male students as they navigate higher education?

The qualitative phenomenological research captured the narrative experiences of Hmong male students in the pursuit of higher education. This study also provides insights and recommendations for colleges and universities to develop strategies to increase retention and academic success for Hmong male students' educational attainment.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

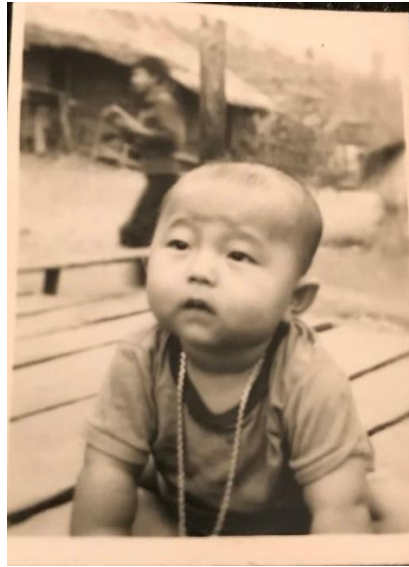


Figure 1. Sai Yang Xiong in 1979.

The reason for pursuing higher education is to obtain knowledge, employment, and financial stability. Hmong American families' common belief is that an educational degree will help open opportunities to achieve the American Dream. Figure 1 is a picture of me in 1979 at 8 months before departing for the United States on May 10, 1980. My college journey and the experience of being the first person and first-generation male in my family to pursue higher education inspired me to research the experiences and factors Hmong male students face in pursuit of higher education. Growing up in a traditional Hmong family with 10 siblings, and being the oldest and first son in the family, I had to take on many responsibilities. Being the first to go to school, I had to ensure I did well and was a good role model for my siblings, who would follow in my footsteps. My parents and grandparents set high expectations, and the pressure of going to college and obtaining the American Dream was always there. College was difficult because my family did not understand the experience and the challenges I had to go through.

However, no matter how difficult the path was, I had to ensure I found a way to succeed because I had so many people relying on me. As a Hmong doctoral student and a student services professional in academia, I continue to see the low educational attainment among Hmong males in higher education. I hope this study helps expand literature, educates society, and fills the gaps on how to support Hmong male students in higher education.

Hmong have been living in the United States for the past 40+ years. The educational trends in the attainment of Hmong American students' attendance in higher education have grown significantly over the years. However, higher education is still new to the Hmong people since their resettlement into the United States in 1975. According to the United States Census (2013) *American Fact Finder: 2013 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates*, the general population in the United States with a bachelor's degree was 18.4%, while those with a graduate or professional degree was 11.2%. For Hmong alone, 13.2% held a bachelor's degree while 3.1% held a graduate or professional degree, with 15.4% being male and 17.1% being female (see Table 1).

Table 1

Educational Attainment of Hmong Population 25 Years and Over Theoretical Framework

Subject	United States			
	Total population		Hmong alone or in any combination (422) & (100-299) or (300, A01-299) or (400-999)	
	Estimate	Margin of Error	Estimate	Margin of Error
EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT				
Population 25 years and over	210,910,615	+/-70,550	122,118	+/-7,319
Less than high school diploma	13.4%	+/-0.1	30.2%	+/-2.3
High school graduate (includes equivalency)	27.8%	+/-0.1	24.9%	+/-1.9
Some college or associate's degree	29.2%	+/-0.1	28.6%	+/-2.2
Bachelor's degree	18.4%	+/-0.1	13.2%	+/-1.7
Graduate or professional degree	11.2%	+/-0.1	3.1%	+/-0.8
High school graduate or higher	86.6%	+/-0.1	69.8%	+/-2.3
Male, high school graduate or higher	85.9%	+/-0.1	74.6%	+/-3.3
Female, high school graduate or higher	87.2%	+/-0.1	65.4%	+/-2.7
Bachelor's degree or higher	29.6%	+/-0.1	16.3%	+/-1.9
Male, bachelor's degree or higher	29.6%	+/-0.1	15.4%	+/-2.4
Female, bachelor's degree or higher	29.7%	+/-0.1	17.1%	+/-2.4

Note. From “American Fact Finder: 2013 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates,” by United States Census, 2013, p. 3.

According to the United States Census Bureau (2013a, as cited in C. D. Vang, 2017), there was an important shift in educational attainment of bachelor's degree from 2000 to 2013 by gender; Hmong women who earned a bachelor's degree increased from 8% to 14.7% while there was a decrease from 18.6% to 13.5% in Hmong men earning a bachelor's degree (p. 9).

Hmong in the United States: Awaiting Challenges

Historically, Hmong lived in Laos, Vietnam and Thailand due to not having a country of their own (Tatman, 2004). During the Vietnam War, Hmong were recruited by the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to fight against the Northern Vietnamese military. Hmong soldiers and their families were promised to be protected and receive assistance from the United States if they helped fight against the North Vietnamese military (Tsai, 2000). When the United States military withdrew from the war in 1975, Hmong were abandoned and forced to survive the North Vietnamese military (Swirkowski, 1997). According to the Minnesota Historical Society

(n.d.), The 1980 Refugee Act standardized resettlement services and allowed passage for Hmong refugees to immigrate to the United States for helping the United States in the Vietnam War. Resettlement sponsorships to the United States, France, Australia, and Canada took years (Lor, 2013; Tsai, 2000). According to the recent United States Census Bureau (2020), it is estimated that 323,156 Hmong live in the United States, with the two largest populations living in California (95,738) and in Minnesota (91,051). Resettlement gave Hmong a sense of freedom, but many challenges awaited them, including learning how to adjust to a new living environment, adapting to the American culture, and learning English.

Researchers indicate that Hmong students face various challenges, such as poverty and limited English skills, because of the cultural barriers to academic success (Ngo & Leet-Otley, 2011). Many Hmong students are fluent in their language and start school preliterate with no academic experience, placing them at a disadvantage in the classroom (C. T. Vang, 2005). Not being familiar with the educational system and not having the basic communication skills, many Hmong students were not able to talk to professors, teachers, and peers about their course materials (Lor, 2008). Hmong students are faced with the difficulties of adjusting to the mainstream culture while trying to maintain and respect their parental cultural beliefs (Supple et al., 2010). Hmong parents think acquiring an education will assist their children in gaining employment and performing well in society (C. T. Vang, 2005). Hmong students may deny the challenges they are having in school because they do not want to make mistakes; failure brings shame to their families (C. T. Vang, 2003).

Hmong continue living in poverty despite how long they have been in the United States. Data from 2015 show that compared to all Americans and Asians, all Hmong continue to be ranked as the highest percentage living in poverty (see Figures 2 and 3; Pew Research Center,

2017). Out of all Americans living in the United States in 2015, 15.1% of Americans were living in poverty, whereas 28.3% of Hmong were living in poverty (see Figure 2). Out of all Americans living in the United States in 2019, 13% of Americans were living in poverty, whereas 17% of Hmong were living in poverty (see Figure 3).

U.S. Hmong population living in poverty, 2015

Chart
Data
Share
Embed

% living in poverty

Group	All Americans	All Asians	All Hmong
All	15.1%	12.1%	28.3%
U.S. born	14.7%	11.2%	29.1%
Foreign born	17.8%	12.8%	27.0%

Figure 2. United States Hmong population living in poverty, 2015. From U.S. Hmong Population Living in Poverty, 2015, by Pew Research Center, 2017.

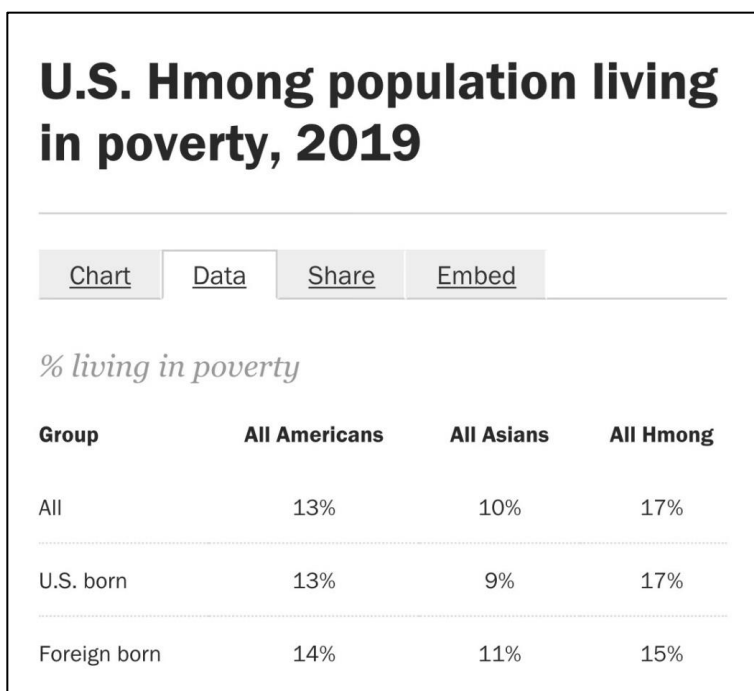


Figure 3. United States Hmong population living in poverty, 2019. From *U.S. Hmong Population Living in Poverty, 2015*, by Pew Research Center, 2017.

Hmong parents living in poverty do not have adequate financial resources to help support their children in higher education and rely on financial aid. According to the *State of Higher Education for Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander Californians* (Campaign for College Opportunity, 2022), “Hmong students had the highest rate of Pell-Grant receipt in the CSU, with 80% of Hmong freshmen eligible for the grants” (p. 58). Hmong parents are worried about the impact on their children’s future because of living in poverty and not being able to pay for their children's education (C. T. Vang, 2005). Financial aid helps Hmong students attend college by offering scholarships, work-study programs, and grants to help cover tuition, room and board, books and supplies, and meals (Lor, 2008).

The model minority myth helps us understand that though many mainstream Asian-Americans thrive, other Asian subgroups are struggling to meet the demands of academia. The myth portrays Asians as typically successful. Although the model minority myth is sometimes

regarded as a positive notion, it has been linked to a number of negative consequences (Museus & Kiang, 2009). The overarching belief of the model minority myth within Southeast Asian refugee groups who entered the United States from the 1970s to the 1990s was that they did well educationally and economically (Pak et al., 2014). Despite the increasing graduating rates of Asian American students, many educators and lawmakers do not know much about the struggles students face while pursuing higher education. Hmong students are faced with cultural and structural barriers, revealing a reality that counters the model minority myth (Lee, 2007).

Statement of the Problem

Education is seen as a gateway to financial stability and employment opportunities in mainstream America for Hmong males and their families. Higher education attainment highlights an increasing rate of Hmong student graduates, but there is a disparity between Hmong female and male students. Why are both genders given the same opportunity, and more females than males are progressing and graduating, creating a gender shift in the Hmong community? As of today, limited studies and literature focus on Hmong male students' educational attainment.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to analyze factors that contribute to Hmong male students with the aim of understanding how factors such as education, cultural influences, and life challenges contribute to the low educational attainment of Hmong male students in college.

Research Questions

The following two research questions guided this narrative inquiry regarding Hmong male students' educational experience:

1. How do traditional cultural factors and contributing life challenges affect Hmong male students' education?
2. What educational challenges are perceived by Hmong male students as they navigate higher education?

Significance of the Study

Since the resettlement of the Hmong in the United States, researchers have conducted studies on family, culture, K-12 level, and Hmong female college students' experience but not specifically on Hmong males. Literature on Hmong shows that Hmong Americans experience many obstacles in their educational attainment (Ngo & Lee, 2007). Hmong parents and students believe that pursuing higher education is the key to unlocking doors and helping them climb the socioeconomic ladder in society regardless of their current status (C. T. Vang, 2005). The research questions analyze the factors that affect Hmong male student attainment of an undergraduate degree. With minimal research written about Hmong male students in higher education, this study provides insights and recommendations for colleges and universities to help better support the retention and academic success of Hmong male students.

Methodology

The qualitative phenomenological research used in this study captured narrative experiences to understand the Hmong male students in their pursuit of higher education. Phenomenology focuses on people's experience in their engagement with their interpersonal actions and orientations (Roberts, 2010). By using this design, Hmong male students were given

a voice to express their perspectives and points of view, providing a rich, in-depth contextual understanding of their educational journey.

Theoretical Framework

Critical race theory (CRT) was the theoretical framework used in this study. CRT focuses on the ethnic studies notions of each group and situation centered on cultural and group cohesion (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). CRT provided the framework through the foundational lens of storytelling/counter-stories to help analyze the narrative experiences of Hmong American male students' attendance in higher education. CRT provided a framework that allowed the students to disclose the experiences, cultural values, and barriers they face in pursuing their education. College institutions can understand the stories of Hmong male students to help better support them.

Delimitations

The student participants in this research were delimited to Hmong male students attending Northern California State (a pseudonym for the study site). This study addresses the Hmong male students' experiences and how education, cultural influences, and life challenges impact them in obtaining an undergraduate degree. Due to the vast research on Hmong female students in higher education, this research only focused on Hmong male students. As Hmong females continue to excel in higher education attainment, Hmong males continue to struggle, and the percentage of Hmong males continues to decline.

Definition of Terms

The following key term definitions clarify the concepts used in this study:

Academic Success

Academic success describes those students doing well and on track to graduate on time.

Educational Attainment

Educational attainment depicts the highest level of education or degree completed (United States Census Bureau, 2016a).

First-Generation Student

The first person in the family to attend college when their parents did not complete a 4-year college degree.

Hmong

An Asian ethnic minority group that originated from China and immigrated to the United States from Laos due to “the Secret War” during the Vietnam War (K. Yang, 2001).

Hmong American

An Asian ethnic Hmong descent group either born or raised in the United States.

***Hu Plig* (pronounced who plee)**

A ceremony ritual performed by a shaman chanting, offering food, calling the soul of the individual whose spirit has been frightened, who has been sick, and or recovering from an illness.

Low Socioeconomic

Describes the social status of those eligible to receive public assistance or government support due to inadequate income.

“Model Minority Myth”

A positive stereotype related to naturally gifted, hard-working, and passive social indicators that all Asians have no issues in school and succeed academically (Pak et al., 2014).

Saib

Saib means go look.

Tshuab Qeej

Blowing of a free-reed aerophone bamboo sacred instrumental pipe used for cultural ceremonial events.

Ua Neeb

A ceremonial healing procedure that treats a variety of health conditions requiring spiritually focused concerns that only a shaman is capable of completing.

Summary

For the past 40+ years, Hmong male students’ complexities and challenges pursuing an undergraduate degree continue to be an ongoing work in progress. Today, colleges and

universities play an essential role in the lives of many Hmong male students and their families. This qualitative study sought to assist college administrators, faculty, and staff in understanding the challenges Hmong male students face and how institutions can provide the necessary resources to aid success in academia. Obtaining a college degree is an advancement for Hmong male students and their families to achieve financial stability in the United States.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter reviews the literature beginning with an overview of the historical background and resettlement of Hmong in the United States. The next section discusses the acculturation challenges of living in the United States with intergenerational strains, gender differences, and roles and responsibilities. After that, the next four sections provide information on challenges for those in pursuit of higher education with low-socioeconomic status, language barriers, educational support services, educational attainment trends, and the model minority myth. Lastly, this chapter concludes with an explanation of critical race theory (CRT) in education through the theoretical lens of storytelling/counter-stories.

Historical Background and Resettlement in the United States



Figure 4. Fuesai family migration from Laos to Thailand in March 1979. Permission to use this picture from author's grandfather Chang Xue Lee.

Hmong origin dates back to 5,000 BCE in central China before the migration into the mountains of Laos in the early 19th century (Minnesota Historical Society, n.d.). Thousands of families embarked on a historic journey to the mouths of the major rivers, constantly traveling across the mountains and defending themselves to stay free men and women while walking with the clothes on their backs, holding their children, and pushing cattle and horses. Their arrival in Laos took place between 1810 and 1820, and they believed they had discovered a life of dignity for themselves and their descendants (Catlin et al., 1982). Hmong lived in the highlands of Laos, surrounded by mountains, residing in poverty, and relied on the natural habitat resources for survival. Hmong were farmers who grew their crops and raised livestock.

