



ECOLOGICAL FACTORS IN HMONG AMERICAN EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS



SACRAMENTO
STATE

*"What nationality are you?'... 'Who are Hmong, Mongolians?'
It is things like that that makes me feel growing up being Hmong
was hard to identify. Even going to school today, I still do not
see the options of Hmong being in the Asian category when
identifying my identity."*



“What drives me to do well in college, definitely my parents... this is always something they always wanted. Like I said, my dad never got the chance to go to college so he always wanted to go to college. My mom always wanted to go to school in Laos... so I always wanted to do it for them.”

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A MESSAGE FROM PRESIDENT ROBERT S. NELSEN

In 2015, the Hmong community celebrated the 40th anniversary since migrating and resettling in the United States. In these times when America is struggling with immigration and immigration policies, there is much to learn from the Hmong diaspora and from their journey and experiences.

With this groundbreaking report, Sacramento State shows its commitment to be an inclusive campus that plays a central role for the economic success of Hmong Americans in our city and in our region. That commitment is critical precisely because Sacramento State serves one of the largest Hmong student populations in the nation.

This report provides key insightful numeric data and powerful narratives that will give readers a much richer and deeper understanding of Hmong American students and their parents. I firmly believe that the report will help Sacramento State and others improve the retention and graduation rates for Hmong students as they transition from high school to and through college.

I hope that you find this report useful, insightful, and compelling. I am certain it will inform education policy discussions in this region for years to come.

Robert S. Nelsen
President



REMARKS TO THE HMONG COMMUNITY

My conversations with the student and parent participants left me feeling optimistic about their future and the future of the Hmong community in America. As a member of a group of people without a country and with a history that cannot be changed, my participation in this study influenced my own sense of empowerment. Through this process, I became more conscious of my place in the Hmong community and the role I play in the larger society. I recognized my male privilege as a Hmong son, which has helped me bring a voice to the stories of the young people living the Hmong experience in my home region. I am also endeavoring to shape responsive policies and change the discourse of what it means to be a Hmong student in college. In doing so, I myself I have become a cultural broker and cultural straddler.

Further, as the children or grandchildren of refugees, we all should be reminded of the journey our parents or grandparents took. It wasn't easy, and their generations may never fully transition to life in America. But thanks to their efforts, it is possible that within the next 40 years, we can carve a place in America for our children as Hmong Americans.

This report is dedicated to the Hmong students who stay the course and successfully graduate. As a result of their success, an influx Hmong Americans are entering the professional workforce, and I am hopeful that a community cadre of Hmong professionals will actively negotiate a path for positive change. They could become a political force in California, using their position to address the health, educational, economic, and social disparities that our communities face.

—Dr. Chao Danny Vang

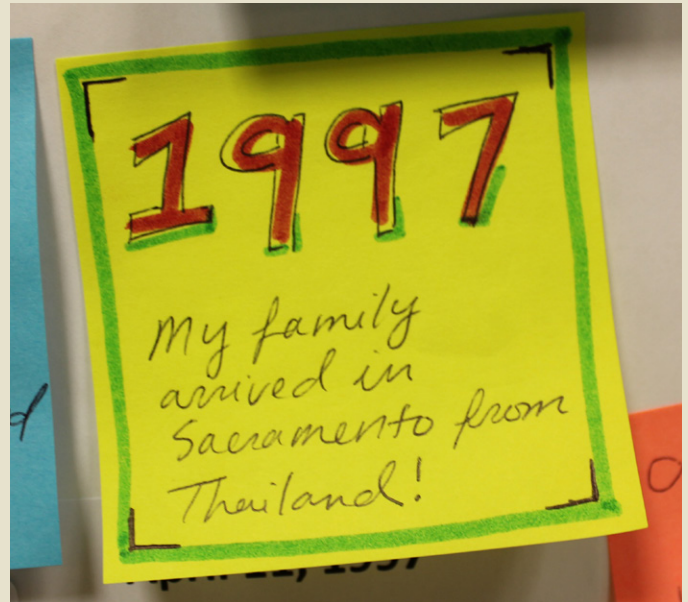
ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report examines the academic needs and challenges of Hmong students at Sacramento State. It explores the students' experiences, using both numeric and narrative data, and then considers institutional changes that will better support their academic development. This report provides implications for educators and policymakers, including academic institutions that serve large numbers of first-generation Hmong students whose parent did not complete a four-year college degree. The report gives Sacramento State an insight into the experiences of the 1,000+ Hmong students it serves. The goal is to begin a rich conversation that will identify comprehensive policies and innovative practices that will increase the college completion rate among Hmong students.

With a thriving Hmong student presence, Sacramento State can become a destination campus for Hmong students. The students can play a central role in the economic success of this campus, and the university can play a central role in the success of the city's Hmong population.

This report only examines Sacramento State; accordingly, it represents some but not all Hmong students. This limited representation cannot be used to generalize the entire population of Hmong students at the institution, not to mention in the region, the state, or the United States. Nevertheless, although fundamentally changing American schools is well beyond the scope of this report, it intends to carve out a place in the academic literature for the experiences of Hmong students.

"I can make a change for me and my family. It kind of breaks the stigma that because your parents are not educated, you can't become educated or you can't move up the ladder."





INTRODUCTION

From 2000 to 2010, Asian Americans composed the fastest-growing racial or ethnic group, with an increase in population by 46% to 19.5 million in the United States. The Hmong population experienced growth by 40%, reaching an estimated 285,000 Hmong Americans residing in all 50 states, including the District of Columbia (Asian Pacific American Legal Center & Asian American Justice Center, 2011; Pfeifer & Yang, 2013; U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). This substantial increase in the Hmong population was significant—it meant more Hmong students would be enrolling in American school systems and matriculating into classrooms throughout the nation.

National data suggested that too many Hmong students are failing to matriculate from degree programs in colleges and universities. Table 1 shows that 37.7% of Hmong Americans in the United States have less than a high school diploma as their highest level of education. Only a few have a bachelor's degree (11.3%) or possess a graduate or professional degree (3.3%; U.S. Census Bureau, 2013a). The metropolitan area comprising Sacramento, Arden Arcade, and Roseville supports this data; only 7.3% have earned a bachelor's degree and only 3.6% have earned a graduate or professional degree as their highest level of education (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013b).

The Hmong population experienced growth by 40%, reaching an estimated 285,000 Hmong Americans residing in all 50 states

Table 1
**Educational Attainment in the Hmong Population
25 Years Old and Older**

Highest Level of Education	General Population (US)	Hmong (US)	Hmong (Sacramento Metro Area)
Less than a high school diploma	14.7%	37.7%	42.8%
High school graduate	28.4%	21.9%	22.2%
Bachelor's degree	17.6%	11.3%	7.3%
Graduate or professional degree	10.4%	3.3%	3.6%

Note. Adapted from Selected Population Profile in the United States: 2011-2013 American Community Survey 3 Year Estimates 2009-2011, by the U.S. Census Bureau, 2013a

The Sacramento region contains over 29,509 Hmong people, and this population will continue to increase. The median age in this population is 20 years, and 79.6% of Hmong ages 3 years or older are enrolled in preschool through 12th grade (see Table 2; U.S. Census Bureau, 2013a). Consequently, there will be an increase in Hmong students' matriculation into local colleges and universities, including California State University, Sacramento (Sacramento State).

Located in the heart of the Sacramento Metro Area and the city of Sacramento, Sacramento State serves one of the largest Hmong student populations in the region, state, and nation. From Fall 2005 to Fall 2016, Hmong student enrollment grew from 153 students to 1,075 students, representing a 602% population increase and making Hmong students the second-largest Asian subgroup on campus (just short of 2,039 Filipino students; Office of Institutional Research, 2016). Figure 1 presents the total number of Hmong students enrolled at Sacramento State from Fall 2005 to Fall 2016.



“Being Hmong was actually one of the, probably one of the reason why I went to college because being a Hmong women, we have more responsibilities, we have higher expectations so I feel like it was easier for me to go to college... I feel it’s a big accomplishment, not just for yourself but as a community... All four of my brothers dropped out... I’m still here even though I’m struggling. I am almost done”

Table 2
School Enrollment in the Sacramento Metro Area

Current Level of Education	General population	Hmong population
Preschool	5.5%	4.1%
Kindergarten	4.7%	4.0%
Grades 1-8	37.6%	46.4%
Grades 9-12	21.1%	25.1%
College or graduate school	31.2%	20.3%

Note. Adapted from Selected Population Profile in the United States: 2011-2013 American Community Survey 3 Year Estimates 2009-2011, by the U.S. Census Bureau, 2013a.