From the early 1960s to 1975, Hmong were recruited by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to fight in the Secret War. It is called “The Secret War” because the CIA hid its involvement from the United States Congress and the American public due to the treaty’s terms not allowing the United States to have American soldiers in Laos (K. Yang, 2001). The CIA employed Hmong men of various ages to fight against the communist North Vietnamese during the war. The Hmong fought to protect their homeland, and the CIA provided reassurance that if their efforts ever failed, the Hmong would be supported by the United States as compensation for their military service (Tsai, 2000). The North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao Communists took control of Laos 2 years after the United States ended its involvement in the Vietnam War in 1973. The Hmong, who were suspected of being United States spies, became unwelcome and were forced to leave Laos to avoid persecution (Vang & Flores, 1999). As a result, Hmong military officers and their families were evacuated to the United States. However, only a small minority of Hmong people were forcibly removed from their homes. Thousands of Hmong

people were forced to flee to Thailand's refugee camps, where they spent years before being allowed to immigrate to the United States and other nations (Tsai, 2000).



Figure 5. Soptuang Refugee Camp in Thailand 1979. This picture was taken by Fuesai family members.

Hmong encountered challenges, hardships, and unexpected events (Lor, 2008). Hmong people did not want to leave Laos, which they had fought so hard for and for whom they had lost so much blood (Catlin et al., 1982). In 1975, Hmong evacuated and escaped to Thailand on their own to get to refugee camps (Minnesota Historical Society, n.d.). Living in refugee camps, families endured demanding acculturation and survival conditions (Vang & Flores, 1999). The refugee camps in Thailand had no electricity, running water, or sewage disposal and were severely overcrowded (Siegel & McSilver, 2009). Many Hmong resettled in the United States, leaving their homeland of Laos (C. T. Vang, 2005). Ngo and Lee (2007) stated:

The first wave (1975-1979) was composed of members of the educated elite, professionals, and those who worked closely with the U.S. military. Second-wave refugees (1979-1982) were primarily family members of first-wave immigrants who were educated and had above average economic and social resources. The third-wave refugees (1982-present) lived for many years in refugee camps in Thailand before immigrating to the United States. This third wave was composed primarily of Hmong and Lowland Lao (the largest population in Laos), who worked as subsistence farmers and were the least educated of the Southeast Asian refugees. Third-wave refugees generally had lower English proficiency, less experience with formal education, and fewer transferable skills. In this article, when referring to Southeast Asian Americans, we are referring to Cambodian, Vietnamese, Hmong, and Lao Americans. (p. 418)

The resettlement and adjustment to the United States have created ongoing challenges for the Hmong since their arrival (Lee, 1997; Lor, 2013; C. T. Vang, 2005). Hmong came to the United States as refugees at the end of the Vietnam War in the mid-1980s. Unlike other Asian Communities such as Chinese, Japanese, and Filipinos, Hmong did not immigrate voluntarily for economic purposes (Tsai, 2000). Researchers have showcased the social and cultural experience of the Hmong journey into the United States during the resettlement transitions. In exchange for the Hmong involvement in helping the United States in the Vietnam War, Hmong were given resettlement in the United States. Once in the United States, Hmong people had to relocate multiple times in order to reunite their families and clans. After settling in and becoming acquainted with their new surroundings, they began a secondary migration based on housing, work, and closeness to family and friends (Vang & Flores, 1999). According to 2010 United States Census (as cited in Hmong National Development, 2013), 260,073 persons of Hmong origin were living in the 50 United States. The Hmong population in the United States expanded by 97% between 1990 and 2000 (p. 9). Figure 6 illustrates the Hmong population distributed across the United States and regions from 1990 through 2010.

**Hmong Population
United States and Regional Distributions, 1990-2010**

	1990 Hmong Pop.	2000 Hmong Pop.	2010 Hmong Pop.	% Change 1990- 2000	% Change 2000- 2010	% Change 1990- 2010	1990 % of U.S. Hmong Pop.	2000 % U.S. Hmong Pop.	2010 % U.S. Hmong Pop.
United States	94,439	186,310	260,073	97%	40%	175%	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.
Northeast	1,941	3,781	3,860	71%	16%	99%	2.0%	2.0%	1.5%
South	1,272	11,645	24,230	714%	134%	1805%	1.3%	6.2%	9.3%
Midwest	38,796	91,034	126,713	115%	52%	227%	41.1%	48.9%	48.7%
West	52,430	79,850	105,270	38%	46%	101%	55.5%	42.9%	40.5%

US Census Bureau, 1990 Census
 US Census Bureau, 2000 Census, Summary File 1, PCT 1
 US Census Bureau, 2010 Census, Summary File 1, PCT 7

Figure 6. How the Hmong population is distributed in the United States. From *The State of the Hmong American Community 2013*, by Hmong National Development, 2013.



Figure 7. Author’s family in Spokane, Washington 1981. This picture was taken by our family sponsors.

Acculturating Challenges Living in the United States

The Hmong came from a preliterate society and rural background where they went through multiple acculturation barriers and much culture shock (K. Yang, 2001). The primary resettlement of Hmong people in the United States was limited to Alaska, Alabama, California, Colorado, Indiana, Illinois, Kansas, Ohio, Oregon, Oklahoma, Minnesota, Montana, Michigan, Rhode Island, Texas, Washington, and Wisconsin because of the availability of sponsorships (Vang & Flores, 1999). Adapting to a new cultural environment in mainstream America posed a significant challenge to the Hmong due to their traditional coping skills and customs. These cultural differences, combined with a lack of vocational skills and inadequate educational preparation, have contributed to numerous acculturation issues, including high unemployment, poverty, a high rate of welfare participation, a significant generation gap, youth gangs, role change and conflict, and mental health and medical issues (K. Yang, 2001). The biggest challenges Hmong refugees faced then and now relate to learning and gaining the linguistic and occupational skills needed to achieve economic self-sufficiency in society (Catlin et al., 1982).

Intergenerational Strains

Immigrant Hmong parents who migrated to the United States continue to hold their traditional way of life even today, 40+ years after leaving their homeland. The Hmong parents emphasized the necessity of preserving Hmong culture and religious traditions to sustain a Hmong identity (C. D. Vang, 2017). Asian parents who immigrate to the United States are more likely to maintain their homeland's lifestyle, beliefs, traditions, and customs and are less likely to accept the norm in American society when it comes to raising their children. Children, on the other hand, are more likely to acculturate, as they are influenced by their peers, school, media, and society as a whole (Lee et al., 2009). Many Hmong parents are slower to acculturate than

their children due to having no formal education, lack of English language, and limited knowledge about the educational system (Xiong & Lee, 2011). Hmong parents appear to be culturally stagnant and unable to acculturate at the same rate as their children. Role reversal occurs within the family circle as a result of children's significant changes (C. T. Vang, 2005). Hmong parents worry their children will no longer continue the traditional upbringing and ignore their cultural beliefs; therefore, they try to enforce strict expectations on their children (Lee et al., 2009). Changes can bring intergenerational tension, such as losing control, family separation, and humiliation, between parents and children (C. T. Vang, 2005).

Gender Differences

As Hmong gender roles shift over time, the dynamic expectation causes conflict between mothers and fathers and their sons and daughters (Lee et al., 2009). In the Hmong society, the expectations are that Hmong boys start understanding the cultural expectations, such as being the breadwinners, protectors, leaders, and pillars of the family (K. Yang, 1997). Hmong parents have different expectations for daughters and sons and are more controlling of their daughters' lives (Lee et al., 2009). Male children will be the primary caregivers for their parents and elders and will continue to honor their parents and ancestors in the afterlife (K. Yang, 1997). The sons carry the family's name and are given higher status over the daughters (Lee, 1997). Hmong parents always guard the status and innocence of their daughters because they want their daughters to marry into the right family to have a good life. Daughters are viewed as outsiders once they get married because their in-laws become their immediate family, and the in-laws are responsible for looking after the daughters. Hmong sons are raised in homes where they are expected to be the ones in charge of the family based on their gender (Abidia, 2016).

Roles and Responsibilities

Hmong students are expected to maintain gender responsibilities and obligations enforced by their parents, which impact students' academics and states of mind (C. T. Vang, 2005; Xiong & Lam, 2013). Hmong parents want their children to succeed in education in order to gain financial stability. However, they hold higher standards for their sons over their daughters (Lee, 1997). The patriarchal structure of the family determines how Hmong men and women are viewed in a society where Hmong men are considered the heads of the household (C. T. Vang, 2005). Hmong men are customarily the financial providers for their families (Tatman, 2004; Thao, 2004). Hmong men have control and are respected in the community with or without an education, whereas Hmong women have to become educated to gain respect (Lee, 1997).

Hmong women's roles and responsibilities are having children, staying at home, and attending to all domestic duties (Lor, 2013). Hmong daughters face ongoing social and cultural obstacles in pursuing higher education (Lee, 1997); they have more issues with their parents because of the strict control and different expectations compared to Hmong sons (Lee et al., 2009). Hmong daughters are pressured to get married because of the cultural norms in Hmong society (Lee, 1997; Lor, 2013). If a Hmong daughter is not married by the age of 18, she is viewed as someone who has passed her prime and is not good enough for marriage. For independence and financial advancement, Hmong women pursue higher education and hold off on marriage (Lee, 1997). Education plays an essential factor in social change for women, allowing them to gain independence and gender equality (Lee, 1997; Lor, 2013; C. T. Vang, 2005).

Over time, Hmong women excel in higher education, and Hmong men continue to face academic obstacles and cultural barriers in pursuit of obtaining undergraduate degrees. Hmong

men's goals and academic achievements are important for gaining financial stability and respect within the Hmong community (Lee, 1997; C. T. Vang, 2005).

Challenges in the Pursuit of Higher Education

Living in Laos, Hmong were mostly self-sufficient farmers who farmed at the tops of the mountains and had no formal education (Lee & Green, 2008). In the United States, Hmong parents are not aware of the challenges of seeking an education without an educational background. Living in the land of freedom, Hmong parents believe that obtaining an education will help their children find employment opportunities and perform well in society. The expectation from Hmong parents is for their children to pursue higher education, as it is the gateway to and primary reason for financial stability (Lee, 1997; C. T. Vang, 2005). Hmong parents believe higher education will provide their children with the job skills they need to enter the workforce, as well as the intellectual and cultural abilities they need to survive in society. When their children are not accepted into a college or do not find employment afterward, they are faced with a harsh reality (C. T. Vang, 2005). Hmong students are faced with barriers including low-socioeconomic status, language struggles, lack of an educational support system, education attainment trends, and the model minority myth.

Low-Socioeconomic Status

Many Hmong parents cannot provide financial support to assist their children who are seeking higher education. Hmong parents have difficulty seeking employment due to a lack of education, language barriers, and the ability to meet the physical need for laborious jobs. Hmong families know the difficulties and challenges of acculturation are a result of poverty. In the Hmong community, education and employment are highly desirable; and financial struggles push students to do well in school (F. Vang, 2015). Since many Hmong parents do not have adequate

financial resources to assist their children, Hmong children rely on financial aid to pay for school tuition (Lor, 2008). Based on the 2010 United States Census, reported by the Hmong National Development (2013), Table 2 indicates a family of four making under \$23,050 per year is thought to be living in poverty. One quarter, 25%, of Hmong families live in poverty, and the most disadvantaged families in both the United States and the Hmong population are headed by female single parents (Hmong National Development, 2013). The largest states in which Hmong families live and reside in poverty are California with 30.7%, Minnesota with 26.2%, and Wisconsin with 20.3%.

Table 2

Poverty Status Among Hmong Families and Children Under 18

State	All Families	Under 18 years
AK	59.1%	52.0%
AR	20.8%	30.8%
CA	30.7%	41.9%
CO	2.0%	3.0%
GA	4.9%	15.2%
MI	16.0%	17.5%
MN	26.2%	34.6%
NC	20.0%	21.5%
OK	42.0%	58.8%
OR	21.5%	20.1%
WA	34.0%	50.2%
WI	20.3%	21.0%

Note. From *The State of The Hmong American Community*, by Hmong National Development, 2013, United States Census, p. 26.

Language Barriers

Language is a challenge Hmong students face in school. Many Hmong students' parents are refugees who came to this country with no formal schooling and limited English proficiency. Due to limited English proficiency, Hmong students encounter educational challenges in

academia at an early age (C. T. Vang, 2005). Hmong students were identified as limited English proficient (LEP) and were put into English as a second language (ESL) classes, where they became academically segregated (A. T. Vang, 1999). Schools' placement of Hmong students into LEP and ESL programs is based on the perception that they would not be educated enough to attend higher education even if they desired, with the expectation that they would not attend college (C. T. Vang, 2005). Hmong students would transition better into higher education if institutions were aware of the barriers and issues they face with language (Lew et al., 2005; Lor, 2008; C. T. Vang, 2005). Hmong students' lack of English abilities places them at a disadvantage in academia, as they lack the support at home and struggle to receive resources at school, being overlooked on a macro-level. Hmong students struggle in the classroom and have difficulty understanding the curriculum (C. T. Vang, 2005). Language barriers can cause students to avoid taking courses that require profound English fluency and, thus, can affect career decision-making and long-term goals (Lew et al., 2005). Low scholastic achievement, low test scores, and insufficient credits are due to their English deficiencies (C. T. Vang, 2005).

Educational Support Services

Hmong parental support comprises traditional therapeutic encouragement, inspiration, and emotional and spiritual methods (Lor, 2008; Tatman, 2004). Many Hmong parents are not able to inform their children of the difficulties they will face when pursuing higher education because of lacking the educational background (A. T. Vang, 1999). Students are faced with academic challenges undermining their abilities. Hmong students rarely seek assistance or talk about their academic struggles because of viewing teachers as authority figures (C. T. Vang, 2003). Institutions can implement support services to enhance students' learning environment by providing counseling services, faculty and peer support, educational conferences, and workshops

(Gardner, 2005). Academic counselors play an essential role in students' development towards graduation success as they help students develop educational plans outlining what courses to take and share resources students can use to develop leadership skills and grow as individuals (Lor, 2008; Xiong & Lam, 2013). Students also value professors who encourage and support their academics by creating a welcoming environment during office hours and class and providing additional times to help them understand course content (Gardner, 2005; Lor, 2008). Peer support helps minimize loneliness and isolation and offers emotional support (Gardner, 2005; Xiong & Lam, 2013).

Educational Attainment Trends

Higher education has increasingly become something many Hmong students pursue after graduating high school. Hmong men and women differ in educational attainment, and these differences change over time. Xiong (2012) cited United States Census Bureau data (2000), as illustrated in Figure 8, comparing three levels (high school, associates, and bachelor's degree) of academic accomplishment over the years. From 1990 to 2010, more women attended higher education and achieved a degree.

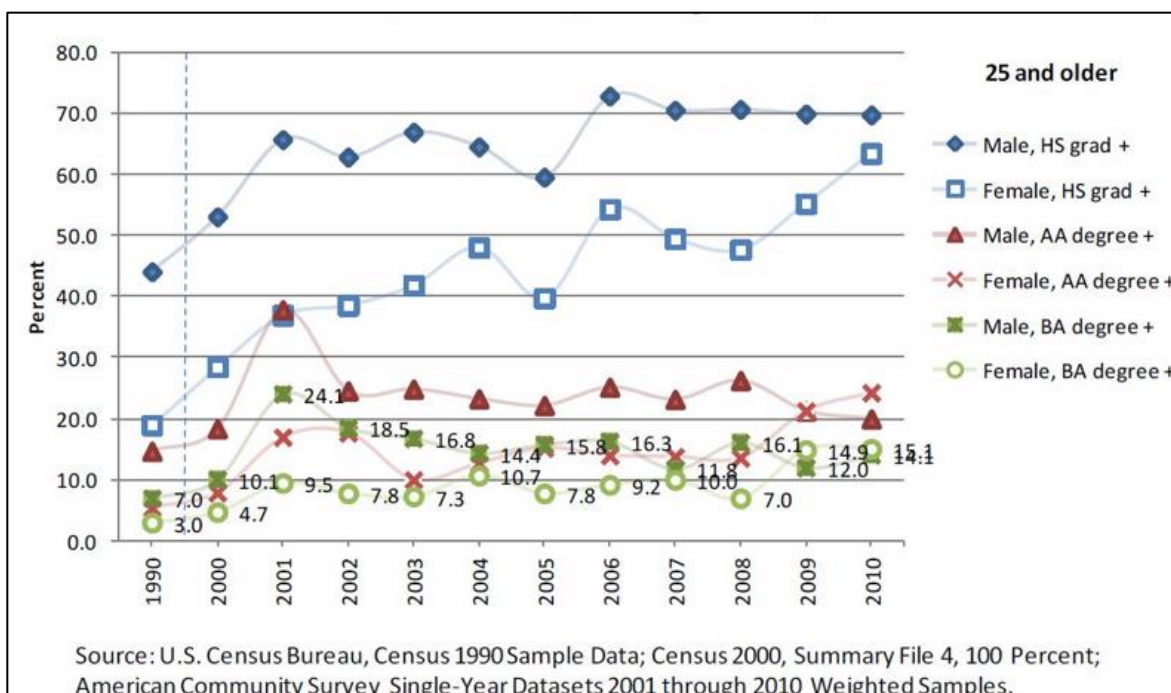


Figure 8. Trends in educational attainment by sex, education level, and year (Hmong alone). From “Hmong Americans’ Educational Attainment: Recent Changes and Remaining Challenges,” by Y. S. Xiong, 2012, *Hmong Studies Journal*, 13(2), 1-18, p. 10.

Hmong women continue to face challenging obstacles as they continue to obtain gender equality in the pursuit of higher education and the Hmong community. Hmong women’s goals and academic achievements are essential to gaining financial stability and respect within the Hmong community (Lee, 1997; C. T. Vang, 2005). Hmong women continue to move steadily upward in education attainment whereas Hmong men slowly move upward. According to Pfeifer (2014), the *Hmong Americans in the 2013 American Community Survey* indicated there was an educational attainment shift in gender for a bachelor’s degree or higher; 17.1% of Hmong women earned a bachelor’s degree compared to 15.4% of Hmong men.

Model Minority Myth

The model minority myth portrays Asian Americans as high achievers in education and hardworking; therefore, they are seen as role models for other racial minority groups (Wing,

2007). An overarching belief of the model minority myth within the Southeast Asian refugee groups who entered the United States between 1970 and 1990 was generalized assumed all Asians did well educationally and economically (Pak et al., 2014). Although the model minority myth is sometimes regarded as a positive notion, it has been linked to a number of negative consequences (Museus & Kiang, 2009). The stereotype portrays Asian American students as naturally talented, persevering, and socially thriving; several researchers have uncovered the fact that these students face multiple obstacles (Pak et al., 2014). According to Wing (2007), the five most common stereotypes are:

- All Asian students are high academic achievers. As a group, they outperform White students.
- Asians naturally excel at math.
- All Asian families highly value education.
- All Asians are alike in culture, language, appearance, and academic achievement.
- Asians do not suffer racial discrimination like other people of color.

Asian Americans have suffered as a result of model minority stereotypes in higher education because Asian American students are portrayed as problem-free high achievers. Hence, higher education institutions tend to overlook the real challenges the students face (Suzuki, 2002). Different elements can affect Asian American students' achievement levels academically. Although some Asian American students meet the model minority perception, many students are in jeopardy of not graduating from college because of the individual, family, school, and community influences (Museus & Kiang, 2009). As Escueta and O'Brien (1991) explained, more than 28 different Asian American groups show academic achievement, but some groups are underrepresented.

Hmong “Minorities in Higher Education”

The distinctions between Hmong and mainstream American cultures have been interpreted as those between a premodern and modern society. The Hmong culture consists of preliterate, rural, patriarchal, and traditional upbringings (Ngo & Lee, 2007). Hmong and Southeast Asian American populations have the lowest rates of higher education compared to their East and South Asian American counterparts (Museus & Kiang, 2009). The stereotype of Asian Americans excelling in school ignores the diversity of refugee waves and the recent influx of Southeast Asian ethnic groups (Ngo & Lee, 2007). There are substantial gaps in higher education, illustrated a lack of understanding of Asian American students’ diverse academic experiences (Poon et al., 2016). The racialization of Asian Americans combining all Asian groups in the United States into a single, high-achieving category, disaggregated group indicates significant differences (Ngo & Lee, 2007). Figure 9 illustrates the racial and ethnic categorization of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders.

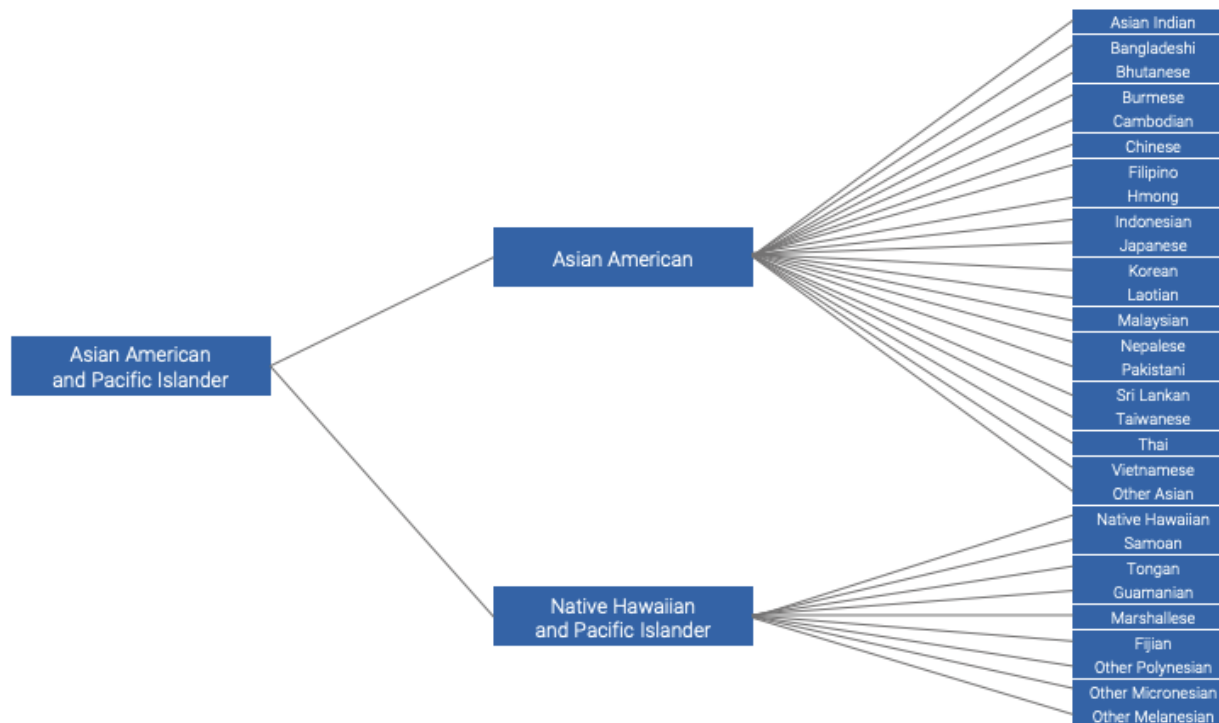


Figure 9. Racial and ethnic categorization of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. From Significant Disproportionality in Special Education: Trends Among Asian Students, by National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2020, p. 2.

The model minority stereotype not only idealizes what kind of immigrant is "better," but it also pushes certain groups of immigrants and communities of color against one another, obscuring the vast diversity of experiences, histories, struggles, and needs among Asian Americans and Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders (AAPI; The Campaign for College Opportunity, 2022). According to the National Center for Learning Disabilities (2020), Hmong are behind their Asian American southeast subgroups, with 37.9% of Hmong having less than a high school diploma and 14.7% having a bachelor's degree or higher. Figure 10 indicates that though AAPI students may be succeeding overall in public schools, Southeast Asian students may be disproportionately struggling.

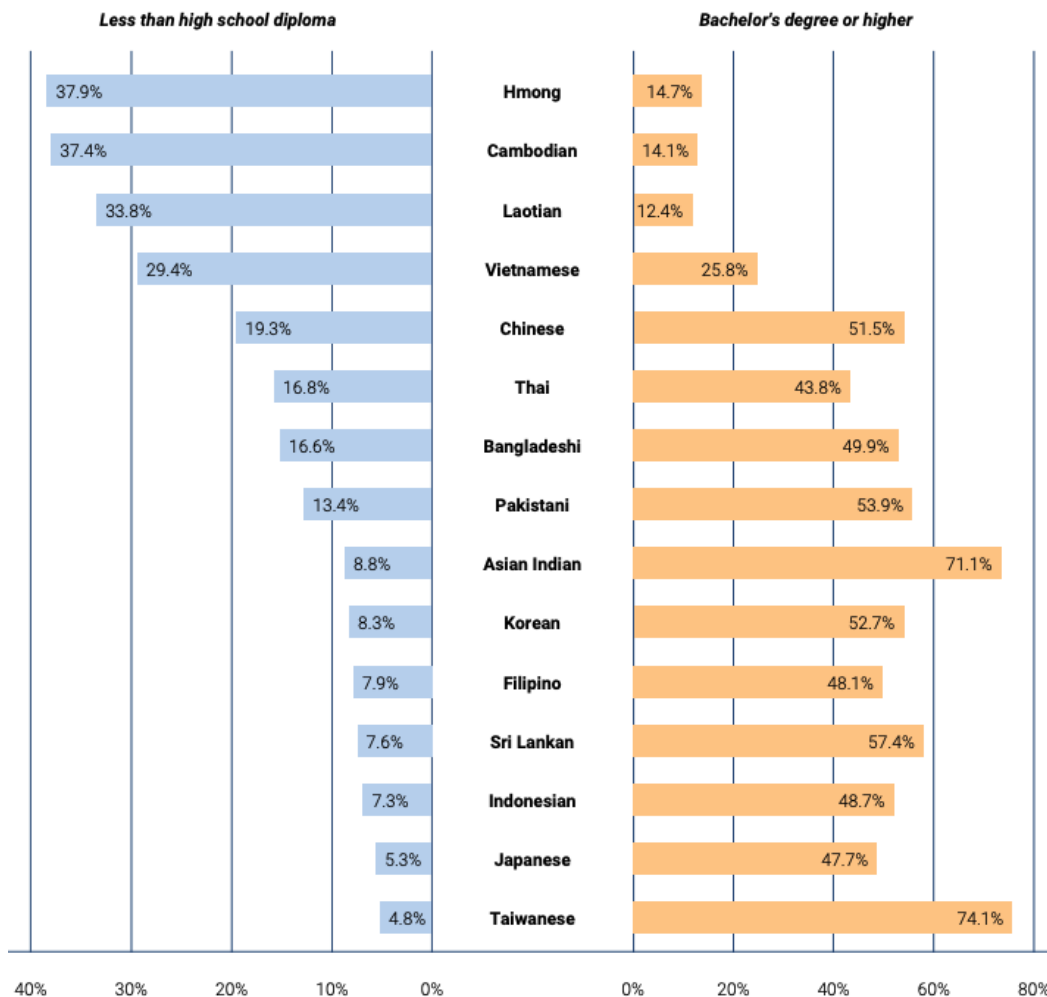


Figure 10. Educational attainment for Asian American subgroups, 2008-2010. From *Significant Disproportionality in Special Education: Trends Among Asian Students*, by National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2020, p. 3.

Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory (CRT) was used to examine the factors influencing Hmong male students' educational attainment and understand the life stories of Hmong male college students. CRT narrative inquiry framework allowed participants to tell stories of their lived education experience at Northern California State (a pseudonym for the study site). CRT was developed during the transformative Civil Rights Movement era of the 1960s from the early work of Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, and Richard Delgado (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Hiraldo, 2010).

CRT was created in the 1970s by numerous academic scholars with legal, activist, and academic backgrounds who understood theories and approaches were required to confront America's racist practices (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). CRT arose as a formal body of inquiry in the mid-1970s, with origins in anthropology, sociology, history, philosophy, and politics. Additionally, CRT expands on a body of literature in law, sociology, history, ethnic studies, and women's studies (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). In the 1990s, CRT achieved widespread acceptance in the legal profession and has evolved since then (Mitchell & Stewart, 2011). CRT respects and insists on the inclusion of people of color's and historically marginalized populations' lived experiences as credible evidence in the study of law, education, and society (Wong et al., 2018). CRT has established a claim on a unique approach that combines existing historiographies, literary and narrative analyses, and legal case studies, all of which are inextricably linked to its ideological beliefs about race and racism (Fernández, 2002). CRT can be used to help identify "inequalities," structural impediments, and devaluation of education (Mitchell & Stewart, 2011).

Ledesema and Calderon (2015) defined CRT five tenets as:

(1) acknowledge the central and intersecting roles of racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of subordination in maintaining inequality in curricular structures, processes, and discourses; (2) challenge dominant social and cultural assumptions regarding culture and intelligence, language and capability, objectivity and meritocracy; (3) direct the formal curriculum toward goals of social justice and the hidden curriculum toward Freirean goals of critical consciousness; (4) develop counter-discourses through storytelling, narratives, chronicles, family histories, scenarios, biographies, and parables that draw on the lived experiences students of color bring to the classroom; and (5) utilize interdisciplinary methods of historical and contemporary analysis to articulate the linkages between educational and societal inequality. (p. 210)

However, this research primarily focused on Tenet 4 storytelling, narratives, and family histories on the life experiences of the students of color bring to the classroom. CRT was used to explain persistent social and educational issues of students related to their academics in higher education, looking into historically marginalized communities (Ledesema & Calderon, 2015). When it

comes to developing a more diverse and inclusive higher education institution, CRT can be crucial (Hiraldo, 2010).

Critical Race Theory: Narrative Storytelling / Counter-Storytelling

Storytelling is one of the forms of human expression, using told stories as a form of education, culture, and moral ideals (Lynn & Dixson, 2013). Storytelling is a methodology and practice that helps people express themselves in a dignified, healthy, and cultural manner in a racially oppressed environment fighting colorblindness (Khalifa et al., 2013). CRT storytelling functions as an interpretive tool where one can share their experience and provide increased awareness to help transform social action and empower people (Fernández, 2002). Bowman et al. (2009) added that CRT storytelling and counter-storytelling disclose the challenges people of color face in society based on the degree of power and authority. Three forms of counter-storytelling or counter-narratives are autobiographical narratives, biographical narratives, and composite narratives, providing evidence and analysis of people and communities who are marginalized in society (Wong et al., 2018). According to Rodriguez (2010), “Through storytelling, researchers can express empathy and build these relationships with marginalized students” (p. 494). There are unheard counter-stories within the histories and lives of people of color. These experiences can be strengthened through storytelling and counter-storytelling, which can assist in reinforcing social, political, and cultural survival (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Critical Race Theory in Education

Today many academic scholars identify as critical race theorist and use CRT theories to comprehend problems such as school hierarchy, tracking, affirmative action, high stakes testing, curriculum and history debates in schools (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). The use of counter-stories in higher education gives faculty, staff, and students of color a voice with which to share

their experiences; storytelling has been utilized to give marginalized people a voice to share their knowledge and experiences (Rodriguez, 2010). Counter-stories can help in analyzing the climate on a college campus and can lead to more research into how an institution can become inclusive (Hiraldo, 2010). The sharing of stories serves several objectives for people of color, including gaining a unique viewpoint at the cost of suffering from racism and injustice. CRT is used to challenge racial neutrality and impartiality in higher education, reflecting on recent contributions to higher education in CRT research (Ledeseema & Calderon, 2015).

The educational trends of Hmong American students in higher education have grown significantly over the past 40 years. Cultural and institutional factors play a part in Hmong male students' attainment of an undergraduate degree. The CRT theoretical framework helped in the examination of the factors influencing Hmong male students' educational attainment and clarified the life stories that contribute to why there is such low educational attainment for Hmong male college students. A CRT narrative inquiry framework allowed participants to tell stories of their lived education experience at Northern California State.