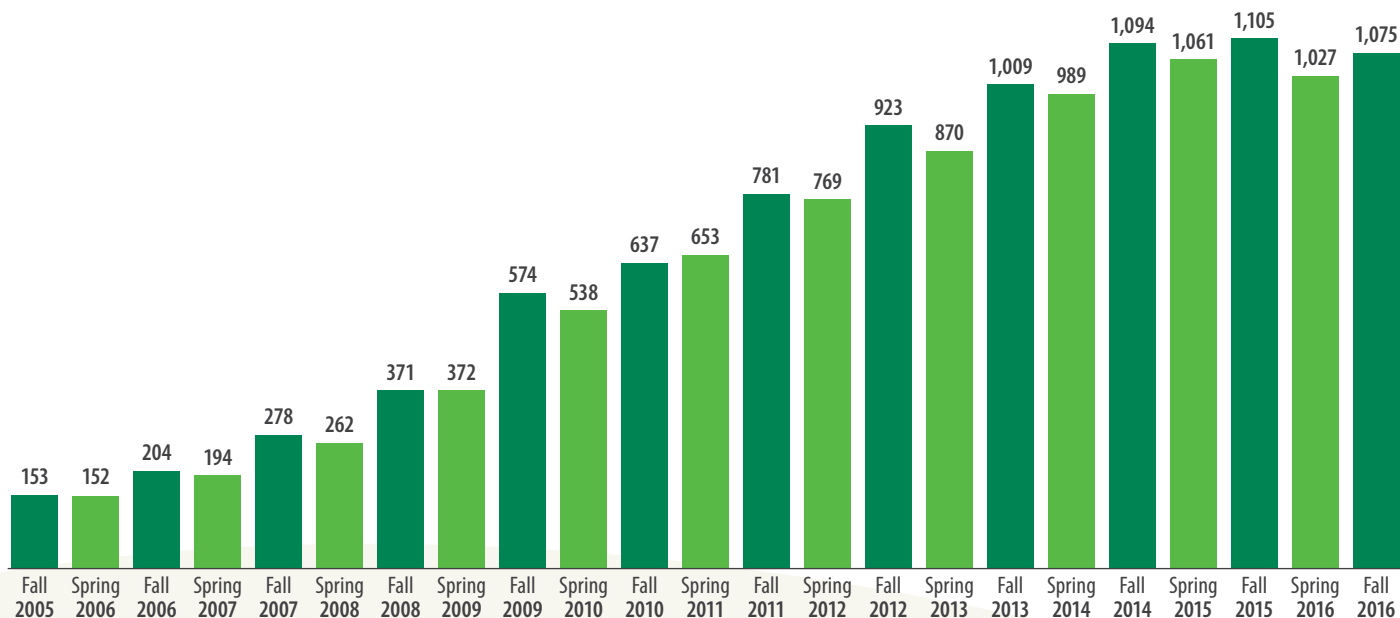


Figure 1

Total number of Hmong students enrolled at Sacramento State from Fall 2005 to Fall 2016. Adapted from Southeast Asian Graduation Rates, by the Office of Institutional Research, 2016, data received from Sacramento State on

September 28, 2016, and Hmong Enrollment, Retention, and Graduation 2017-2018, by the Office of Analytics and Institutional Effectiveness, 2017, data received from Sacramento State on August 14, 2017.

It is important to note that not all Hmong students from 2005 to 2009 were accounted for in this report, due to the lack of a specific racial category in the classification used by the California State University (CSU) system. During that period and previous years, many Hmong students classified themselves as either Asian or Laotian. Students were only counted as Hmong if “Hmong” was one of their self-reported ethnicities.

What factors might contribute to this tremendous increase in enrollment? In 2000, the median age in the Hmong community was 16.1 years (Hmong National Development, 2004). A decade later, the median age in the Hmong community was 20.4 years. Many Hmong young adults are now completing high school and matriculating into colleges and universities (see Table 2; U.S. Census Bureau, 2013a).

Also in 2000, 8% of Hmong women and 18.6% of Hmong men held a bachelor’s degree or higher (Hmong National Development, 2014), revealing a 10% gap. A decade later, Hmong women with a bachelor’s degree or higher had increased from 8% to 14.7%, whereas the rate among Hmong males had declined from 18.6% to 13.5% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013a).



At Sacramento State, from Fall 2009 to Spring 2017, native female Hmong students have consistently enrolled in undergraduate and post-baccalaureate degree programs, exceeding male Hmong students (see Figure 2). Examining archival data on the 326 Hmong students who graduated between Summer 2012 and Spring 2014, Thao (2015) found that Hmong females graduated at a much higher rate than Hmong males (61.7% versus 38.3%). This trend suggests a shift in the cultural attitude toward Hmong daughters pursuing higher education, which may contribute to the increased enrollment of Hmong students in colleges and universities across America. Figures 2 and 3 further illustrate this gap.

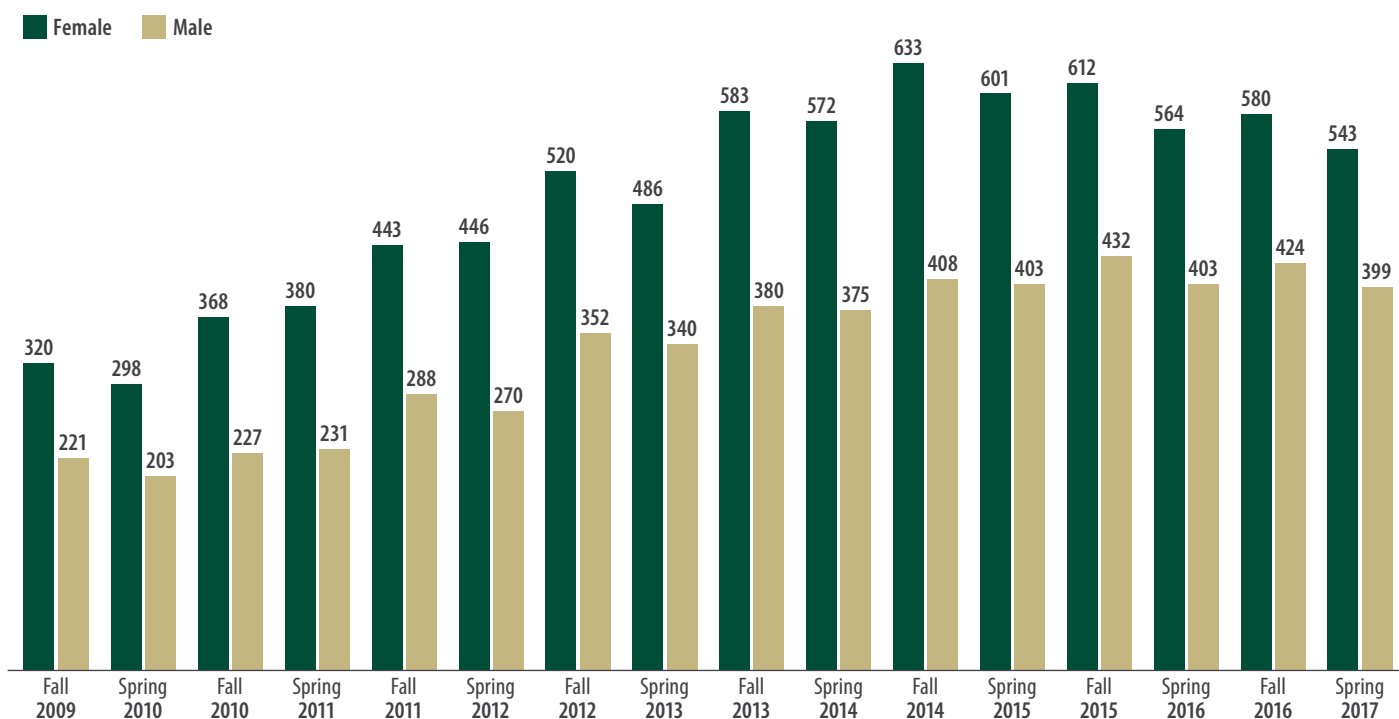


Figure 2

The total number of Hmong students enrolled in undergraduate degree programs at Sacramento State, divided by gender, from Fall 2009 to Spring 2017. Adapted from Hmong Enrollment, Retention, and

Graduation 2017-2018, by the Office of Analytics and Institutional Effectiveness, 2017, data received from Sacramento State on August 14, 2017.