Summary

The literature articulates that even though Hmong have been residing in the United States for the past 40 years, the complexity and challenges of Hmong college students are an ongoing working process. Hmong male students still face multiple issues such as cultural challenges, low socioeconomic status, and intergenerational challenges and language barriers. Hmong students continue to focus on cultural adjustment and how to create a better life in the United States for themselves and their families. Older generations want to maintain traditional cultural values, while the younger generations seek self-sufficiency. As gender inequality slowly fades away, more Hmong women are pursuing higher education because parents are stepping outside the box

and allowing education equality for their sons and daughters. Hmong parents' cultural values and beliefs in the significance of obtaining a degree from a university play an essential role in the lives of many Hmong male students and their families. By understanding the challenges Hmong male students face while pursuing higher education, institutions can identify and provide the necessary resources to support their academic success. Obtaining a college degree is an advancement for Hmong male students and their families because of achieving one step closer to the American Dream.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes the methodology utilized to explore the factors and life experiences Hmong male students face in higher education and discusses the research design, the participant recruitment and selection, data collection, and data analysis. Finally, the chapter concludes with trustworthiness, ethical consideration, limitations, and a chapter summary.

Higher education serves as a means of upward mobility for many Hmong students and their families. There seems to be a shift in the demographic regarding Hmong males and females graduating from college. In the United States Census (2016b) report, *Educational Attainment in the United States: 2015*, for the population 25 years and over, out of 118,806 Hmong people, 7,501 Hmong males received a bachelor's degree, whereas 8,096 Hmong females received a bachelor's degree. As more Hmong male students enroll in higher education, it is vital to comprehend their educational factors and understand how to help support them in their education.

This qualitative study sought to better understand the trends and factors Hmong male students experience in pursuit of higher education. According to Creswell (2012), qualitative research is defined as an inquiry to understand, explore, and collect descriptive information from participants to analyze themes. A qualitative approach allowed Hmong male students to share their college experiences as they navigate higher education and enabled the researcher to research the problem using open-ended questions to explore this phenomenon further. Phenomenology is a type of qualitative study in which the researcher tries to discover how one or more people feel about a phenomenon. The goal is to access each participant's inner world in order to grasp their perspective and experience (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). Furthermore,

data are words that represent people's knowledge, ideas, emotions, and feelings, as well as thorough descriptions of their actions, behaviors, activities, and interpersonal relationships (Roberts, 2010).

My decision to use the phenomenological approach came from a desire to use a qualitative research inquiry method that allowed the researcher to explore, collect, and analyze data on the contributing factors and challenges Hmong male students encounter in pursuing higher education. A phenomenological study allowed Hmong male students in this research to share their lived experiences and their views about attending college and discuss any challenges they face while pursuing higher education. This phenomenological investigation addressed the following questions: What educational challenges are perceived by Hmong male students as they navigate higher education? and How do traditional cultural factors and contributing life challenges affect Hmong male students' education? The objective was to analyze what facilitates Hmong male students to understand how factors such as education, cultural influences, and life challenges contribute to the low educational attainment of Hmong male students in college.

Research Design

This qualitative phenomenological research study was designed to capture significant and descriptive experiences of the Hmong male students pursuing higher education. According to Creswell (2012), qualitative research explores a problem and develops a detailed understanding of a central phenomenon. The researcher reviewed the literature, justified the issues, and stated the purpose and research questions in a general and broad way to collect information for data analysis. The data were described and themes were discovered using text analysis then interpreted to create detailed views of the informants (Creswell, 2012). This qualitative

phenomenology study aimed to capture and obtain a deeper personal understanding of Hmong male student experiences and perceptions of the factors they faced, to explore their support systems, and to discover what made them decide to pursue higher education using interviews. I conducted the interviews via Zoom[®] with semi-structured, open-ended questions to fully articulate the students' pursuits and college experiences.

Participants, Recruitment, and Selection

This research focused on first-generation undergraduate Hmong male students attending Northern California State, one of the universities in California with the second-largest Hmong student attendance pursuing a 4-year degree. The researcher has seen a decrease in Hmong male attendance in higher education and reached out to Hmong male students on campus to obtain their personal stories and learn about their experiences in pursuit of their education. All nine participants were recruited utilizing a combination of snowball sampling, word of mouth, networking through department colleges, and postings on Hmong student organizations' social media, Facebook, and Instagram platforms. In addition, the researcher sent out an email correspondence and a flyer to student support services, academic programs, major departments, and Hmong student organizations and clubs on campus. In the recruitment email to the students, the criteria for selecting qualified participants were listed: (a) Hmong/Hmong American male students, (b) aged 18 to 33 years old, and (c) pursuing an undergraduate degree at a 4-year university. The researcher recruited the participants by asking for Hmong male students interested in participating (i.e., obtaining names and contact information). Thus, after receiving the names and contact information, each participant was contacted through e-mail and telephone about the study (see Appendix A).

Data Collection

The data collection for this study consisted of the following: (a) a general demographic intake survey, (b) one-on-one interviews, (c) a focus group session, and (d) handwritten notes taken during the interviews. Each participant was e-mailed the Demographic Intake Survey (see Appendix B) that asked about the participant's current age, marital status, living environment, year in college, and declared major. Table 3 lists the demographic participant information.

Table 3
Demographic Intake Survey Data

Pseudonym	Age	Marital Status	Living Environment	Year in College	Declared Major
John	24	Single	Off-Campus	4	Rec. Therapy
Teng	22	Single	Off-Campus	4	Engineering
Leng	22	Single	Off-Campus	4	Software Engineer
Cha	20	Single	Off-Campus	2	Bio. Chemistry
Doua	33	Single	Off-Campus	4	Counselor
Bone	24	Single	Off-Campus	3	Double Major: English and Social work
Meng	23	Single	Off-Campus	3	Undeclared
Xiong	18	Single	Off-Campus	1	Computer Science
Tou	24	Single	Off-Campus	4	Rec. Therapy

Note. The researcher has provided pseudonyms to protect participant identity.

Before each participant was interviewed, I had a 20-minute Zoom[®] meeting or phone call to explain the study, answer any questions about the study, and inform the participant that the interview would take approximately 60 to 90 minutes. I then e-mailed the participants a consent form (see Appendix C) to review, sign, and e-mail back to the researcher for keeping before the one-on-one, the interview could begin. A copy of the participant's signed consent form was then

e-mailed backed to the participants for their record keeping. All nine interviews were scheduled and conducted virtually through the Zoom[®] platform because of health and safety precautions enforced by the public health department due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants provided their availabilities, determining how the interview appointment was scheduled.

The interviews were conducted virtually through Zoom[®]. English was the primary language spoken. Before going into the interview questions, I informed each participant of the interviewing process and what it would consist of and asked if they had any questions. Once the participant stated that they understood the process and agreed to start the interview, I began asking questions from the protocol (see Appendix D). The interviews were audio-recorded using the Zoom[®] platform. I also took handwritten notes on what stood out during the conversations.

After all the interviews were completed with the participants, I determined that additional information was still needed. I emailed each participant again to see if they were available and willing to participate in a focus group. I explained the purpose of the focus group, which was to gather additional and in-depth information about their experiences in higher education. Four of the nine participants responded that they were available and interested and provided their availabilities. The focus group was also conducted virtually through Zoom[®], and English was the primary language spoken. Before going into the focus group interview questions, I informed the four participants of the interview process and asked if they had any questions. To protect their identity, the camera was turned off. Once the participants stated that they understood the process and agreed to start with the interview, I began asking questions from the protocol (see Appendix E). The focus group interviews were conducted via Zoom[®] in English, audio-recorded through Zoom[®], and transcribed for analysis with Zoom[®] transcriptions. I also took notes during the focus group. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) explained, “Reaching a point of saturation or

redundancy means that you begin hearing the same responses to your interview questions or seeing the same behaviors in observations; no new insights are forthcoming” (p. 101). In the research, study saturation was reached after the focus group interview when the researcher recognized the participants voicing similar answers to the questions. All data of this study—interviews, recordings, and handwritten notes—will be kept in a locked filing cabinet for three years and then destroyed.

Data Analysis

According to Creswell (2012), “Analysis consists of ‘taking the data apart’ to determine individual response and then ‘putting it together’ to summarize it” (p. 10). I created a pseudonym for each participant to protect their identity. I listened to the Zoom[®] audio recordings, read and corrected any misspellings in the Zoom[®] audio transcriptions, and reviewed my handwritten notes. While listening to the audio recordings, there were times when some participants did not know how to respond to the questions because it was hard for them to share what they were going through. Reactions like this stood out in my reflection on the audio recordings.

Roberts (2010) stated, “Data Analysis is making sense of the data and interpreting them appropriately so as to not mislead readers” (p. 38). I used Braun and Clarke’s (2006) 6-phase thematic analysis to analyze the data from the demographic intake survey, one-on-one interviews, and the focus group interview (see Figure 11).

1. Become familiar with the data,	4. Review themes,
2. Generate initial codes,	5. Define themes,
3. Search for themes,	6. Write-up.

Figure 11. Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework for conducting a thematic analysis.

The first step in the data analysis process was to become familiar with the data by reviewing the audio-recorded transcriptions and handwritten notes from the initial interviews and the focus group interview. In the second step, the researcher re-read and reviewed the audio-recorded transcriptions from the initial interviews and focus group interview again, using different highlight colors to code the similarities and differences. In the third step, the researcher completed the color coding and searched for themes by analyzing the transcriptions and organizing the information into themes and subthemes based on significance. The fourth step was to review and refine the themes and subthemes from Steps 2 and 3. The fifth step was the final refinement of the themes and subthemes. Step 6 involved writing up the final analysis report based on the themes and subthemes taken from the data. Through the data analysis of the six steps, three emerging themes and 11 subthemes were identified from the participants. The results section of Chapter 4 discusses the synthesizing process of the participants' transcripts on how the research was coded into themes and categories.

Trustworthiness

As a male, first-generation Hmong professional working at the university providing student services focused on student retention success, I witnessed a shift in educational attainment for Hmong male and female students. I noticed there had been an increase in Hmong female students pursuing higher education and obtaining an undergraduate degree and a decrease

in Hmong male students doing the same. I wanted to discover the contributing factors and understand the phenomenon of this happening.

This section describes the strategies used to ensure the trustworthiness of the data. To provide the content credibility, I utilized several instrumental strategies: (a) Zoom[®] software to transcribe the audio recordings of the interviews to ensure accurate transcriptions; (b) collaboration with a Hmong professor at Northern California State to assess the research contents and provide feedback of the interview instrument for data collection; (c) after the data transcription and assessment, the researcher met with the participants individually to ensure transcription accuracy of the interview, share with the participants their transcript information, and ask for feedback to help increase accuracy and credibility for the study.

Ethical Considerations

I obtained approval from the University of Pacific and Northern California State Institutional Review Boards (IRB) prior to beginning this study. Several ethical considerations were involved in protecting the participants' privacy in this study. The participants were contacted via e-mail and provided with information about the study and a consent form for agreeing to participate in the research study. A copy of the signed consent form was received from each participant before the start of the interview. I advised and provided the participants with a complete disclosure form about the risks and benefits of the research. In addition, I fully disclosed the research goals and allowed the participants to decide whether they were interested in participating in the study. I also informed the participants that the study was voluntary, and if the participant withdrew from the study, their data would not be included in the study. The participants were informed that all information was confidential, and the information would be kept secure in a locked filing desk. Cultural considerations were taken into account, and if the

participant chose not to answer specific questions, this did not affect their ability to participate in the study.

Limitations

Several indicators may have affected the validity of the research. The interviews were conducted during the COVID-19 global pandemic, and social distancing imposed limitations for this study. Additionally, the COVID-19 restricted and limited the recruitment of participants for this study through direct on-campus and in-person solicitation. Due to the small sample size, the sample should not be interpreted as a valid representation of California's entire Hmong male student population. Also, the number of Hmong male students in the study was small, and it should not be generalized that all Hmong male college students have the same experiences. Participation of Hmong males at the university was crucial in this study, and the participants could withdraw from the study anytime. Finding a replacement in the middle of the study could have been challenging. Not enough information would have been obtained if the researcher could not find replacements.

The literature on Hmong male students in higher education is limited, although there is a high research volume focusing on Hmong female students. However, due to the small sample size used in this study and the limited research on Hmong male students in higher education, further studies would benefit from more diverse recruitment strategies from various geographical locations within California to better support the trends and factors identified regarding Hmong male students' educational attainment.

Summary

The phenomenological approach used in this study was to learn and understand the experiences of Hmong male college students related to their pursuit of higher education. I aimed

to uncover and understand the educational, cultural influences, and life challenges that contribute to low educational attainment in Hmong male students. There was limited literature and research on the experiences of Hmong male students' pursuing higher education. Chapter 4 focuses on the findings in more detail. In Chapter 5 I review the implications of the study and offer recommendations for further study.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

This chapter includes an introduction of the purpose of this study, an overview of the characteristics of the participants, the findings, and a summary of the results. Minimal research has been written on the college experience of Hmong male students in higher education. This qualitative phenomenological study was conducted to analyze and understand the factors of education, cultural influences, and life challenges that contribute to the low educational attainment of Hmong male students. The participants' responses were analyzed to help answer the two research questions:

1. How do traditional cultural factors and contributing life challenges affect Hmong male students' education?
2. What educational challenges are perceived by Hmong male students as they navigate higher education?

Through the data analysis of the participants' stories, I identified three emerging themes and 11 subthemes.

Characteristics of Participants

Before conducting the interviews, each participant was given a demographic intake survey to complete (see Appendix B). For the confidentiality of the nine participants in this study, I assigned each participant a pseudonym. All nine participants were attending Northern California State (a pseudonym) and pursuing undergraduate degrees at the time of data collection. Table 4 provides information on each participant's background characteristics: (a) pseudonym, (b) age, (c) country of birth, (d) marital status, (e) living environment, (f) weekly work hours, (g) year in college, and (h) declared major.

Table 4
Participants' Demographic Characteristics

Participant	Age	Country of Birth	Marital Status	Living Environment	Weekly Work Hours	Year in College	Declared Major
John	24	U.S.	Single	Off-Campus	20 hours	4	Rec. Therapy
Teng	22	U.S.	Single	Off-Campus	0 hours	4	Engineering
Leng	22	U.S.	Single	Off-Campus	40 hours	4	Software Engineer
Cha	20	U.S.	Single	Off-Campus	0 hours	2	Bio. Chemistry
Doua	33	U.S.	Single	Off-Campus	24 hours	4	Counselor
Bone	24	Thailand	Single	Off-Campus	48 hours	3	Double Major: English and Social work
Meng	23	U.S.	Single	Off-Campus	20-30 hours	3	Undeclared
Xiong	18	U.S.	Single	Off-Campus	0 hours	1	Computer Science
Tou	24	U.S.	Single	Off-Campus	40 hours	4	Rec. Therapy

All nine Hmong student participants in the study varied from ages 18 to 33 years old and had different demographic characteristics. Eight of the participants were born in the United States, and one was not. All nine participants were single. Eight of the nine participants lived at home with their parents or family, and one participant lived off-campus with his sibling. All the participants were full-time college students. Three participants—Leng, Bone, and Tou—worked full-time. Three participants—John, Doua, and Meng—worked part-time. Three participants—Teng, Cha, and Xiong—did not work. Five participants—John, Teng, Leng, Doua, and Tou—were fourth-year college students, two participants—Bone and Meng—were in their third year,

one participant—Cha—was in his second year, and one participant—Xiong—was in his first year.

Table 5 provides an overview of the demographics of the nine participants' and their parents': (a) years living in the United States (U.S.), (b) father's birthplace, (c) mother's birthplace, (d) father's highest degree, and (e) mother's highest degree.