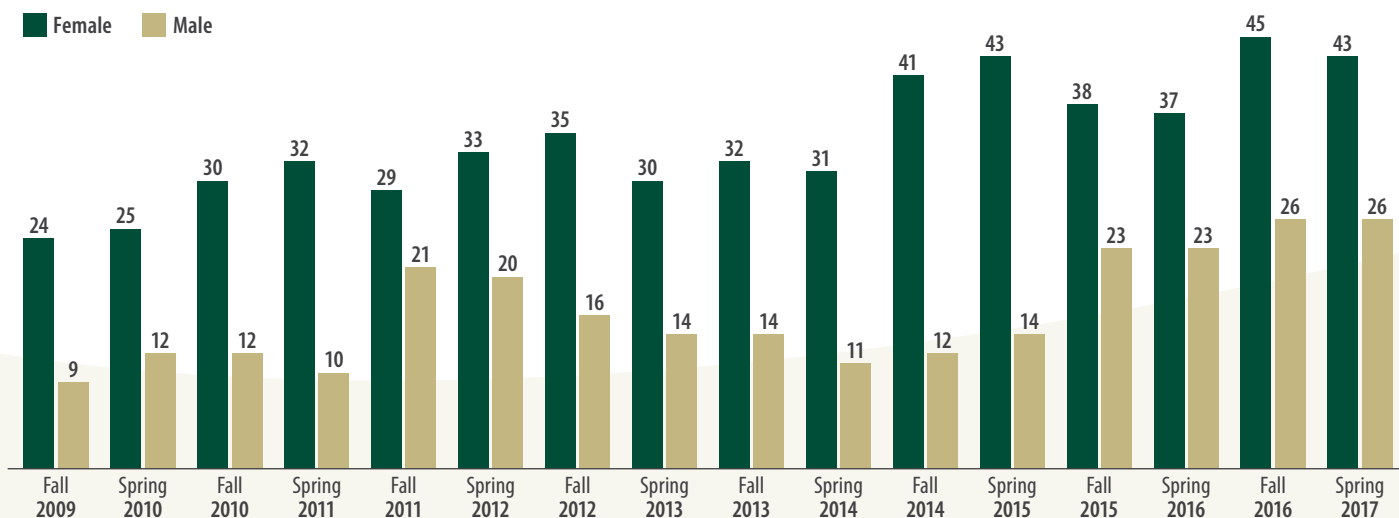


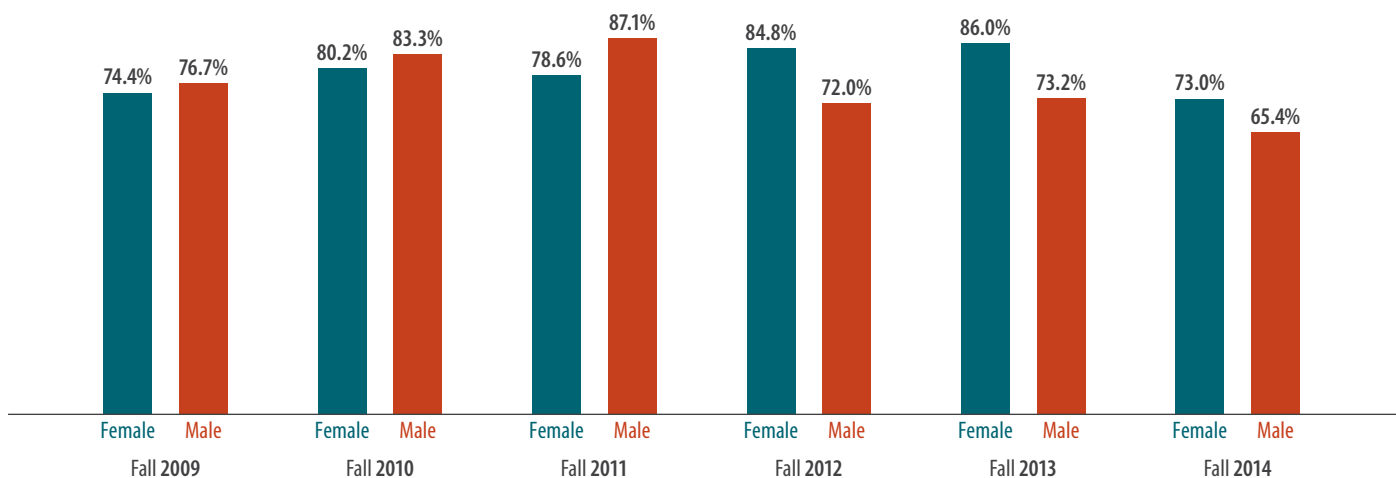
Figure 3

The total number of Hmong students enrolled in post-baccalaureate degree programs at Sacramento State, divided by gender, from Fall 2009 to Spring 2017. Adapted from Hmong Enrollment, Retention, and

Graduation 2017-2018, by the Office of Analytics and Institutional Effectiveness, 2017, data received from Sacramento State on August 14, 2017.

Figure 4

Retention Rate by Gender for Hmong Students by Year Three, Fall 2009–Fall 2014

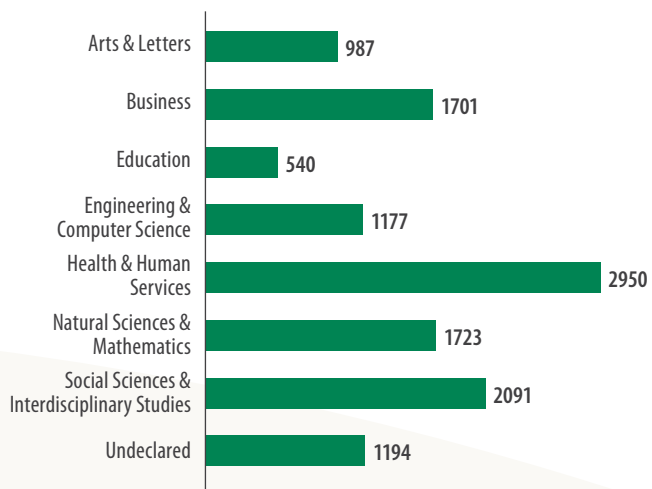


From Fall 2009 to Fall 2014, the retention rate by gender for native Hmong students by year three on average was slightly higher among native Hmong female students than among native Hmong male students (percent still enrolled or graduated) (see Figure 4) (Office of Institutional Research, 2017).

From Fall 2009 to Fall 2016, most Hmong students held a major in the College of Health and Human Services and College of Social Science and Interdisciplinary Studies (Office of Analytics and Institutional Effectiveness, 2017). Figure 5 presents the total Hmong enrollment (undergraduate only) by college.

Figure 5

Total Hmong Enrollment (undergraduate only) by College from Fall 2009–Fall 2016





Despite the growth in enrollment at Sacramento State, native Hmong students experience very low four-year completion rates (see Figure 6). To illustrate, during the Fall 2011 cohort, the overall percentage of native university freshmen who graduated within four years was 8.3%. For Southeast Asians, the rate was 2.8% (Office of Institution Research, 2015), and for Hmong students, it was only 1.2% (Office of Analytics and Institutional Effectiveness, 2017).

The rate of native Hmong students who graduated within six years is relatively higher. Figure 7 presents the six-year time-to-graduation rate for the Fall 2005 to Fall 2011 cohorts. The six-year time to graduation rate was 38.2% in Fall 2007 and 32.2% in Fall 2008, representing a huge difference from the 0% four-year graduation rate in both years (Office of Institutional Research, 2016).

Figure 6

The 4-year graduation rates for native Hmong students from Fall 2005 to Fall 2012. Adapted from Southeast Asian Graduation Rates, by the Office of Institutional Research, 2016, data received from Sacramento State on September 28, 2016, and Hmong Enrollment, Retention, and Graduation 2017-2018, by the Office of Analytics and Institutional Effectiveness, 2017, data received from Sacramento State on August 14, 2017.

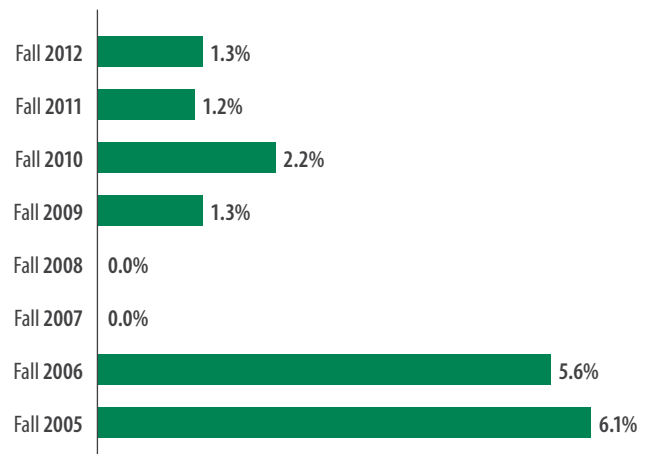
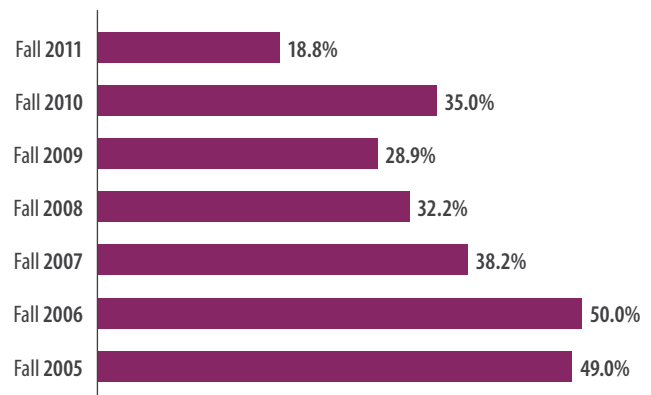


Figure 7

The six-year graduation rate among Hmong students from Fall 2005 through Fall 2011. Adapted from Southeast Asian Graduation Rates, by the Office of Institutional Research, 2016, data received from Sacramento State on September 28, 2016, and Hmong Enrollment, Retention, and Graduation 2017-2018, by the Office of Analytics and Institutional Effectiveness, 2017, data received from Sacramento State on August 14, 2017.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

(Summary of Key Findings)

Numeric and narrative data provide insight into the Hmong student experience at Sacramento State. This report presents quantitative findings from Fall 2014 and qualitative findings of emerging themes from Fall 2015, based on the perception and self-disclosure of students and their parents.

STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS

In 2014, a majority of the Hmong students at Sacramento State were first-generation college students (78.6%). Over half (55.2%) were employed and nearly half (44.4%) worked 20 or more hours a week. Most (89.2%) were enrolled in school full-time.

A large number of the Hmong students at Sacramento State lived at home with multiple people in the household. Nearly all (98.5%) reported living off campus, and nearly half (48.8%) lived at home with 7 or more individuals in the household.

Most of the Hmong students (89.3%) financed their education with state or federal aid. Most of them (76.7%) also reported a household income of less than \$39,000.

About half (53.9%) of the respondents had taken remedial courses in both math and English since entering college, and 73.1% reported at least one sibling with a college degree.

STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Only half (51.3%) of the students reported that Sacramento State was their first or only choice of schools. Most chose to attend college because of the influence of a parent (89.9%) or teacher (74%) or to help their families (42.5%).

During the college application process, a large number of Hmong students lacked college information (such as financial aid availability and required documents), and 58% indicated that this was a significant barrier. Many received no help with their applications or their transition to college (58.9%), and most indicated they were self-motivated (83%).



ADJUSTMENT TO COLLEGE LIFE

For a majority of the Hmong students, family obligations (79%) and cultural obligations (51.7%) interfered (or somewhat interfered) with their ability to complete their degree. A large majority frequently or occasionally felt overwhelmed by all they had to do (89.5%).

A large number of the Hmong students frequently or occasionally felt depressed (70.7%) or isolated (63.8%) on campus. About half frequently or occasionally felt lonely or homesick (49%).

When faced with academic challenges, a majority of the Hmong students at Sacramento State frequently or occasionally confided in a friend (91%) or a sibling (78.7%), and many confided in a faculty or staff member (42.8%). When dealing with personal challenges, most frequently or occasionally discussed them with a friend (85.5%) or a sibling (71.2%), and a small number discussed them with a faculty or staff member (18.3%).

"I am so proud of myself for still continuing my education after failing classes and being on academic probation numerous of times. Even when things get hard and I lose self-motivation, I try to remind myself about how important my education is for my future. There are many other things that I am proud of; however, I am most proud of how far I've come with my education, despite the struggles."



CAMPUS CLIMATE

A majority of the Hmong students at Sacramento State saw themselves as members of the campus community (77.8%). Most had not felt unsafe on campus (70%) and had never been discriminated against based on race or ethnicity (60.9%).

A large number of the Hmong students had participated in a student club (92.3%). However, a majority had not participated in an internship (87.9%), used the Career Center services (57.4%), received tutoring assistance (71%), or used the Student Health Center's psychological counseling (92%).

"I actually got accepted into UC Riverside, but it was too far, and they weren't able to help me financially, so they were pushing for me to go to Sac State instead... It was really close to home... Sac State was actually one of my last options."

STUDENT SUCCESS

For a majority of the Hmong students at Sacramento State, faculty and staff mentors (92.8%) and peer mentors (89.2%) were very helpful or somewhat helpful in their efforts to complete their degrees. Other key factors included motivation (98%), communication with their families (97.8%), and moral support (97.2%). Nearly all of the respondents (94%) said that a campus partnership with the Hmong community could help them complete their degrees.

Despite some challenges, 72% indicated if they could make their college choice over again, they would still enroll at Sacramento State.





EMERGING THEMES: STUDENTS

The Hmong students felt morally bound to their families and culture even before they entered college. Once in college, they had to negotiate the responsibilities of two cultures and navigate between two identities. They experienced a high level of cultural incongruence between home and school settings. Their role as cultural negotiators made them more conscious of their place in the institution and society, and in return they developed a stronger sense of their ethnic identity as Hmong.

“The support system that I have right here is HUSA being one, and the Ambassador’s Initiative really helped me out... It drove me to excel in school because it taught me how to balance myself more where being an active person in college. And I ended up finding my sense of belonging there... I also joined [the] Hmong Health Alliance... Even though I’m not part of Full Circle, I became part of Full Circle in helping them... I feel like those are great programs that bring back to the community.”



EMERGING THEMES: PARENTS

The Hmong parents stressed the importance of maintaining a Hmong identity by preserving the Hmong culture and religious traditions. Though difficult at times, the parents believed it was important, in their role as parents, to encourage their children. As refugees, they understood that the displacement they had experienced would create a new Hmong American culture, which their children would acquire through socialization.

In Laos, there was no opportunity to attend school. As a result, a majority of parents referred to themselves as uneducated, and they found this hindered their ability to help their children academically.

Robust data sets showed that many elements—cultural, social, family, religious, and economic—were central to the collective experience of Hmong student's educational pursuits. For many Hmong students, commitment to family and culture was an important deciding factor in their decision to enroll at Sacramento State. Further, for a majority, interrelatedness with their college peers was a common support factor that enabled them to remain in school.

“You have a lot of pressure, expectations that you have to meet because you have two different cultures. You have the American culture and you have the Hmong culture, and you have to choose which expectation to meet... In order to get that American dream, get that job, you have to sacrifice, for a while, that Hmong expectation of getting married. So I have to put off marriage in order to succeed that. So sometimes I feel like you can't win. There's nowhere to go, so you get alienated from one of the two cultures.”



METHODOLOGY

During the Fall 2014 to Spring 2015 academic year, a study was conducted to understand, analyze, and describe the Hmong student experience at Sacramento State. To generate information that examined both the depth and breadth of the research questions, the study employed a mixed method design, using a sequential explanatory strategy that was both quantitative and qualitative. In the first phase, participants completed a survey. In the second phase, a select number of respondents participated in a one-time interview. By the culmination of the study, 496 Hmong students completed the 52 item questionnaire. The findings provided insightful numeric and narrative data that informed the second, qualitative research study, which was conducted during the Fall 2015 to Spring 2016 academic year. For inclusion and to capture a range of experiences, an equal gender distribution participated in the interview process; three male and three female students for a total of six student interviews; three fathers and three mothers for a total of six parent interviews. For detailed analysis of methodology, please see Vang, 2016.

For centuries, the Hmong have recorded their rich cultural history and tradition of problem-solving through oral narrative. In that tradition, the qualitative study applied the Critical Race Theory method of storytelling and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory as the frameworks for exploring the contextual factors that contribute to the post-secondary experience of first-generation Hmong undergraduate students. By methodological design, a descriptive phenomenological strategy of inquiry was used to conduct 12 in-depth, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews. To capture a range of experiences, an equal number of male and female participants were included in the study (see Appendix A and B).

STUDENTS' QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

The following findings are based on surveys of 468 student participants.

BASIC DEMOGRAPHIC FACTORS

Dividing the student participants by gender, **68.7%** were male and **31.3%** were female. Their marital statuses were separated into four categories: never been married (89.3%), married (9.6%), separated (0.2%), and divorced (0.9%). None had been widowed.

FAMILIAL FACTORS

The overwhelming majority of the Hmong students were the first in their families to attend college (78.6%), which helps explain why they became “cultural straddlers” (Carter, 2006), simultaneously straddling dissonant home and school settings. Their families also lacked basic knowledge about college, which helps explain the stressful socio-emotional transition many students experienced.

Environmental and societal factors played a strong role in the Hmong students’ educational pursuits. Because of Hmong cultural norms, adult children often live in close geographic proximity to their families. Many of the students wanted to move away for college, yet decided to stay because of these familial and cultural expectations. Sacramento State was the first choice for only half (51.3%) of the students. Embracing their cultural obligations and familial expectations may impede Hmong students’ graduation rates and, more importantly, their college experiences.

The vast majority of the students lived at home while attending Sacramento State (98.5% lived off campus). For those living at home, nearly half lived in large households of 7 or more people (48.8%).



“I feel like no matter where I want to go in life, I’m always having this extra baggage with me... I have to always consider my parents, and it influence[d] a lot with me when I wanted to find a future spouse... I want to go here for college, I want to do this, oh but what about my parents? I have to help them.”



Interestingly, many Hmong students did not know their fathers' and mothers' educational histories (see Figures 8 and 9). Many parents lacked formal education, which may be a significant factor in Hmong students' academic development and success, including their risk for dropping out of college

"They were against going far away because Hmong parents in general want their son or daughter to be here so that they can help out with chores or help around with cultural events. And so they were really supportive when going to Sac State, but to other campuses, they did not encourage. My father expects me to help do chores and take care of them because they are getting old now and because he doesn't have the money to support our education."

Figure 8

The fathers' highest levels of education, as reported by the students.

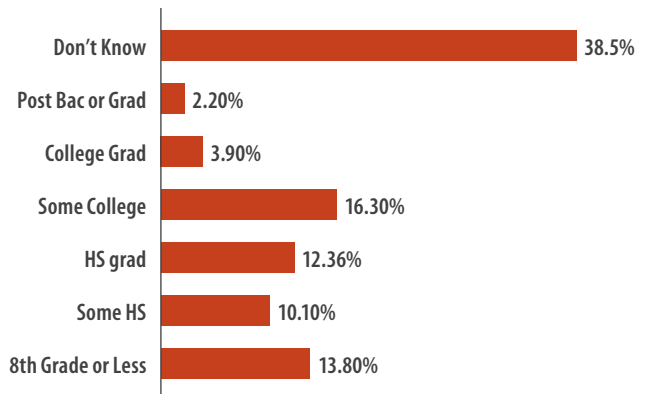
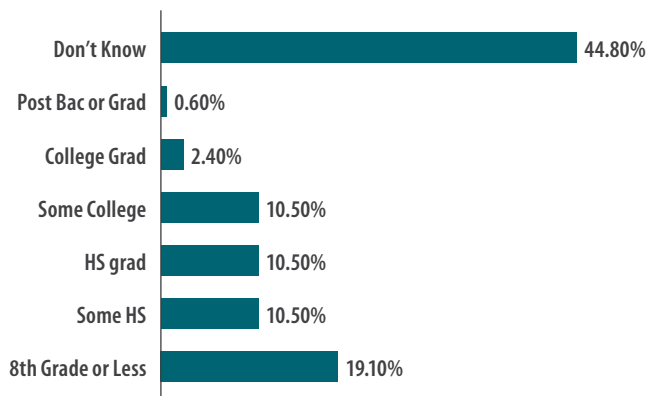


Figure 9

The mothers' highest levels of education, as reported by the students.



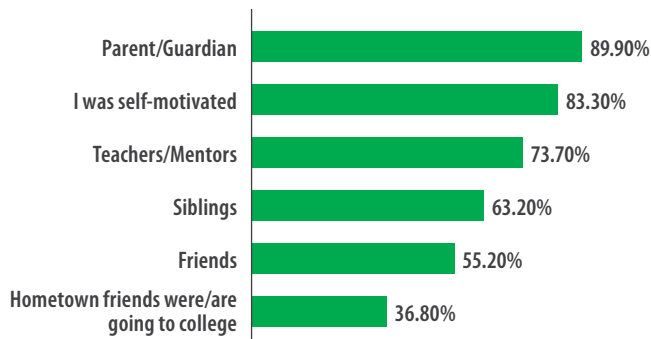
MOTIVATIONS AND CHALLENGES IN THE DECISION TO ATTEND COLLEGE

Most of the students had multiple factors encouraging them to attend college. During high school, most of the students heard about applying to a four-year university either always (46.9%), often (30.5%), or sometimes (15.3%). Most of the students felt encouraged by their parents or guardians to attend college, and most were also self-motivated. Many were encouraged by teachers, mentors, siblings, and friends. Seeing that their hometown friends were attending college added another motivating factor (see Figure 10).