Table 5
Parent Demographic Characteristics

Participant	Years Living in the U.S.	Father Years Living in the U.S.	Father's birthplace	Mother Years Living in the U.S.	Mother's birthplace	Father's Highest Degree	Mother's Highest Degree
John	24	40	Thailand	39	United States	None	None
Teng	22	40	Laos	38	Laos	Some College	unknown
Leng	22	20+	Laos	20+	Laos	High School	Associate degree
Cha	20	40	Thailand	40	United States	unknown	unknown
Doua	33	40-50	Laos	40-50	Laos	unknown	unknown
Bone	16	16	Laos	16	Laos	No schooling	No schooling
Meng	23	30+	Laos	27	Thailand	High School	High School
Xiong	18	35+	Laos	35+	Thailand	High School	Associate degree
Tou	24	20+	Laos	20+	Laos	High School	High School

The participants in this study identified as first-generation college students because their parents either did not go to college or went to college but did not graduate. Eight of the

participants—John, Teng, Leng, Cha, Doua, Meng, Xiong, and Tou—were born in the United States, and one participant, Bone, was born in Thailand and immigrated to the United States 10 years prior to this study. For seven of the nine participants—Teng, Leng, Cha, Doua, Meng, Xiong, and Tou—their parents were born in Thailand or Laos and immigrated to the United States. John’s and Cha’s fathers were born in Thailand, and their mothers were born in the United States. One participant Teng’s father took some college courses. Leng’s, Meng’s, Xiong’s, and Tou’s fathers completed high school. Lastly, four of the last nine participants—John, Cha, Doua, and Bone—did not know their father’s highest educational degree. Leng’s and Xiong’s mothers completed an associates degree. Meng’s and Tou’s mothers completed high school. Five of the participants—John, Teng, Cha, Doua, and Bone—did not know their mother’s highest educational degree. Three participants, Teng, Leng, and Doua, had older siblings who graduated from college; however, because the participant(s)’ parents did not graduate, the participant is still considered first generation.

Table 6 provides an overview of the nine participants’ household demographics: (a) birth order, (b) brothers, (c) sisters, (d) total siblings, and (e) number of parents. Four participants—John, Cha, Meng, and Tou—are the oldest sons of their families. Doua is the middle son in his family. Teng, Leng, Bone, and Xiong are the youngest sons of their families. The participants’ number of siblings ranged from 1 to 11. Eight participants lived in a household of two parents and one lived with a single parent.

Table 6
Household Demographics

Participants	Birth Order	Brother(s)	Sister(s)	Total Siblings	Number of Parents
John	Oldest	2	4	6	Both
Teng	Youngest	1	2	3	Both
Leng	Youngest	2	5	7	Both
Cha	Oldest	1	1	2	Both
Doua	Middle	8	3	11	Both
Bone	Youngest	3	2	5	Single parent
Meng	Oldest	2	3	5	Both
Xiong	Youngest	1	0	1	Both
Tou	Oldest	1	2	3	Both

Findings

The process for analyzing the data is detailed in Chapter 3. I reviewed and analyzed the four data collections: (a) the general demographic intake survey, (b) the recorded transcriptions from the individual interviews, (c) the focus group session transcripts, and (d) the field notes taken from the interviews. In the first pass of the data analysis, I analyzed and read line-by-line the data transcriptions based on the participants' responses to each of the questions. In the second pass, I read through the collected data, coded the responses that stood out, and put them into distinct thematic categories based on words, phrases, and ideas. Third, I looked for emerging themes and labeled and organized the data to identify similarities and relationships. Figure 12 represents a summary of the three major emerging themes and 11 subthemes found through the data analysis process.

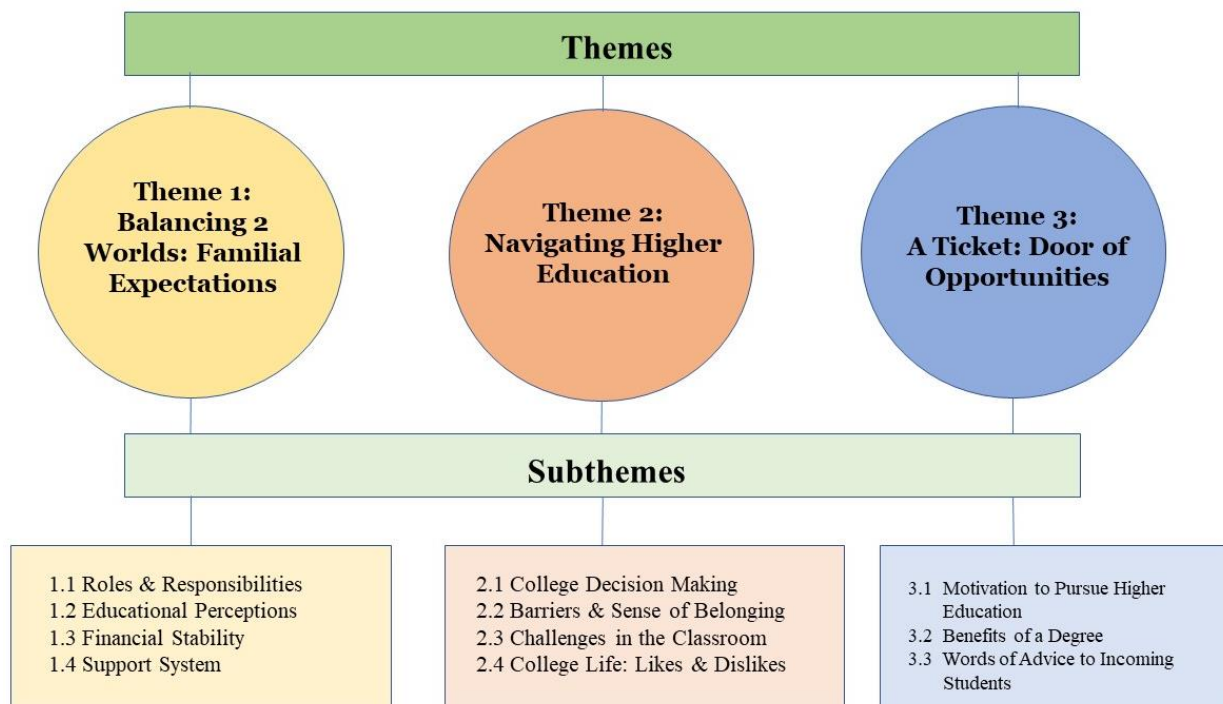


Figure 12. Summary of the three major emerging themes and eleven subthemes.

Theme 1: Balancing 2 Worlds: Familial Expectations

The first theme that emerged in this study is familial expectations. Among parents want their children to go to college so they can live a better life because they do not want their children to struggle as they did. The participants' narrative stories of their parents wanting them to pursue higher education is to achieve what is perceived to be the American Dream. Doua shared, "They feel excited for me to go to college. That's one of the things that my parents always promote for everyone to go to college because they see how education helps sustain great family life." Similar to Doua, Leng's family is supportive:

They feel proud of me, I'm do something that they didn't achieve. They are proud I'm accomplish, so far getting scholarships and getting good grades, internship it remains a work experiences and that will help you know eventually give me a full-time career after I graduate.

The expectations held by the parents then create stressors because the parents still want the children to participate in all to most family activities, especially the sons. The participants spoke about the challenges of being a full-time college student and balancing their family and cultural responsibilities. Within the familial expectations, four different subthemes exist: roles and responsibilities, educational perception, financial stability, and support system.

Subtheme 1: roles and responsibilities. Being a full-time college student, the expectations of being a son and balancing cultural obligations can be challenging. Hmong parents want their son to take on active roles and responsibilities within the culture, such as funerals, weddings, ceremonies, and family rituals such as calling the fallen spirit “Hu Plig” event and jingle bell “Ua Neeb.” Acknowledging the life challenges can help provide an understanding of how the participants feel having to balance conflicting priorities. John, Teng, and Doua expressed how they felt when it came to their roles and responsibilities of growing up and having to abide by their family’s cultural upbringing and expectations. John shared:

I'm the oldest Hmong son in my family growing up in my household. So, there were a lot of expectations to know the culture. That puts more pressure on the older son, ME, to learn more about the culture. So, you know, growing up was always everybody always tell me, oh, go saib. go watch your grandpa Ua Neeb or, you know, help, watch them do the rituals, go hit the gong, go help your cousins, cut the pig. So, in the culture aspect growing up. It was just a lot of expectations.

Similar to John, Teng had expectations from his family:

Like on weekends, you'll have relatives doing like a family gathering, you know, some type of party or maybe like a Hu Plig or like a kind of like a just any type of like ceremony or any gathering or even funerals and you have to go out and you have to help our families like help them cut meat, or you help to pay respects to their family. So, a lot of your weekends are usually cut off for that.

Doua shared the same responsibilities that he had:

Being a Hmong son, you have a lot of responsibilities that are expected from my parents. Certain expectations are pretty much like the ones that the relative does. If one of my

relatives have a party, they expect you to help out. It goes like funeral as well. If there's any parties you're expected to help in chopping meat.

The participants revealed that they were confronted with the challenges of balancing and negotiating personal life challenges between dual roles of cultural and school responsibilities.

John explained:

My grandpa is a shaman and now my dad. My dad is a shaman, and training, for lack of a better word, there's pressures. My grandpa is getting old and my grandma will always tell me that you know you need to take time to learn from your grandpa, the culture and there's this one thing that he's very big on that he wants to pass on, it's called "Tshuab Qeej." That's basically a Hmong instrument, learning how to play that right now with a lot of pressure for me to finish my lessons of playing that instrument and then there's a lot of pressure for me to understand the basic components of how to do "Ua Neeb." When it comes to education, the last thing you want to think about is waking up in the morning and killing pig, but yes, those are some of the obstacles.

Teng shared how he struggled trying to balance his responsibilities:

Family obligation is holding you back. Living with the family kind of holds you back too because, you know, time wise you don't have time for school. Anything else in the culture, the expectations are heavy on you. Sometimes our parents put too much stress on us when it comes to going into college. Because like they expect you to do well to succeed, you fail a class and they don't understand. I feel Hmong parents have that high expectation so I feel like that's one of the biggest culture setbacks.

Leng's challenges were:

So every week, my time is going to school and practicing prepping for those marching band competitions. Between that you know I had things to do on the weekend with our family, with the cultural parties, killing pigs and cow, attending funeral so I had to attend those and I missed out on those opportunities.

The participants' stories provided a glimpse of what it is like being a Hmong son and having to balance family and cultural responsibilities and manage an academic workload. The participants had to prioritize their responsibilities to meet the expectations of their family while trying to stay on top of their schooling.

Subtheme 2: educational perceptions. Education is very important to Hmong families because it will help their children have a better life. Hmong sons with an education will be able

to better provide for the family and be the role model for their siblings and relatives. The participants talked about the importance of going to college and how receiving a college degree can help lead them a better life and obtain financial stability. John shared:

I want to be the first one to get my degree. I want to be the first one to make a pathway for my siblings to live a successful life. Growing up, I saw how my grandma and grandpa struggled with money and I just want to make sure that I'm in a position where I can help my parents.

Teng emphasized, "Going to college means that you get a better life because you can get better jobs and you can actually pursue something that you enjoy." Leng added, "I want to get out of this poverty situation for me and my family." Doua stated, "The fact that I want to help out my community more because of a low retention rate in college, a lot of college dropouts."

Cha explained:

I realized that I want to pursue higher education when I was in high school, because I didn't know what I was going to do after high school. So, the only clear path that I had was to go to college and see what I can do from there.

Bone stated:

You know after high school, I work in different places and went to vocational school and finish the program and stuff like that. My doctor, someone I work for, he saw potential in me. So, I decided to go back to school.

From the participants' perspectives, they grew up seeing their families struggle financially and this was what motivated the participants to pursue higher education. The participants considered that attending college would help them have a better life and help pave the way for other family members and siblings who want to pursue higher education, but choosing or deciding what major and courses to take was challenging. Meng shared that his parents wanted him to be a doctor:

So, my freshman year I was very set on being a doctor. I learn how difficult all these type of stressor affects me after that first year. I'm like, oh, man, I don't think I can be a doctor. I kind of just gave up being a doctor because I was confused on the route to take.

John's parents wanted him to go into business or become a doctor to follow the money. He stated:

First of all, how to find out what I really want to do I think being first-generation student, you follow what your parents say. You follow the money and sometimes following the money doesn't really help you or whether it's going in business or becoming a doctor. Many fields and degrees out there sometimes are hard when you're the first one to go to college. It's hard to know who to talk to about stuff like that.

Hmong parents have limited knowledge about the college system, and they push their children to pursue higher education and high-paying careers. The participants discussed the academic struggles they faced in college while trying to meet their parents' expectations in choosing a major and career. Meng talked about his decision to change his major because it was not what he wanted to do after college:

I kind of just gave up being a doctor because I was so confused on the route to take. My first year, what to do, who to go to, you know, take to acquire classes. I didn't even know about the college catalog. It was very confusing trying to explore a system. It was like trying to put 1,000 puzzle pieces together. You can only grab one at a time, and I was just hastily grabbing onto bits of information that I could find. My first year, I got academic probation. I really didn't tell anybody because I was very ashamed of the failures because of my family expectations of me.

Teng shared:

When I first started, I wanted to quit. I didn't feel like I belonged in my classes. When I chose mechanical engineering, I wasn't sure if it was the best decision. I felt like I can't even do this, what makes me think I can do the real career. So that was the biggest barrier. I wanted to quit because I have a hard time. I felt different because our college is predominantly White so like I felt out of place.

Leng said:

You know, computer science, that's my major. I had a hard time finding a mentor that is from a Hmong background. Not a lot of Hmong people major in engineering, computer science, so it was kind of hard. So, I couldn't really connect my freshman year.

The participants explained the parental expectation of choosing a major or high-paying career that would lead to financial stability while not understanding how difficult college was for

a first-generation student. The participants faced many challenges, with some having to change their major, and they chose to not share the information with their parents to avoid the confrontation of failure.

Subtheme 3: financial stability. Participants saw their families struggle financially while growing up, which motivated them to strive for a better life financially to help support their parents and their futures. The participants' decision to attend college was the next step toward helping their families and creating a financially stable future. Teng stated, "I know going to college means that you get a better life because you can get better jobs. You can actually pursue something that you enjoy. It's kind of hard to get most jobs out there." Leng shared, "I want to get out of this poverty situation, and right now, my future is looking bright for me and my family." Meng explained:

Throughout high school, they would just say go to college; it's the only way to get out from our economic status. There was family pressure of going to college. Going to college there will be opportunities and success for you to be economically and financially stable.

John said:

I think having that bachelor's degree, it's a statement and it's a ticket. It just gives us a slight advantage and it opens up more opportunities. So, for me getting my bachelor's degree is a sense of certification of everything that I have learned throughout my years in higher education and it's a ticket to open many opportunities for everything.

As mentioned by the participants Teng, Leng, Meng, and John, seeing their families struggle financially motivated them to pursue higher education. The result of attending higher education can open up opportunities and financial stability for their futures.

Subtheme 4: support system. The participants shared that their influential support system included their parents, family, relatives, and their Hmong community. While pursuing

their education, participants often rely on people close to them for support. Leng described his support system:

My dad, his brothers, and sisters. We are closely attached to them, so they are my support system and whenever I need help, getting a job or whatever, general life advice, I always go to them and they usually have some good advice to say to me.

Cha stated his family was his support, “I’m getting most of my support from my family providing me with free housing, transportation, and food.” For Xiong, his support system was, “Just some bunch of friends and just mostly family.” For Doua, support involved his family, his friends, and the faculty “who I have met during college and coworkers who I work with and also faculty members that I connected throughout the years.” Bone explained his support was his mom:

First and foremost, my mom. She has always been there for me and support me if I get into college or not. She doesn't set a standard very high on me. She doesn't push me and doesn't choose my major for me, so she let me do I want to do. She doesn't care how long it's gonna take, as long as I continue my education and she's very proud of me. My oldest brother has been very supportive. So yeah, those people are the most crucial that support me throughout my career.