A large number of Hmong students indicated that their parents encouraged them to attend college. An even greater number, however, said they made the transition by themselves or had help from a sibling (see Figure 11). This supports the idea that Hmong parents think their lack of education prevents them from helping with this transition.

Figure 10

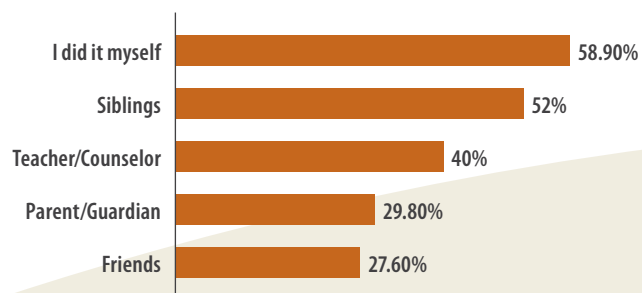
People and factors that influenced the decision to attend college.



“A lot of people were talking about it during the last few semesters for high school. I[t] kind of made me feel incompetent, inferior. Because everyone is going to these major schools and I’m just going to a local community school.”

Figure 11

People who helped the students transition to college.



Most Hmong students were motivated to attend college by their families and communities. This suggests that as more Hmong college graduates leave academia and enter the workforce, there will be an untapped cadre of Hmong mentors.

Most students felt their high schools prepared them to gain admission to a four-year college extremely well (34%) or somewhat well (43.2%).

Most of the Hmong students had at least one sibling who had attended college or earned a college degree (see Figure 12). Having a college-educated sibling may have a positive effect on educational aspirations.

“The classes that I was enrolled in high school were also known as ‘college prep’ classes. They’re really just regular classes, not SDAIE or AP... It was more like we were preparing for college. It was actually more of a surprise not to attend college for us... It really doesn’t matter on how smart you are, I think it just depends on self-discipline or determination.”

The students faced several significant barriers during the college application process. A lack of information hindered more than half (58%), as did the cost of tuition (58%) and the difficulty of the application process (51.5%; see Figure 13).



Figure 12
How many of the participants’ family members had earned college degrees.

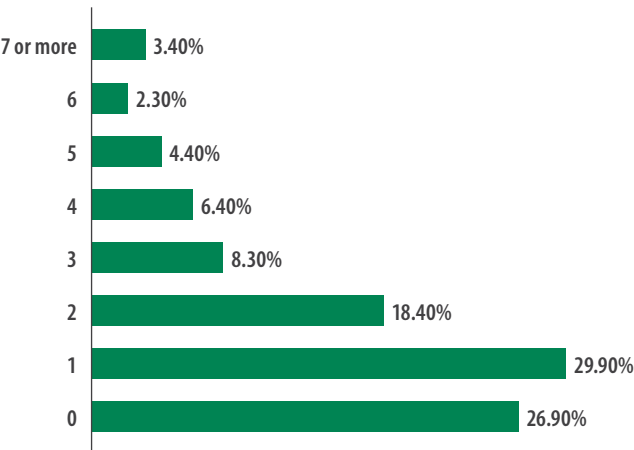
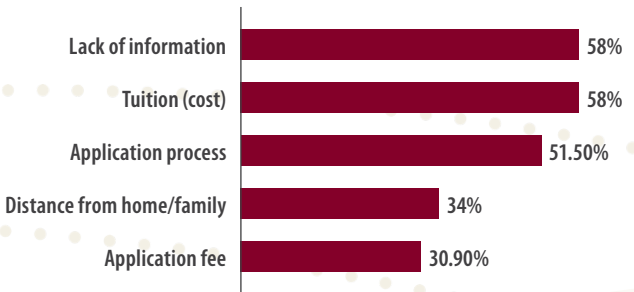


Figure 13
Significant barriers faced during the college application process.



When asked why they pursued higher education, many of the respondents said it was to help their families and parents (42.5%), to get better jobs (39.2%), or to earn more money (29.1%). Most of them (69.8%) came from families earning less than \$39,000 per year, and nearly half of the families had 7 or more people in the household; this may partly explain the desire and pressure to help financially.

“When they found out that I’m going back to school, they’re extremely happy for me because now for them, from how I see it, they have one less son to worry about, because he’ll be well off... They said, ‘We’ll do our best to help you out. Even though we have little, we will do our best.’ They really did encourage me because they really wanted me to succeed. They don’t want to see me living a life of a struggle of how they’ve been through.”

More than half the students (63.3%) felt that their job responsibilities interfered with their schoolwork frequently or occasionally. Family responsibilities interfered with schoolwork for 75.40% of the students, and social responsibilities interfered for 61.3%.

For a large majority of the students, family obligations (such as taking care of siblings or handling personal problems) interfered with their degree completion (79%). A large majority also felt, however, that they needed their families’ support to succeed in school (87.6%). A negative family attitude, indicating a lack of support, interfered for less than half of the students (39.5%).

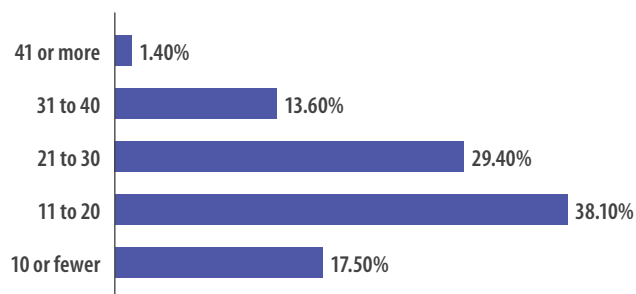


FACTORS IN COLLEGE SUCCESS AND SATISFACTION

More than half of the Hmong students surveyed were employed (55.2%), and the rest were unemployed but looking for work (44.9%). Of those working, 89% were enrolled full time and 11% part time. Working many hours per week (see Figure 14) can take time away from studying and attending campus events. This may have contributed to the students’ lack of connectedness with the campus and may have affected their academic performance.

Figure 14

Number of hours the employed students worked per week.



“What drives me to do well in college [is] definitely my parents... This is always something they always wanted... My mom always wanted to go to school in Laos and when she was here in the U.S., so I always wanted to do it for them, that’s one of the reason[s] why.”

The Hmong students face many cultural obligations, including funerals and weddings—and with large extended families, these events are common occurrences in the Hmong community.

This could have made it difficult for the students to meet with other students on weekends for group work and study time, which could have affected their academic performance. These cultural obligations interfered with the ability to graduate for about half of the students (51.7%).

“Being a daughter is pretty difficult. It’s a lot of balance between what you want and what your family and your culture want. And I think that’s just something that in order to achieve both, you kind of need to show to them that it’s possible to do both. Go to school, do your homework, do your community outreach work, and then come home and being able to cook, clean, all the necessary stuff that needs to be done at home. Like what they expect from me as a Hmong daughter.”



Most of the Hmong students said that their high schools prepared them to succeed in college either extremely well (21%) or somewhat well (44.8%). Nevertheless, many Hmong students attending Sacramento State were placed in remedial classes for math (11.3%), English (34.8%), or both (53.9%). Some of the students had failed one or more courses (39%), and a small number had even withdrawn from school temporarily (9.3%). This suggests a lack of college readiness may contribute to the students’ extended graduation times. A lack of social capital within the family and community may also be a factor.

About half of the students felt frequently or occasionally homesick (48.1%), and more than half felt isolated from campus life (63.8%). There are two Hmong student organizations, the Hmong University Student Association (HUSA) and the Hmong Health Alliance (HHA); both have many members and host many Asian Pacific Islander festivities. Nevertheless, many Hmong students were not involved in either group. Very few had joined fraternities or sororities (3.7%). Only a small number played sports in a club, in an intramural league, or just recreationally (19%).

Institutional factors may contribute to a sense of student isolation. One primary factor may be a lack of Hmong faculty, staff, and personnel.

“I can say that it’s very lonely because I am the only Hmong student—well, not the only Hmong student, but I’m one of the very few Asian students in my major, I would say that. So it makes me feel good [but] at the same time it makes me feel like I don’t belong in certain classes or in my major.”

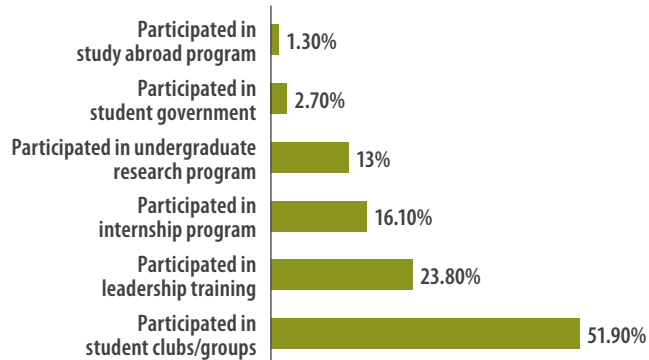
Despite these difficulties, more than half of the students (59.2%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “I see myself as part of the campus community.” Most of the students studied with other students (85.7%), and some even tutored other students (41.9%). About half the students had participated in student clubs and groups, and smaller numbers had participated in academic or professional programs (see Figure 15).

Many of the students (67.4%) found that campus-related factors interfered with their ability to complete their degrees. Campus factors included course variety, availability of courses, instructors, advising, and support services. Only a quarter (24.5%) of the students found that academic and educational factors interfered. These factors included a lack of adequate preparation for college, a lack of proper motivation, and a poor choice of major. Financial factors (such as the cost of tuition and textbooks) interfered for a large majority (80.6%).



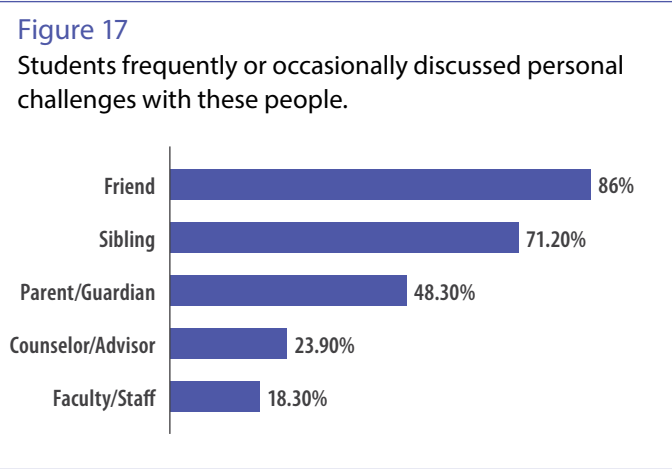
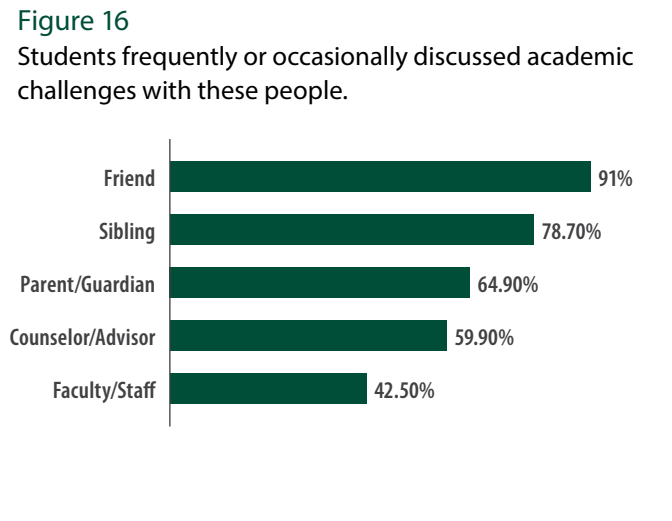
Figure 15

Participation in social, academic, or professional programs since entering college.



“It was difficult to navigate the system... When you are so far into your education, then you don’t have these resources or nobody to stop you or take a step back and see where you’re going and how you’re progressing... So I think that it should be mandatory that they should have us meet with an advisor at least every semester, or every year at least.”

A majority of Hmong students shared their personal and academic challenges with a sibling or a friend, and many also shared with a parent, counselor, or faculty or staff member (see Figures 16 and 17). This suggests that peer programs can be culturally responsive and very helpful.



“I would say friends who are as motivated as you are, who are in your situation, who are low-income, and for the Hmong students here too, they are great aspirations, great motivators to get you to do better, knowing when they understand your background... It’s just positivity around you, and it makes you want to do better and go forward because you have that dream or goal that you have with your friends... They provide me emotional support because we can talk about our stress and we would just be there for one another.”

Mentors with shared experiences may also support student persistence. Many of the students found that faculty members were interested in their academic problems (73.7%) and personal problems (43.5%). Staff members, too, were seen as interested in the students’ academic problems (43.2%) and personal problems (69.8%).

Nevertheless, fewer than half of the Hmong students shared their personal or academic challenges with faculty and staff members. Despite this, when asked what university programs, information, or services would be very or somewhat useful in helping them complete their degrees, the students overwhelmingly indicated faculty and staff mentors. Figure 18 provides additional information about university programs, information, or services that could help Hmong students complete their degrees.

Figure 18

University programs, information, or services would be very or somewhat useful in helping the students complete their degrees.



“There are a lot of resources here on campus that a lot of Hmong students don’t know about, such as the career center, who are the professors here on campus that could probably help the Hmong students here. And so, because on campus, there’s not a lot of them... There are Hmong professors here, but the students don’t utilize it because they don’t know how to utilize it.”

Figure 19

Types of familial support that would be very helpful or somewhat helpful in degree completion.

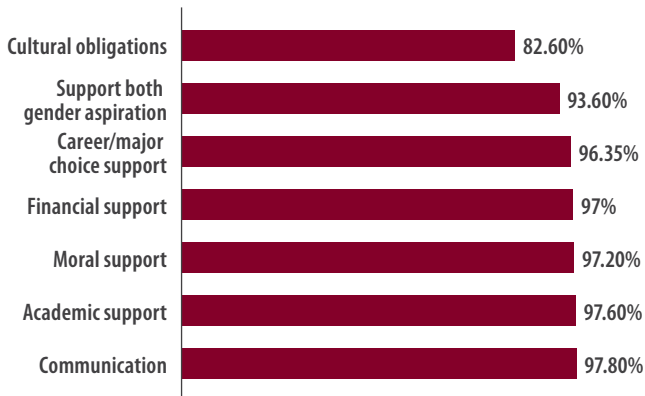


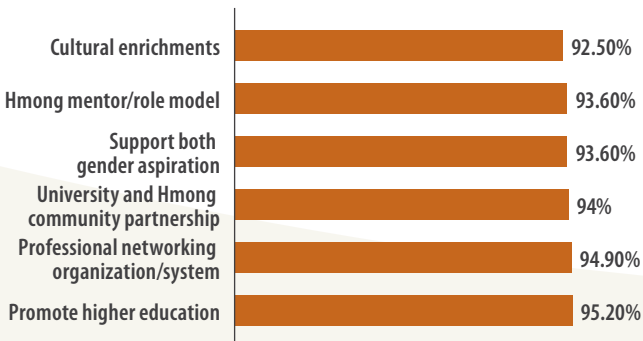
Figure 20

Types of personal support that would be very helpful or somewhat helpful in degree completion.



Figure 21

Hmong community support, information, or services that would be very helpful or somewhat helpful in degree completion.



The data also identified types of familial and personal support that could help the students complete their degrees (see Figures 19 and 20).

When asked what factors in the Hmong community could support their academic success, an overwhelming number said a professional organization would make a difference, as would a partnership between the university and the Hmong community. Community promotion of higher education would also be useful. These are achievable goals that can provide a starting point for an important conversation between the Hmong community and the university (see Figure 21).



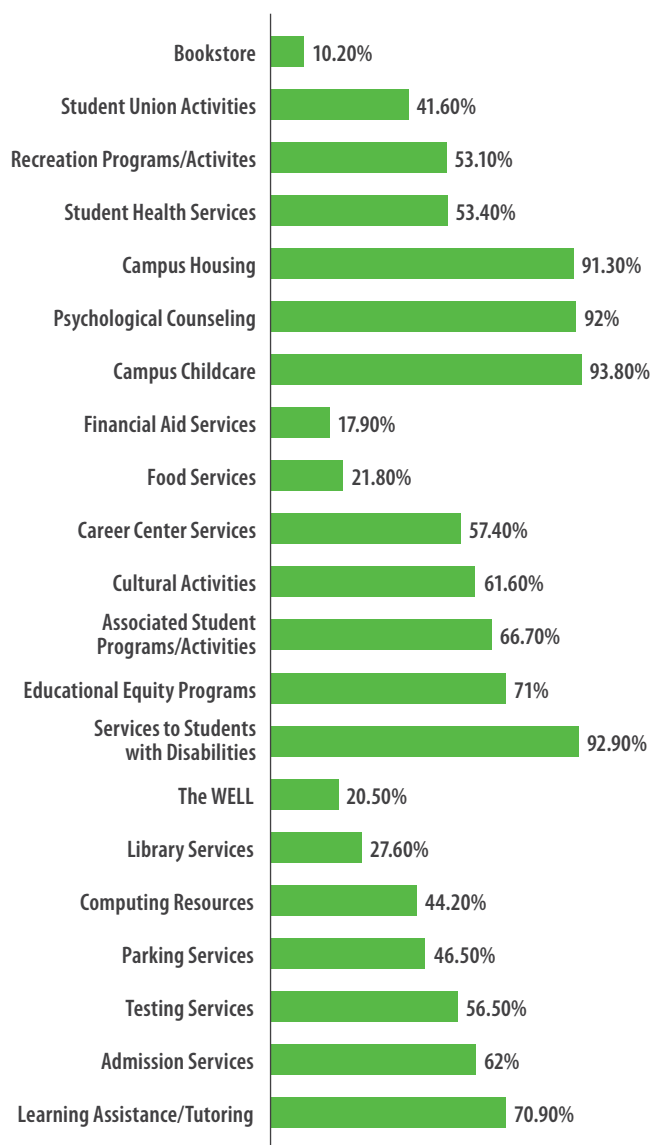
Most of the students did not feel discriminated against based on race or ethnicity (60.9%), although some had heard faculty express stereotypes about racial and ethnic groups (38.4%). Only a very small minority of the students (13.1%) felt that there was a lot of racial tension on the campus. Many had taken an ethnic studies course (70.3%), and some had even attended racial or cultural awareness workshops (30.8%).

Nearly all the students had frequently or occasionally been bored in class (92.9%). Nevertheless, a large majority felt that their college experiences had exposed them to diverse opinions, cultures, and values (88.3%). Nearly all of them also felt that their courses frequently or occasionally inspired them to think in new ways (91%).

“Pursue higher education. Even though it may cost you money out of your own pocket, money can always be made. It’s to change you. By going to college and being active, you see your surroundings and you see that you can make a difference when you come back to the community. And there are lots of programs out there, not [just] inside college but outside as well that are always improving the community because they want to change the community.”

Figure 22

Campus resources that were used “not at all.”



Most of the students frequently or occasionally felt depressed (70.7%). Most of them maintained healthy diets (66%) and got adequate sleep (65%). The vast majority of students frequently or occasionally felt overwhelmed by all they had to do (89.5%).