Meng mentioned his uncles and aunts, “So my support system is my uncle and aunt who I'm living with now from my dad's side. They've always been my primary support system in terms of economic and physically just being there.” Tou shared that his support was outside of his family and if it were not for peer mentors in the Upward Bound program, he would not have known what to do when it came to his academics:

So, for me, when I was in high school, I had a program that I was in Upward Bound. They are a federally funded educational program and only accept students with low-income family or first-generation students that was my main background, backbone for my support and education. They supported and helped me with my academics and having mentors. Also, my parents and siblings are very supportive. Everybody was very supportive.

John explained his struggles and wanting to stop school because of worrying about his family:

There has been multiple times where I just wanted to quit and start working because I was worried about the family, my family, you know. There're things my mom and dad would say, don't worry about us, we're old, we had our time. We're working so you cannot stress about school. They would just reassure me and say, look, don't worry about working bringing money in for the family and just worried about getting school done. So that's one way my parents in particular has helped me stay mentally focused. My male cousins and my little brothers keep me going. That's a great thing. And then as for my friends, being the same generation going to college, they're just there for you. They helped me through financial crisis and also helped me through tough mental situations.

Teng spoke about his parents:

Well, I think my biggest supports have to be my parents. I felt like I wouldn't get far in college without them because they provide for me financially and they provide a home for me. My parents provide the money for my tuition, and they provide money for books and food. I don't work. I have them supporting me throughout everything. When it comes to emotional, my parents help me out. I always talk about how stressful I am. All my siblings try their best to help out. My brother helps me out sometimes like mathematical equations and stuff like that.

Lastly, Tou shared, “My parents pushing me to do better than them really helped me. They just don't want me to end up like them and you know for me to pursue higher education. So, I think that's a big factor.”

The participants' stories illustrate the challenges they have in pursuit of their education, and that they rely on their family and friends for support and motivation. Without supports and reassurance they received, the participants felt they would not have gotten far in college.

Therefore, parental support plays an important role in the lives of the participants in their educational journey.

Theme 2: Navigating Higher Education

The second theme that emerged in this study was navigating higher education. The participants shared that navigating the college process was an individualized experience for

which their parents could not provide guidance; therefore, navigating the college system was overwhelming and challenging. Within the navigating higher education theme, there are four different subthemes: college decision making, barriers and sense of belonging, challenges in the classroom, and college life: likes and dislikes.

Subtheme 1: college decision making. The participants disclosed that they decided to attend a local college because they did not want to be far from their parents and support system.

According to John:

I had 100% full control if I wanted to leave home. I could have left home if I wanted to. I had 100% control on that and that's a good thing. I made the decision to stay because it was close to family. I was worried about them, since I was the oldest son, and they may have needed me. I just wanted to make sure that I'm, whenever my parents needed me, I wasn't too far away.

Teng shared how his parents encouraged him to attend college locally because of his older brother's educational struggles of commuting and the financial cost:

I felt like my parents push me to go to college, but I feel like it was my choice to go to college. I myself chose because I didn't want a hard-working job or a hard labor job so I knew that going to college was my decision. My family didn't want me to go far because of financial. I saw the struggle when my brother tried to do it. He said, "The school is really difficult. It was hard. It was stressful because commute was really far and all the traffic and everything." He said he was so stressed out. I chose the easier route because I've seen what my siblings gone through.

Leng stated:

So it was mainly my decision. The pressure to, you know, go to same college since a lot of my uncles and aunts basically all goes there. It's basically just saying go close to home and won't cost you that much.

Cha emphasized going to his uncles for advice on whether he should attend a junior college for 2 years to cut down the cost of tuition or go directly from high school to a 4-year university:

I had the main role and my college decision. I was debating whether I should go to a junior college because the first 2 years were free but I was influenced by one of my

uncles saying that it would be best if I came to Northern California State which was my main choice, so I chose Northern California State.

Doua talked about staying close to home and family, “I want to go to the institution that is near, that's close to where I live and close to where family are.” For Meng:

Decision, in a way, I had to be accountable for it. And here I am now. By the way, it's also my parents because I can be close to them. They do need a lot of help around to translate for them.

Tou described his experience of wanting to attend an institution away from town, but his sister's experience helped him decide to attend school locally:

It was my choice. I decided to go and my parents as well. They really wanted me to pursue education. I originally wanted to go to a little further. I wanted to go out of the area. Part of it was my sister telling me if I go that far, I have no friends, then I'm going to most likely drop out.

Subtheme 2: barriers and sense of belonging. Barriers and a sense of belonging are identified as a second subtheme. The participants shared that they faced academic challenges and barriers navigating the college system as first-generation college students. Transitioning from high school to college was challenging because of not knowing how the college system operates. Participants also identified being different from their classmates and professors leading to a lack of sense of belonging.

Navigating the school system by myself, I didn't know what to do. I'm a barrier. I got to college, and I was just winging it. I didn't know effective ways to talk to professors. I didn't know what to do. I didn't know how to navigate financial aid. I didn't know that we can change major. The main barrier was not understanding how to navigate the school system or the higher education system being a first-generation student. (John)

Some of the things that I found difficult as a barrier would be like I wanted to quit school when I first started the transition. I didn't feel like I belonged in my classes. In high school, they see me as one smart student and the top student. So, when I went to college, I didn't do well. So, the biggest barrier I wanted to quit and it was hard to make new friends. I felt different because I feel like our college is predominantly White or American and so like I felt out of place. (Teng)

When I came in, I didn't know anything about computer science, that's my major. So, I had a hard time finding a mentor that is from a Hmong background. Not a lot of Hmong people major in engineering, computer science, so it was kind of hard. The freshman class was only me and another Asian person. There was a lot of African Americans and Hispanics, so I kind don't fit in. (Leng)

Well, during my freshman year, a barrier that I encounter was becoming familiar with being in college and the environment. In my first semester, I was kind of like isolated from my classmates and I didn't try to create new friends. Another barrier that I deal with is speaking clearly during my public speaking classes. (Cha)

I will say loneliness for the most part. Why I say that because going to high school you have a lot of friends. Finish high school and going to college you're on own and it was just so different from high school. Freshman to my sophomore, straight lonely cuz you're pretty much by yourself. (Bone)

I was so confused, my first year on what to do, who to go to, talk to require classes. I didn't even know about the College Catalog, my first year it was all new to me. It was very confusing trying to explore a system. And so, you know, I was like, damn, like this sucks! (Meng)

So it was tough going out of high school and going to college. My main source of motivation was having friends. I had no friends going to college. All my high school friends went to different colleges, some of them didn't attend college, and I was the only one in my group that went to my college. I had to make new friends but I still felt I had nobody and I think that really affected me my first year. You know why I almost dropped out. I had no motivation. It was just beating me down. (Tou)

Subtheme 3: challenges in the classroom. The participants described challenges they faced in the classroom and with campus experiences, who they sought for academic support, and their comfort level when seeking support. John explained:

I think the challenges on campus or in the classroom sometimes depending on the class, there's a lack of diversity. For example, the RPTA courses, you barely see any other Asian Americans in those courses. It's more of White major and it can be discouraging sometimes. But you know, I was able to get through that.

Teng described his experience:

Challenges I face in the classroom, I feel like sometimes I'm on the quieter side in some classes. I think classes in general is just tough because it depends on how the professor teaches it. Other than that, I just felt like I'm like any other students where I'm just lost. I feel like when you go to college everybody minding their own business, doing their own thing and has headphones on.

The participants discussed who they went to for academic support or advice. The participants sought help from academic advisors, counselors, professors, and classmates. John shared, “I go to my advisor on campus. She's great when it comes to support, advice, and some big college decisions.” Teng said:

I will go to classmates. I usually make at least one friend in each class so I can text them for help, call them for help, and meet up to study for exam. When I first started college, I was scared to talk to anyone. I feel like now, I have a lot of buddies from my classes. I've taken same classes with them for a long time. I build that relationship with them so I go to them first. Also, academic like about class, I go to professor office hours. I'm not afraid to ask in the classroom, but like I don't know, it feels awkward for me when I'm outside of class. I think that's just me in general. But yeah, I usually go to my peers or colleagues first before anything.

For Leng, “On campus, I'll just go to people who took those classes and students in upper division and off campus, ask engineering professionals that graduate for some advice for them.”

Cha stated:

On campus if I need help academically, I would go to my professor's office hours and get help from them, but most of the time, I don't because I feel like I have the subject down. I will also go to PAL facilitator's office hours and get help. I would get a lot of help from my peers from my organization also pursuing a major similar to mine. But off campus, I don't really get much help because I'm mainly on campus.

Doua explained:

On campus, my faculty because one aspect that I learn from my community college is try to connect with your faculty. I usually try to attend office hours and ask them about some things I don't know about. For off campus, I don't really have a lot.

Bone said, “Usually my girlfriend. She also goes to the same college. Besides her I don't go to anyone.” Meng described, “I go to a counselor that's easily accessible because counselors are really hard to get appointments in the departments. So, whenever I need help, I would go to counselor in the RISE program.” Xiong said, “I usually talk to my teachers or my friends who have the class with me.” Tou stated, “On campus would be my advisor for my major. He's been

a very big supporter of my education these last 2 years. Outside maybe just my sisters and my close friends.”

The participants described their comfort level when asking for academic help and support from an academic advisor, counselors, professors, and classmates.

In the beginning of my college years, I was not comfortable at all. However, I'm getting used to the school system now being a senior, it's 100% comfortable for me. I always go see my professors and they always clarify items. (John)

I'd say out of 10, it'll probably be like a between a five or six. I'm scared even approach them. But if I really have a question, I will go to them. I wouldn't be afraid, but like outside, I'll be afraid to ask them a question because usually I'm clueless about things and I just feel shy around them. (Teng)

I'm uncomfortable. I'm just afraid of wording things weirdly I'm, because growing up, my English isn't very good. Speaking to authority, growing up you don't talk back to the people that teach you, you know, just don't talk in general. Sometimes they would say stuff and I wouldn't really understand. I would just say, yeah, I understand. When I truly didn't even understand it, that would be the most uncomfortable part and not knowing what to say back. So, there's kind of anxiety about that, but most cases I'm kind of uncomfortable. (Meng)

Tou stated, “My first 2 years, I was nowhere close to asking for help or anything. I didn't want to talk to advisors or anyone. I just mainly talk to my friends that I took my classes with.”

Leng shared:

I'm always very comfortable. If I get stuck, I always go see my professor because when I get stuck, I don't like that. So, I always go seek help from professors or anyone that can help me solve my issue.

Doua said:

I'm really comfortable seeking help from professor faculty because they know what they're doing. I really want to seek help from them and they're able to provide back to me. I've experienced good and bad professors. There are some who would go the extra mile just to help you out and there are some that just don't go the extra mile.

Cha explained:

I have only gone to a couple of my professor's office hours. I would say, I'm not that comfortable but if I really need to, I'm willing to go out of my way to get that help from my professors and facility facilitators.

As for Bone, "I'm pretty comfortable Professor wise. Sometimes it can be a little awkward you know or sometimes can be a little bit more intimidating." Participants were asked if there was a Hmong administrator, faculty, or professor on campus from whom they felt comfortable seeking assistance. John stated:

Yes. I feel if there were more, I would say mostly Hmong male students feel more comfortable when there's a course with somebody that looks like you or comes from the same background as you. I think that allows students to open up a little more.

Teng shared:

I feel like in my major there isn't really any. I don't even have Hmong peers/colleagues, and so it feels so weird like in my major. Nobody's Hmong and I feel so alone. I first started my freshman year when I mentioned that I felt like I didn't belong because everybody was predominantly White in my classes. I didn't have any Hmong colleagues being mechanical engineer. If I had a Hmong professor, I would go to him all the time for advising. I think I feel more comfortable. I feel like he'll be more understanding of my situation. He would like be easier to approach. There's this administrator, he's really nice, he's White. I feel a little bit uncomfortable around him because I feel like he just doesn't understand me or get me. It feels kind of weird. He's being the nicest he can but it's just kind of like he intimidates me, so I feel scared to approach him. I have advising with him and I knocked on his door and then I didn't hear anything. He didn't say like come in or anything and I opened a little bit and he said that I didn't tell you to come in and I felt intimidated after he said that and I feel like so bad and I apologize and he kind of give me a mean look. So, I close the door and I got scared. I feel like if someone Hmong, I feel like there'll be a little bit more generous to me because another Hmong person like Hmong people see another Hmong person, they're really nice about it.

Additionally, Leng shared:

Since we're both Hmong, we can relate with our struggle. For example, if it was like an engineering professor. I'm pretty sure he struggles as well. There's not a lot of Hmong engineers so we could both relate on a personal level and our experiences, journeys, and career.

Doua stated:

I would say yes, seeking help from administrator who are from the same background. So, if there was Hmong administrators, I will feel comfortable seeking assistance from them. If they weren't any Hmong administrator, I would still seek help regardless.

Meng said, "I would feel comfortable seeking answers from them, as I'm comfortable receiving assistance from any other administrative or faculty." Xiong, and Tou agreed. "Yes, we're both Hmong and Hmong people like get along better together" (Xiong). "Definitely, I think it makes me feel more comfortable and seek for help more" (Tou). Out of all the participants, Bone was the only one who felt differently, "I don't. That would be uncomfortable. I'm a very prideful person. I would hate to say this, but I don't like asking help especially from a Hmong staff unless I know them."

The participants then went on to discuss how college administrators, faculty, and or professors can better assist Hmong students.

The way faculty can support Hmong is taking the time to understand. Sometimes there are cultural barriers that will cause students to stress over and have anxiety. I think it's important for faculty and administrators to realize or just check in on their students because there's a lot of cultural pressures. I think it's important for them just to know where Hmong students come from and their family dynamics. Most students come from big families, low poverty, and that could take a toll. (John)

I feel like if they understand the culture a little bit. I feel like everybody has different types of manners and etiquette. I feel like Hmong people have a hard time understanding American etiquette because we have different types of things. Hmong people usually apologizing. I think it would make them feel a little, be more open and reasonable. (Teng)

I believe they can assist Hmong student better by looking at data that Hmong scholars and old scholars have done. Data show that almost 80% of Hmong students feel lonely and it's a really big thing. I think administrator could look at the data that's provided and find solutions to assist Hmong better. (Doua)

How can, I would say that the culture and language barriers sometime can affect Hmong. The Hmong language is very limited and sometimes they don't have words in English. So for me, I wasn't born here so English is actually my third language. Sometimes when

I want to say something, I can't find the right words to say. Language barrier and culture is something that can impair when you seeking for help. (Bone)

Well, I guess make programs like Hmong for more supporting system, where we can break the language barrier for people to seek for help. Start more organization and programs and stuff within our community. (Tou)

Subtheme 4: college life: likes and dislikes. Participants shared insights on what they liked and disliked about college, how they stay on track, and what strategies they used to be successful in pursuit of their education.

I always want to educate myself and want to develop myself personally and professionally. I decided to take a lot of courses that helped me develop personally, even though my friends and family says that's a waste of money. It's a great experience for me to develop myself personally because by taking those courses, I'm able to gain more knowledge about other stuff. (Doua)

My plan is making sure that I am on track to graduate by meeting all my requirements. I always have a list of plans for all my classes that I took and need to take. I use that to help navigate myself in order to graduate from college. What I like about college is the amount of opportunities that it offers. As a student coming from computer science, there's a lot of opportunities for the students to get involved. I took advantage of that and I use it a lot. I was able to get to where am I, where I am at now. What I don't like about the college is the lack of funding opportunities for students to go to conferences or events that could help them professionally. I just wish that the school could help the students more in that aspect. (Leng)

I think I enjoy it because it's not hand holding. It's not micromanagement like high school was and college treat you like an adult. There are resources to help you and you have more freedom. That's what I like about college and on top of that, nobody's telling you to take mandatory classes. Yes, we have mandatory classes we can still choose our own courses. This allowed me to learn different topics that I wanted to. College is the experience where you really do find yourself and what you want to do. What I don't like about college is sometimes it's hard to find the resources. What I mean by that is, sometimes we don't know that there are resources to help us. There's a lack of advertising and there's a lack of awareness of all the resources on college. From freshman to sophomore and even my third year, I find out about new resources every year cause nobody ever told me about it or never heard about it. For example, the financial wellness center actually help you budget and teach you about taxes and all those aspects. Those were useful resources that found later down the line. The writing center was one for sure. I didn't find that until my second year and it was something I really needed. I didn't know that the medical center on campus was available. I thought it would be out of pocket. Somebody explained to me that the mental health stuff is basically covered and that would have been nice to know the first year in college. (John)

You get to meet a lot of new people and students who are experiencing the first time in college. A lot of exploration that you do on your own experiencing what college life is. I don't like tuition always increasing every semester, which is ironic. It's always increasing and that's one of the things I don't like about college. The second one is how to navigate going to graduate school. I talked to my undergrad advisor and he didn't know what office I should talk to or know the resources. So, he diverges me to the Financial Aid Office and they diverge me to the College of Continuing Education and they diverge me to the Office of Graduate Studies. So, during my time going back and forth, I was frustrated and angry about the lack of resources and knowledge my advisor had. So that's one of thing I don't like about college. There are faculties that don't know a lot about the resources, especially when if they're advisor they should know. (Bone)

Theme 3: A Ticket: Door of Opportunities

Growing up, Hmong parents instilled in their children the importance of education and how education can help better their lives and future. Hmong parents push their children to go to college after high school. Because of this, Hmong parents and the participants viewed college as a ticket to the door of opportunities.