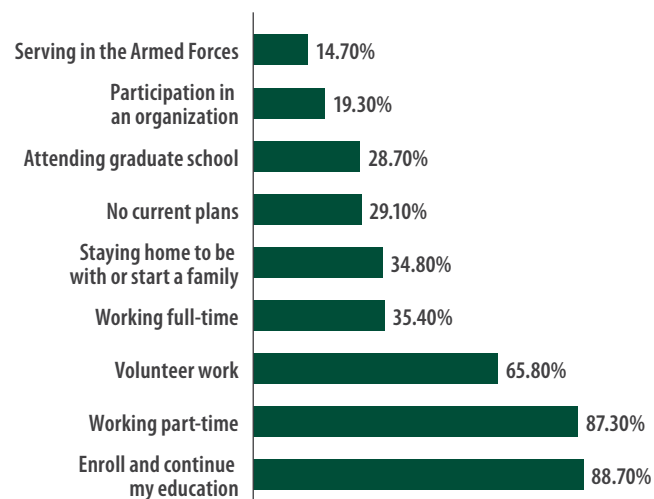
Many of the campus resources were underused by the Hmong students (see Figures 22).

When asked about their plans for the next academic school year, large majorities planned to continue their education and work part-time (see Figure 23).

A large majority probably or definitely would choose to enroll at Sacramento State again (72.30%).

Figure 23

Primary or secondary plans for the next academic school year (Fall 2015).



STUDENTS’ QUALITATIVE RESULTS

In order to understand the phenomenon for this investigation, Colaizzi’s (1978) seven-step method for data analysis was employed. Table 3 presents a summary of the 301 significant statements, 215 formulated meanings, 70 clusters of themes, and 22 emergent themes. These results were generated by applying Colaizzi’s method of phenomenological analysis to the student interviews, which yielded a clear overview of the Hmong student experience.

THEME 1: GENDER-BASED RESPONSIBILITIES, OBLIGATIONS, AND ROLE EXPECTATIONS

Gender-based expectations, spanning childhood to adulthood, permeated the study. Male students felt a strong sense of cultural responsibilities and obligations, and they conveyed a sense of moral necessity for the sons in the household to sustain the “roots” of the Hmong people, both in life and in death. Funeral and wedding customs are primary cultural obligations of the Hmong sons. Hmong daughters likewise face cultural expectations to fulfill traditional roles and domestic duties. Understanding the home environment is critical to understanding why Hmong participants in postsecondary education view themselves as culturally bounded, which can lead to a disconnection from their Hmong identity and home communities.

Table 3
Final Thematic Map Developed from Student Interview Data

Process	n	Exhaustive Meanings
Significant statements	301	Gender-based responsibilities, obligations, and role expectations
Formulated meanings	215	Feeling culturally bound to family and feeling a dissociation/disconnection from Hmong identity and community
Clusters of themes	70	Negotiation and navigation between two cultures and two identities, causing dissonance/incongruence
Emergent themes	22	Hmong identity formation and habitus transformation

Note. For a detailed analysis of the themes and interview transcripts, please see Vang, 2016.

“Those two events are really important because if you really go down the roots to understand who we really are, and especially [why] we [are] being really spiritual; we have spiritual guardians around us, [and] by doing the wedding, for the wife, you bring her to your side and she becomes your family so she’s part of your spiritual side. And in the world of death, which is the funeral, is a way of sending them back to their roots. It all comes back to do you believe your traditions?”

THEME 2: FEELING CULTURALLY BOUND AND FEELING DISSOCIATION FROM THE HMONG IDENTITY

Even before college, Hmong students already felt morally bound to their families and culture, which limited their college choices and opportunities.

“So in our culture, Hmong culture, it’s either the youngest son or the only son that has to have the parents live with you. Basically because back in our culture in the old days, there’s no retirement plan or there’s no housing for your parents when they get old to go live. It’s in the culture and it just doesn’t translate into the American culture. So that means that for me, I’m their retirement plan because they don’t make enough to set their own retirement funds.”

Feeling culturally bound does not necessarily lead to poor academic performance (London, 1989). Still, many students mentioned the dissociation from their cultural Hmong identity and a corresponding struggle to find a new identity.



“Well, when I was younger, it always kind of make me very dislike my culture actually, because of that. I feel like no matter where I want to go in life, I’m always having this extra baggage with me... If I want to go here for college, I want to do this, oh but what about my parents, I have to help them. So it influences you a lot to think of other people and you feel like you’re not living a free life.”

THEME 3: NEGOTIATION AND NAVIGATION BETWEEN TWO CULTURES, CAUSING DISSONANCE

Because they had to negotiate the responsibilities of two cultures and navigate between two identities, the students became “cultural straddlers” (Carter, 2006). They had to exist simultaneously in incongruous home and school settings. The students struggled to balance the differences in the values and expectations of their two worlds. This caused significant dissonance and even identity crises.

“The crossroad between the both of them, you have to live like two separate lives. Which is at home, you have to live your culture and then when you’re outside, you have to live the White culture. But if you try to mix and match both, it creates a conflict when you bring Hmong to the White or White to the Hmong culture... You’re either Hmong or too White, and there was no middle ground.”



“It affects you in a way that you don’t know your own identity because you try to establish yourself—say, well, am I Hmong or am I more American? Because if you’re more Hmong, people that are more American says, ‘oh you’re too fobby.’ Or if you’re too American, your Hmong people say, ‘oh you’re too White.’ So there’s always that tension to who am I? And after a while, you make your own classification, that you’re Hmong American.”



“Understanding your roots, understanding your identity, is a big thing. I’ve seen in college where people who understand who they are, they’re able to have a platform where they can perpetuate themselves. So that helped me in college because [I’m] understanding that I can be who I want to be. I am still Hmong; I can still be very out there in the White American society.”

THEME 4: HMONG IDENTITY FORMATION AND HABITUS TRANSFORMATION

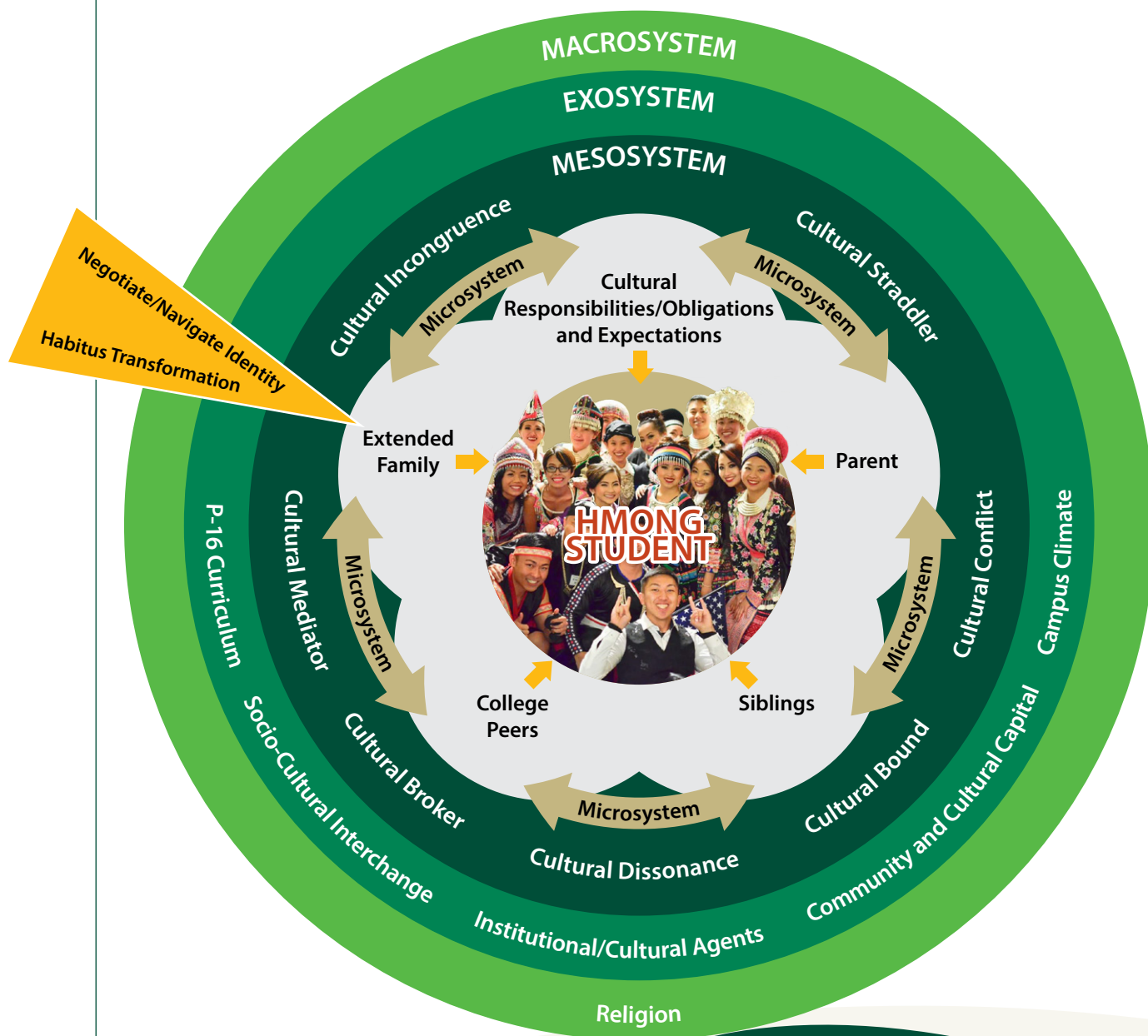
Living as cultural negotiators made the students more conscious of their place in the institution and in society. Most students were acutely aware that they lacked a sense of belonging and a sense of identity. As a result, they developed a stronger sense of their ethnic identity as Hmong. They were positively motivated by their ability to function in both worlds and by a strong grasp of personal identity.

This narrative supports previous studies’ findings that a change in the environment can contribute to students’ ethnic identity development (Lozano et al., 2015, p. 71). The proximal cultural factors in the home environment, referred to as habitus, influenced the students’ educational aspirations. Habitus is defined as the attitudes, perceptions, and knowledge sets that shape a person’s actions subconsciously (Bourdieu, 1977). It is an intimate space existing deep in the folds of family. Habitus is a useful analytical tool for understanding the students’ transformation.