Subtheme 1: motivation to pursue higher education. In the Hmong community, a college degree is seen as a pathway to better opportunities. The participants shared what motivated them to pursue college and the benefits of what a college degree can provide for them and their families. According to Teng:

Going to college means that you get a better life because you can get better jobs and you can actually pursue something that you enjoy. It's kind of hard to get most jobs out there. You really need a degree to get any job so I felt like going to college is what I need to do if I want to make money. I want to do something I enjoy and have a stable life so that was the biggest reason why I went to school.

John shared:

What motivated me to pursue higher education is be the first one to get my degree. I want to be the first one to make a pathway for my siblings and to live a successful life. Growing up, I saw how my grandma and grandpa struggled with money and I just want to make sure that I'm in a position where I can help my parents.

Leng stated, “So what motivates me is that I want to get out of this poverty situation. Right now my future is looking bright, my path right now is looking bright, and a better future for me and my family.” Bone explained:

I will say on my nieces and nephew. One time, my niece came up to me, she wanted me to teach her, read for her, and help her write short essay on it. I was grown man, you know, I was like 18-19 and I couldn't help her which is an embarrassment. I have gone to school all this time and I can't help you know a little girl do her own four grade book reports. It was a shame. My niece and nephew I want to inspire them, you know, I wanted to be the person that guide them through college, school, and in the education system. So pretty much them, who inspire me to go back to school and pursue my education.

Cha's plan to go to college was, “My family and friends are most of my motivations because like they are really supportive.” Doua had slightly different inspiration but similar:

Motivation for pursuing higher ed is because of the fact that I want to help out my community more. Yeah, I want to help out the Hmong community more because of our lack of involvement or lack of retention rate in college, a lot of college dropouts. So, I want to help them out more and emphasize why personal education is really important.

Meng shared:

I didn't know what to do. They would just say go to college, it's the only way and there's nothing else to do. I knew I had to get out from our economic status so there was family pressure of going to college. You're first generation, go to college, there will be opportunity and success was their motivations. The potential to be economically and financially stable more than my parents.

Xiong said, “My parents because I really want to do is just like give back to my parents because they raised me.” Tou stated, “Honestly, my parents because they want me to just not end up like them. Growing up into the upward bound program, I think that's where it really started to open up my views of going to college.”

Subtheme 2: benefits of a degree. Participants saw that earning a bachelor's degree would help prepare them for a better life after college.

Earning a bachelor's degree prepare your life. Pretty usual when you get your degree, you're expected to work. Your degree can teach you so much to help you succeed in

your career. For example, what you learned, you can apply it in the industry, network, and good communication skills. (Leng)

I think having that bachelor's degree, it's a statement and it's a ticket. What I mean is that you completed your higher education, ready to enter the professional world, and it's a ticket in our society today. It just gives us a slight advantage and it opens up more opportunities. So for me, getting my bachelor's degree is a sense a certification of everything that I have learned throughout my years in higher education. It's a ticket to open many opportunities for everything. (John)

For me, a bachelor's degree will help me in my life after college. A bachelor's degree is a key to open the door to a master program. Once you complete your bachelor's degree, you can apply for employment in the real world and they'll see that you have a bachelor's degree as compared to another candidate who only has an associate because most companies will take candidates who have a higher degree. So, earning a bachelor's degree will actually help you get a stable job and have a stable life. (Bone)

Beside job opportunities, it's just a paper and status. (Doua)

You get a better job. You won't get as tiring like you won't work hard labor. Your job wouldn't be hard, hard labor, it'd be more mental jobs like it's more of like a tired on you know where's all your mental like your brain. It's like a mental labor instead of a physical labor. So, I noticed that I wouldn't really want a physical labor job. I rather work my brain out and then work my body out and that it will be a better job in the long run. (Teng)

When it came to understanding the benefits of the college degree, the participants shared that it would open doors for future master's or doctorate programs, better future employment, and having status within their family or community.

Subtheme 3: words of advice to incoming students. Having navigated higher education as a first-generation college student, the participants wanted to share their advice for incoming first-year students and transferred Hmong male students. John, a fourth-year student, shared:

My advice for incoming male students is that I want them to join social groups to keep you moving forward and surround yourself with like-minded people. I will also say that talk to your advisors monthly if needed. When it comes to pursuing what you want to do, I will also say that be able to explore and talk to different departments to find yourself through college.

Teng another fourth-year student said:

Hmong male students don't give up. Work hard. Don't let anyone stop you from pursuing college career that you want to do. Tell your parents you need support from them. I feel like most Hmong male students don't go to college because they don't have that support. I feel like support is the biggest thing that Hmong male students need in general from their parents. I know some Hmong families aren't financially well off so those students will get financial aid, but sometimes that financial aid is not enough to survive in life or college because everything is expensive when you go to college. My biggest advice for Hmong male students is try to understand your parents and maybe help them understand that you need their help.

Leng, a fourth-year engineering student, commented:

My advice would be specific to those who are majoring in engineering or computer science. I'll tell them to network a lot because it is important to have a good GPA in order to get internships because it is very competitive and hard specifically for engineering and computer science students.

Cha, who is a sophomore majoring in Biochemistry, stated:

I would suggest new incoming Hmong students to not be afraid and seek out their own kind because they can really teach you good, be a good influence to you academically, and culturally. Don't be afraid when you enter college because everyone is in the same boat. You only need to find what makes you feel comfortable in the college environment. I also suggest them to join an organization or participate in events on campus because it truly gives them the college experience.

Doua, a fourth-year senior counseling student, stated:

My advice is to seek a lot help and go seek the student academic programs, join organizations, attend professional development workshops because there is a lot of workshops and events. There's a lot of things that are helpful for us. One of the things that I should have done was join the student organization or student leadership. It wasn't until my last year when I decided to join. There were a lot of helpful workshops, volunteer service, how to write a resume, attend graduate workshop, civic engagement, meet new people, and a lot of great things.

Bone, a junior double majoring in English and social work said:

I will say that you are expected to be by yourself, to do stuff by yourself, you are expected to prioritize your education, and you are expected to take responsibility and not make any excuses. Just don't procrastinate if you don't know. Always ask for help, don't be shy, and scared. At the end of the day, help is the best thing to do.

Meng, an undeclared junior student, explained:

Know what you want to do before you go to college because it will play a pivotal role in how you approach college, the way you perceive college, and understand the different types of college. Understand what you want to study. Participate in extracurricular and use that to your advantage to understand your strengths, weaknesses, and your passions in things. Explore other alternatives to college like vocational school. Be smart and wise with things that you want to do with your time. Be ready to ask for help. Don't be afraid of not knowing anything because you're going to learn that stuff and pick it up as you go along. You ask for help because help is one of the best ways to learn.

Xiong, a freshman, shared, “Just keep going. Don't quit. My parents would always tell me to suffer first and have fun later.” Tou, a senior in Recreational Therapy, said:

Stick to pursuing your education. Dream big. Your parents expect high of you so just do what you can. College is not for everybody. You want to pursue education and have a plan. Seek help if you need help and don't be shy. Start off your first year with making friends. It's going to be helpful in the long run of your college career. Take advantage of the resources that are there, get into clubs that will help you succeed or help you be more socially ready.

Summary

The findings in this chapter generated three main emerging themes and 11 subthemes as a result of the study purpose and research questions. The findings from this study provided a personal overview of the participants' college experience as they navigated the college system, balanced academics, and maintained family responsibilities while trying to achieve their college degree. The next chapter presents the interpretation of the findings, limitations, recommendations for colleges and universities, and recommendations for future research, and concludes with a summary and final reflection.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

This qualitative phenomenological research study analyzed factors that contribute to the low educational attainment of Hmong male students in college to understand how education, cultural influences, and life challenges affect their college achievement. Drawing from existing literature on the experience of Hmong American students' attendance in postsecondary institutions, minimal research has been written on the experience of Hmong male students in higher education. This research study captured the narrative stories and experiences of nine Hmong male students in higher education to assist colleges and universities with recommendations on strategies to increase retention and academic success that can help Hmong male students in higher education.

In this chapter, I begin with a summary of the methodology, theoretical framework, and research questions. The second section includes the interpretation of the findings and thematic analysis. The third section includes discussions related to the theoretical framework of critical race theory (CRT). Finally, the chapter concludes with research limitations and recommendations from the researcher.

Methodology, Theoretical Framework, and Research Questions

This study examined the experiences and factors Hmong male students face in pursuing higher educational attainment. Using a phenomenology method and CRT lens, the researcher examined nine Hmong male students to understand how traditional Hmong cultural factors, life challenges, and perceived educational challenges affect educational attainment. Qualitative research rests on the belief that people construct knowledge as they engage in and make sense of activity, experience, or phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). "Phenomenology looks at the

complete range of human experience, physical sensation and perception, thought, memory, imagination, emotion, desire, language, action, and social activity” (Wayne & Nelson, 2017, p. 4). CRT served as the theoretical framework exploring the portrayal of Asians characterized as the model minority and high achievers when it comes to educational attainment. The three emerging themes are described in the data analysis of Chapter 4 and are used in this chapter to inform the research results and interpretation of the findings as well as conclusions and recommendations.

Interpretation of Findings and Thematic Analysis

This study focused on understanding the perceptions and personal insights of nine first-generation Hmong male student experiences in higher education. Their experiences help provide narrative insight into the college experience, journey, and struggles they faced. Through the data analysis process and the findings of this study, three major themes and 11 subthemes emerged (see Table 7).

Table 7
Summary of the Themes and Subthemes

Themes	Sub-themes
1. Balancing 2 Worlds: Familial Expectations	1.1 Roles and Responsibilities 1.2 Education Perceptions 1.3 Financial Stability 1.4 Support System
2. Navigating Higher Education	2.1 College Decision Making 2.2 Barriers and Sense of Belonging 2.3 Challenges in the Classroom 2.4 College Life: Likes and Dislikes
3. A Ticket: Door of Opportunities	3.1 Motivation to Pursue Higher Education 3.2 Benefits of a Degree 3.3 Words of Advice to Incoming Students.

The key findings provide valuable insights into how the participants managed their lived experiences of having to learn to prioritize the importance of family and educational responsibilities. In addition, participants had to figure out how to navigate college by overcoming the barriers and challenges to reach their academic goals. Participants in the study saw a college degree as a ticket that would help open the doors to better job opportunities and give them a sense of purpose and well-being for themselves and their families.

Theme 1: Balancing 2 Worlds: Familial Expectations

Research Question 1 was, “How do traditional cultural factors and contributing life challenges affect Hmong male students’ education?” This question examined the hardships and challenges Hmong male students encounter in pursuing their degree. The participants’ responses related to Research Question 1 were categorized into four subthemes. Subtheme 1.1 Roles and Responsibilities describes the connection between Hmong male students balancing school and familial expectations as sons. During the interviews, all nine Hmong male participants shared their experiences related to the challenges of being a first-generation Hmong son and a full-time college student. They described and echoed similar experiences as Hmong sons and the difficulty of balancing and prioritizing personal life challenges with the expected dual roles of cultural and school responsibilities to succeed in college. The participants reflected on growing up being influenced by their parents, who wanted them to pursue higher education to achieve the American Dream. In Subtheme 1.2 Educational Perceptions, the participants shared that attending higher education was essential to their families and would lead them to a better life and pave the way for other family members and siblings who wanted to pursue higher education. Subtheme 1.3 Financial Stability illustrates obtaining a college degree would provide job

opportunities and better pay. Finally, for Subtheme 1.4, the participants shared that their Support System consisted of their parents, family, relatives, and friends.

In their stories, the participants shared that they had to prioritize cultural and familial responsibilities while facing the challenges of balancing academic work and being successful in college. They mentioned that when it came to family obligations on weekends, their own school priorities were set aside to make sure cultural expectations (e.g., participating in ceremonies, funerals, Hu Plig, weddings, etc.) for family or relatives were attended to first. College is important to both students and parents; however, the challenges of family obligations for Hmong male students can hinder schooling and create stressors. Participants indicated that common stressors among the participants included waking up in the morning to attend cultural or family events that last all day, exhaustion from helping with the preparation and cooking during the cultural events, coming home, and having little time for academic studying. Hmong male students' cultural and family responsibilities do not go away when they go to college. With the expectation to uphold their roles and responsibilities within their family, Hmong sons are held to a higher standard by their parents and their community. Hmong parents who have not had the experience of attending higher education may not understand the pressure their sons face and what it takes to succeed in higher education.

Theme 2: Navigating Higher Education

Research Question 2 was, "What educational challenges are perceived by Hmong male students as they navigate higher education?" This question looked at understanding the impacting barriers students have to overcome to succeed in higher education. The participants' responses related to Research Question 2 produced four subthemes. The second theme in this study describes the participants' reflections on their college experience and the challenges they

faced while navigating higher education to achieve their educational path and personal goals. In Subtheme 2.1 College Decisions Making, the participants shared and described in a similar context their decision to attend a local college because they wanted to be closer to their family due to financial reasons and to be available to help their parents. Some participants looked up to their older siblings, uncles, and aunts when choosing which college to attend. Going to the same college as close family members allowed them to gain insight into the college experience while still giving the participants the ability to live at home, independently, or with a roommate off campus to lessen the financial strain of attending a 4-year university.

In Subtheme 2.2 Barriers and Sense of Belonging, the participants discussed their personal experiences and faced challenges navigating the college environment as first-generation college students. For Subtheme 2.3 Challenges in the Classroom, participants shared wanting to quit school, loneliness, not feeling a sense of belonging in the college classroom, and the hardship of making new friends because the college classroom was predominantly White. Participants mentioned a lack of diversity and that they rarely saw other Asian Americans in the courses they took, which was discouraging. While seeking academic support from academic advisors, counselors, professors, and classmates, the participants described different comfort levels in asking for help. For Subtheme 2.4 College Life: Likes and Dislikes, participants said they liked the amount of opportunity college has to offer students. College was a place where they did not have to be micromanaged and were treated as adults to manage themselves as students prioritizing what they wanted to do. Participants disliked the college tuition, increasing cost of textbooks, limited available courses where they had to be on a waiting list, and possibly getting disenrolled due to limited seating. Lastly, the participants talked about not knowing the resources available on campus. They expressed the frustration of going back and forth with

different people in financial aid, college departments, and graduate studies to get answers due to the advisors and faculty not knowing about the available resources.

Educational challenges perceived by the Hmong male students as they navigate higher education included the lack of knowledge about college awareness, programs, and resources. Participants' parents at times did not know how to provide the needed support to their children when it came to navigating higher education due to the limited knowledge they have of higher education. The participants struggled with studying for multiple midterms and final exams, finding study groups, and feeling like they do not belong in a classroom that is predominantly made up of White students.

Theme 3: A Ticket: Door of Opportunities

The participants' responses related to Research Questions 1 and 2 about the benefits of a college degree indicated their understanding that the degree would eventually lead them to a better future and opportunities. The Subtheme 3.1 Motivation to Pursue Higher Education related to the idea that the college degree is seen as a pathway to better opportunities. Participants spoke of how obtaining a college degree would open doors to a better life, employment, financial stability, and their family's future. The Subtheme 3.2 Benefits of a Degree related to the concept that earning a bachelor's degree would prepare participants for a better life after college and open many opportunities. Furthermore, a bachelor's degree is a key to unlocking the door to a master's program, employment, and a better job in the long run. In Subtheme 3.3 Word of Advice to Incoming College Students, participants' advice to incoming and transfer first-generation Hmong students is to join social groups and surround themselves with like-minded people, explore and talk to different departments in college to find what you

want in college, attend workshops, and do some volunteer work to gain experience and foster personal growth.

The third point highlights Hmong male students' views on education as a ticket to a better career and financial opportunities. They pointed out that having a college degree can provide better opportunities, motivating Hmong male students to attend higher education. Growing up, their families struggled financially; therefore, graduating with a college degree can get them promising careers and provide financial stability for them and their families. Data from the interviews show that Hmong male participants purportedly view a college degree as a gateway to better financial stability for themselves and their families.

Model Minority Myth and Theoretical Framework of Critical Race Theory

Hmong have been classified under the model minority for numerous years (Xiong & Lam, 2013). The model minority myth suggests that all Asian Americans have little to no issues in school and are more than typically academically successful. The stereotype portrays Asian Americans as naturally talented, persevering, and socially thriving (Pak et al., 2014). Although Asian Americans are succeeding at an increased rate in education, Hmong students continue to fall behind. According to New American Economy Research Fund (2021), The model minority myth hides the disparities among Asian American and Pacific Islander communities regarding education level. Table 8 illustrates Hmong as one of the fourth lowest on the spectrum of Asian American and Pacific Islander populations in educational attainment.

Table 8
Asian American and Pacific Islander Populations in Educational Attainment

Share of Adult Population with a College Degree (Age 25+), Largest 15 AAPI Groups			
Ancestry	Bachelor's degree	Advanced degree	Share with a College Degree
Taiwanese	33.5%	45.4%	78.9%
Indian	31.7%	44.4%	76.0%
Pakistani	34.0%	25.5%	59.5%
Korean	35.3%	23.0%	58.3%
Chinese	27.7%	29.2%	57.0%
Japanese	34.6%	18.9%	53.5%
Filipino	39.7%	10.1%	49.8%
Bangladeshi	27.8%	21.7%	49.5%
Nepalese	24.2%	22.2%	46.4%
Thai	29.5%	16.6%	46.0%
Vietnamese	22.3%	9.8%	32.1%
Hmong	18.7%	5.8%	24.5%
Cambodian	18.6%	5.1%	23.7%
Pacific Islander	12.8%	6.2%	19.0%
Laotian	13.2%	3.7%	16.9%

Note. From *Examining Educational, Workforce, and Earning Divides in the Asian American and Pacific Islander Community*, by New American Economy Research Fund, 2021, para. 3.

The nine research participants in the study identified as coming from low socio-economic families and first-generation Hmong male students. W. Yang (2017) pointed out, “Mong college students relied on federal Pell grants as the primary sources of income to cover economic expenses to get through college” (p. 123). All the participants rely on financial aid to pay their college tuition with the assistance of federal Pell grants and student loans. John, Teng, and Cha had to take out student loans to help offset the cost of tuition. Leng was the only participant who received some financial assistance from scholarships. While college enrollment and retention have increased in academia over the years for Asians, there has not been much of an increase in degree attainment in Hmong, especially pertaining to Hmong males versus Hmong females, where there is a disparity in their success rates in higher education. According to the 2019

United States Census report titled *Selected Population Profile in the United States* (by California, Hmong alone), 34.7% of Hmong males were enrolled in college or graduate school, whereas 32.9% of Hmong females enrolled in college or graduate school. The enrollment rate for Hmong males was 1.8% higher than for Hmong females. However, Hmong females had a much higher educational attainment percentage for a bachelor's degree or higher, at 27.5%, than the 20.6% for Hmong males.

In addition to the model minority myth, CRT was used as the theoretical framework for this study to analyze and understand the educational experiences centering on the issue of challenges in higher education attainment and experiences. CRT in education is a conceptual tool for examining and focusing on race and racism in analyzing the student experience in an institutional context (DePouw, 2012). CRT is a major educational approach that promotes culturally responsive and anti-oppressive pedagogy for students from historically marginalized groups (Wong et al., 2018). By utilizing the CRT narrative lens in this phenomenological study, the researcher hopes to bring an understanding and awareness of the importance of race and cultural consciousness to assist college administrators and universities in revamping existing support systems to help Hmong students graduate from college. In addition, college administrators and institutions need to be aware of marginalized minority groups and critical race consciousness when providing services and working with Hmong students because of their gender, experiences, and cultural backgrounds.

As first-generation college students, the participants struggled and expressed their own unique personal challenges navigating the college environment, particularly with race in the major and classroom. The participants voiced that they felt they did not belong in their major because they were the only Hmong or Asian students in a predominantly White classroom.

Being in a predominantly White major, they felt isolated and lonely. They sometimes wanted to quit school because of the pressure of fitting in and feeling uncomfortable engaging with their peers. F. Vang (2015) shared, “Hmong students’ perception of academic setting also plays a factor in their academic performance. They are more likely to struggle in their academically if they cannot adapt to their environment” (p. 47). The participants felt that if the professors were Hmong, they could relate personally to their education experience, journey, and career.

CRT narrative storytelling/ counter-stories was the best theoretical framework for this study, as it analyzes and clarifies the educational experiences of minorities, centering on the issue of challenges in higher education attainment. Few studies with CRT have been applied to first-generation Hmong male students. Therefore, this study helps bring a voice to understanding the phenomenon of Hmong male college students. Unfortunately, there is limited information and research in this area. From these nine participants’ stories, the researcher learned there is a need for future research on the discussion of factors Hmong males face in pursuit of higher education.

Recommendations

Recommendations for Colleges and Universities

The findings of this research study provide insight into the challenges and factors Hmong male college students experience while pursuing their college degrees. Based on the limited research, the outcomes of this study provide an important starting place for researchers who want to further study first-generation Hmong males’ college experiences in higher education.

Different student support services and resources for Hmong male students exist on college campuses. The unique and personal stories of the participants in this study are important insights for colleges and universities to consider to improve Hmong male student educational attainment.

College personnel (e.g., administrators, faculty, and staff) should be aware of these findings to provide support and resources that can help strengthen the college experience, environment, and educational attainment for Hmong male students. The following are recommendations for colleges and universities to help enhance support services to aid Hmong male students in obtaining their educational degrees.

1. **Provide an annual cultural competencies event.** Even though Hmong have lived in the United States for 47 years, many people still do not know who Hmong are. This event would provide information on where the Hmong come from, cultural background, language, food, etc. This event will be provided to administrators, faculty, and staff. Hmong presenters can be from various professional backgrounds providing training on Hmong cultural competencies.
2. **Hire a diverse pool of administrators, faculty, and staff to help build personal-level connections with Hmong male students.** It would be ideal to hire professionals who can connect with Hmong students on an academic and personal level because they will better understand the Hmong family dynamics of the cultural background.
3. **Outreach connections and partnerships.** Colleges and universities should develop and expand partnerships with high school counselors informing them of programs available to Hmong male students who are low-income and first-generation. Create mentoring and outreach opportunities for new incoming, continuing, and transfer students by connecting them to major departments, faculty and staff, peer-to-peer networking, and resources and support services on campus.
4. **Provide resources to monolingual and limited English-speaking Hmong families.** Colleges and universities can offer and provide informational events related to on-campus programs and resources to Hmong parents and families and introduce the Hmong administrators, faculty, and staff. This can help Hmong parents know what is available and what to expect when their children attend the institution.

Recommendations for Future Research

The following recommendations provide suggestions for future research inquiries. The current study provides a small snapshot to understand the educational, cultural influences, and life challenges Hmong male students face in pursuit of higher education. The data collected in

this study were from participants attending the same institution in northern California.

Additional studies could include:

1. Exploring a larger sample size of Hmong male students from other geographical locations and institutions.
2. A comparison of first-generation Hmong male students to other first-generation male students of color.
3. Exploring first-generation Hmong male students who graduated and did not graduate by looking at the contributing factors.

Summary

This research study provided the researcher with better insights and understanding of what Hmong male students face in pursuit of higher education. The participants' stories reveal a detailed description and understanding of the factors Hmong male students face to navigate educational, cultural, and life challenges that affect educational attainment while pursuing a college degree. All the participants in this research shared their individual stories and experiences in higher education. A college degree is essential to Hmong male students and their families as they integrate or enter into college institutions and will later return to provide assistance for their families and the Hmong community.

EPILOGUE: PERSONAL REFLECTION

This research topic was inspired by my own college journey and the experience of being a first-generation Hmong son and the first person in my family to pursue higher education. As a Hmong doctoral student and researcher, the purpose of this study was to understand the educational attainment experiences of Hmong male students in higher education. For many Hmong male students, obtaining a college degree is a step closer to achieving and attaining the American Dream. It was a privilege to interview the nine Hmong participants and learn about their college experiences and challenges.

Through the nine interviews with the participants, I was able to understand the narrative stories of their college experiences. Obtaining education, a good career, and financial stability have always been instilled in Hmong sons as they grow up into adulthood. In general, many Hmong parents do not know the educational or cultural challenges their sons experience, balancing the dual role of college and familial cultural roles and responsibilities. Hmong sons attend higher education with the hope of seeking a better life, gaining financial stability, and making their parents proud.

From this research, Hmong sons are expected to know the Hmong culture. They have to find balance with prioritizing cultural weekend obligations (e.g., ceremonies, funerals, family gatherings, Hu Plig, weddings, etc.). Responsibilities on the weekends make it challenging to find time for academic studying. Balancing cultural and familial obligations and the academic workload were the challenges experienced by the participants. Being in the doctorate program and working on this dissertation, I can personally relate to the nine Hmong male students. Balancing my education and familial roles and responsibilities was very challenging, especially

being the head of the household, the breadwinner, the father to my children, a husband to my wife, and the oldest son taking care of my elderly parents. Hence, the role and responsibilities of a Hmong son do not go away regardless of how much time has passed with Hmong living in the United States for over 40+ years.

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APPENDIX A: E-MAIL INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

Dear _____,

I hope you are doing well!

Since you were one of my research participant interviewees, “Cultural and Gender Shift: Trends and Factors Hmong Male Students Face in Pursuit of Higher Education.” I would like to invite you to participate in a Hmong male focus group taking place on _____ from _____.

I would like to ask you to participate in a focus group to help obtain your insights and gather a deeper understanding of the experiences of Hmong male pursuing a higher education degree.

Participation: Your participation will entail meeting with 9-10 other Hmong male students to share your experiences about attending college. Your experience will help provide insight and understanding to further improve and support Hmong male students’ college experience. Your participation is entirely voluntary and your decision on whether or not to participate can be withdrawn at any time.

- 1) A Hmong male student
- 2) Participating in a recorded 60-minute interview
- 4) Reflection (open-end questions) of your college experience.

If you are interested, please contact me through e-mail me at [REDACTED] or call me at [REDACTED]

Sincerely,

Sai Xiong
Doctoral Student in Educational & Organizational Leadership
University of Pacific, Sacramento

APPENDIX B: DEMOGRAPHIC INTAKE SURVEY

1. What is your name? _____ prefer: Pseudonym name: _____
2. When were you born? _____
3. Where were you born? _____(city) _____(state/country)
4. Are you the first generation to attend college? __ yes __no
5. What is your marital status?
6. Do you live? On campus Off campus
7. Do you have a job? Yes, how many hours a week do you work? _____ No
8. What year are you in your college career? Freshman Sophomore Junior Senior
9. What is your declared major? _____
10. What is your career goal? _____
11. Parents highest degree _____(father) _____(mother)

APPENDIX C: INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

- A. Title of Project:
Cultural and Gender Shift: Trends and Factors Hmong Male Students Face in Pursuit of Higher Education
- B. Investigator:
Principal Investigator: Sai Xiong, Doctoral Student, University of Pacific.
- C. Purpose of the Research Project:
The objective of this study is to analyze factors that contribute to Hmong male students with the aim to understand how factors such as education, cultural influences and life challenges contribute to low educational attainment of Hmong male students in college.
- D. Procedures: I understand that as a participant in this study, the following will happen:
The interview recording will be 60 – 90 minutes with the student researcher. Questions will focus on the transitions and or factors the participants encountered at Northern California State in pursuit of their educational degree and how Northern California State faculty, staff, or administrators can better help serve Hmong male students. The recordings will be transcribed by a professional transcribing company. The recordings and transcriptions will be placed in a locked desk, and only the researcher will have access.
- E. Benefits and Risks:
Benefits: Opportunity for the participants to address issues in a safe environment and share their experiences.
Risks: Participants can withdraw from the study at any time.
- F. Confidentiality:
Pseudonyms for each participant will be used and indicated as such in the study. The student researcher will be the only person having access to all information. All materials will be destroyed after four years.
- G. Voluntary Participation Statement:
I understand that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may either refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.
- H. If You Have Questions:
I understand that any questions I may have regarding the research or specific procedures should be directed to Sai Xiong at [REDACTED] or via e-mail: [REDACTED]
“If I have questions regarding my rights as a research subject, I should contact the Human Subjects (IRB), University of Pacific Research Office, (209) 946-3903 or via e-mail at irb@pacific.edu
My signature below indicates that I have read and understand the procedures described above, and give my information and voluntary consent to participate in this study. I understand that I will also receive a signed copy of this consent form.

Signature of Participant

Name of Participant

Date Signed

Address

Phone Number

Signature of Researcher

Date Signed

APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Family

- Are you the first person of your family to attend college?
- Are your parents able to help you with your school education?
- How does your family feel about you attending Northern California State (pseudo name)?
- Were your parents involved in your decision-making? Or was your education left for you to decide?
- Do your parents give you advice and moral support?
- Do you feel that you are treated differently because you're a son? How are you treated differently?
- If you have any sisters, do you have the same expectations as them?
- Do you have male expectations as a son?
- Are you expected to help the family financially after high school or college?
- Are you expected to help provide for your sibling?

Student

- Why did you decide to attend Northern California State?
- What types of barriers did you encounter?
- What kind of information would you like to know before attending college?
- Did you have any help from people to help prepare you for college? If so, who?
- Are there any Hmong cultural differences that you deal with while pursuing higher education?
- How much do you know about your Hmong culture or history?
- Why are you pursuing higher education?
- Who do you go to for help or advice with academics?
- Did you have a role in your college decision?
- Did you have control over your college career?
- Did your parents support your decision to pursue higher education?
- What motivated you to pursue higher education?
- Did your parents fear that if you attend higher education, you were going to assimilate to the American culture?
- Do you have siblings in college?

School

- What would you like to see happen at Northern California State to help new Hmong students?
- Is there a person that you can go to for help on campus?
- Do you feel comfortable participating in class discussions?
- Do you feel differently in the classroom, dorms, being on campus? Why?
- Why did you choose to live on or off-campus?
- Do you live with family or roommates? How did you choose your roommates? Are your roommates Hmong or another ethnicity?

- Do you sit in the front or back of the classroom? If so, why?
- Do you belong to student organizations? If so why and what groups?

Support faculty, staff, and administrator

- Do you have any advice to give to new incoming Hmong students?
- Do you feel afraid/shy asking for help from professors, faculties, or administrators?
- Have you ever experienced rejections from administrators, faculty, or professors when you ask for help?
- If there was a Hmong administrator, faculty, or professor on campus, do you feel comfortable going there help?
- How can administrators, faculty, or professors better assist Hmong students?

APPENDIX E: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

Now that you are in college...

1. What educational challenges have you encountered while you navigate higher education?
2. What plans do you have in place to help you graduate from college?
3. What do you like and don't like about college?
4. What are some things that may help you be successful in college?
5. How does earning a bachelor's degree help prepare you for life after college?