It may be that the habitus is precisely what Hmong parents want to save, while they also want their children to succeed in a very different society. This investigation revealed a habitus transformation among the students as they straddled two worlds, juggling their old habitus (along with its cultural boundedness to the home) and the new habitus they acquired through the university experience.

Bronfenbrenner’s (2005) ecological model provided a lens to make sense of specific environmental factors, including the personal, cultural, academic, and campus factors that influenced first-generation Hmong students’ college matriculation and experiences. Figure 26 presents an adaptation of Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model of human development and applies it to the Hmong college student participants in this study.

Figure 26
Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model, as applied to
Hmong college students. For a detailed analysis of the
Hmong Ecological Model, please see Vang, 2016.



Chronosystem

Master historical narrative and includes roots in China and Southeast Asia, the US betrayal, persecution, refugee camps, displacement and resettlement establishing a new community, acculturation, accommodation and assimilation.

Table 4
Final Thematic Map Developed from
Parent Interview Data

Process	n	Exhaustive Meanings
Significant statements	133	Preservation of cultural and religious customs to maintain Hmong identity
Formulated meanings	83	Lack of education and prior experience contributing to role ambiguity and limited involvement in children's education
Clusters of themes	79	Home-based verbal encouragement and tangible support
Emergent themes	14	1. Awareness and accommodation of inevitable socio-cultural changes 2. Cultural clashes in changing gender roles

Note. For a detailed analysis of the themes and interview transcripts, please see Vang, 2016.

PARENTS' QUALITATIVE RESULTS

The following section summarizes the interview data that resulted in 133 significant statements, 83 formulated meanings, 79 clusters of themes, and 14 emergent themes. These results provided a clear overview of the Hmong parents' involvement in their children's education. The final thematic map, illustrated in Table 4, was generated by adhering to Colaizzi's (1978) method of phenomenological analysis.

THEME 1: PRESERVING CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS CUSTOMS TO MAINTAIN A HMONG IDENTITY

Most significantly, the parents stressed the importance of maintaining a Hmong identity through the preservation of Hmong cultural and religious traditions. In spite of this strong desire, the Hmong parents struggled to define what it means to be Hmong. They emphasized that the Hmong identity is tightly connected to unique religious and cultural beliefs and practices. Language was another crucial factor

The Hmong parents also identified the Hmong New Year celebration, an annual communal event, as a central reminder of their Hmong identity.

"Hmong culture is different from [any] other ethnicity. There's no one that do[es] it like us Hmong... For example, if we have someone who passed away, we have a ritual for the elders, we host it for around three days to a week until it's time to bury it. This is what's different."



THEME 2: LACK OF EDUCATION, ROLE AMBIGUITY, AND LIMITED INVOLVEMENT IN EDUCATION

The parents talked at length about their personal struggles and lack of education, which hindered their involvement in their children's education. Stories of limited personal experience in formal education, in both Laos and America, underscored a lack of opportunity and access. As a result, the Hmong parents did not have a context for understanding the basics of American educational policies and practices. Parents also believe their children are more self-reliant and capable than themselves, and they believe they cannot help their children competently. This hands-off approach places full responsibility on the school as the authority figure in the students' academic lives. It also deprives Hmong students of crucial social and cultural capital that could aid their education.

"Even though I'm not helpful, you have your teacher to teach you so you have to go find help yourself. There are those like me who never got an education; we don't know what to do. You can only say, 'oh, you'll just have to ask your teacher or your counselors.' And I don't know the language, you know the language. You go talk to your counselor."

Despite these challenges, the parents strongly supported higher education for their children, and they wanted to help their children succeed academically. Although teachers and school personnel often assume that Hmong parents are not interested in participating in their children's education, they are tragically wrong (as noted by Delgado-Gaitan, 2004, and confirmed by this study). Indeed, the Hmong parents are counting on the teachers and school personnel to help their children achieve only because they feel they cannot.



"No matter how much the parents want to help, it's because we are poor and we aren't educated so we can't help them. The things we want to happen, we can't make it happen. Hopefully the school would help them."

THEME 3: HOME-BASED VERBAL ENCOURAGEMENT AND TANGIBLE SUPPORT

A majority of the parents felt it was important to encourage and communicate with their children, although it was difficult at times. They also noted that there were limits to their role as encouragers. The parents understood the value of education for their children, but they also grasped the challenges of schooling and wanted to avoid pushing children who do not fit the academic mold.

The Hmong parents had tremendous hopes for their children in college, and they perceived social mobility as a tool for advancement. Even though the parents were separated from schooling during the adolescent and young adult periods, they prioritized morally and financially supporting their children's education.

“Let me tell you about education. I told all my family that we shouldn’t lecture too much. We talk to them too much already—they already have headaches—but if we yell at them, they probably won’t be able to do it. The one who can go for it, go for it, but the one who can’t, it’s okay, just go find a job. We shouldn’t force it. Schooling isn’t easy. The one who’s motivated to learn, we don’t have to tell them, they will go for it.”

THEME 4: AWARENESS AND ACCOMMODATION OF INEVITABLE SOCIO-CULTURAL CHANGES

Throughout the study, there was an underlying thread of inevitable cultural and social changes, due to the acculturation and assimilation of Hmong children in this country. For the most part, the parents understood that they would come to terms with the many aspects of the new Hmong American culture. This may reduce how much they pressure their children to learn about traditional and religious Hmong practices and customs.

“This side of knowledge is not worth the knowledge you have, finding a job and how knowledgeable you will become... There’s no way for you to become knowledgeable like your education. Unlike education, there is an end to learning about the Hmong culture. So don’t worry about that.”

For any community, cultural changes accompany social changes. For the Hmong, patriarchal values are traditionally associated with the clan system, which is now likely to be altered. The data revealed at least an emerging awareness of the possibility that the Hmong identity could change beyond recognition, despite the tremendously strong communal desire to sustain it.

“This country is a different country. Our Hmong traditions are too complicated. So in the future, maybe, for example, my children to my grandchildren, they will not use this rough tradition that we elders do because this country is about finding jobs and being educated. In the future, they will change to something simple... It’s not going to disappear soon, but maybe one or two generations after my children and grandchildren’s, then it will slowly disappear.”

The Hmong parents shared a deep commitment to the religious and cultural practices they experienced as children and as younger adults in Laos. They served to sustain the Hmong identity even in the face of life in a different country. However, they viewed these practices as much more complex, demanding, and interwoven with daily life than American religious and cultural practices.

These parents did not see a conflict between identity preservation and their children’s success in education. In fact, the parents were enthusiastic about their children’s college attendance, though they felt unable to help directly. Fully aware that social change leads inevitably to cultural change, they embraced this seeming contradiction, encouraging their children to enter mainstream American life by becoming educated while also maintaining the old ways.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICE

There is no silver bullet that can ensure Hmong students achieve an equitable chance and positive experience as they progress, persist and complete their degree programs. It will take an appropriate response across the various environmental levels that are a broad, multilevel, and extraordinary in policy, practice and resources from the individual, family, community and institution to graduate a student. Though a few generic recommendations might be offered to better serve all of America's underperforming minority groups (e.g., mandatory first-year advising), the Hmong population, like all other subgroups, is unique and requires individual attention. The following are six carefully selected preliminary recommendations to address systematic strategies to support Hmong students. Each recommendation comes from a policy standpoint but with practical implementation for educational leaders, faculty and professional staff to integrate into their every day practices. Moreover, each of these recommendations is vitally important in changing the discourse of what it means to be Hmong American and in college. These priorities are the vision to address the myriad educational needs of students from broad to specific, from cultural to structural.

Recommendation 1:

Disaggregate and disseminate major institutional data sets of enrollment, attrition, persistent and completion rate of all racial and ethnic groups.

Recommendation 2:

Recruit, hire and retain faculty and staff members that are representative of the Hmong student population.



Recommendation 3:

Promote pride and create role models by publishing the accomplishments of Hmong, AAPI's and other first generation students, alumni, faculty, and staff.

Recommendation 4:

Establish, maintain and institutionalized organizations and/or programs that promote, contribute and improve educational success of Hmong students.

Recommendation 5:

Host Hmong Parent-Student Conference to form relationship with the community of first generation students to promote academic, career and life success.

Recommendation 6:

Practical applications for faculty and student affairs professionals.

For detailed analysis of recommendations, please see Vang, 2016



CONCLUSION

The current state of research on Hmong Americans is insufficient, and this report fills a void in the existing literature. The educational experience of Hmong American students deserves increase visibility among the campus and community. By addressing this gap, this project could serve as a model for similar projects in other Californian communities that have high concentrations of Hmong Americans (e.g. the San Francisco Bay Area, Fresno and the Central Valley, and various regions in Southern California). This report concludes that the college experience may be the only way to create a habitus transformation. Helping underrepresented minorities enter college is necessary for economic growth, but it is also necessary for realizing America's promise to provide a place where people can co-exist fruitfully and peacefully.

"Our looks, our values, [being] hard-working individuals, and having big families are what remind me of being Hmong. There is something about knowing that an individual is Hmong by the way they speak or the way they bring themselves. Maybe it is a good or a bad impression, but oftentimes, we identify our own kind easily. We are such a small, strong community built within a large, diverse community, and that is why I am proud to be Hmong. Because family is highly valued, we are always helping each other out."

Appendix A
Student Demographics

Student	Age	Country of birth	Siblings	Siblings with degrees	Major	Full or part time	Classification	Unit	Years in college	Expected graduation
Male	22	USA	13	1	Social Work	FT	Senior, transfer	95	4	F 2016
Male	23	Thailand	6	0	Business	FT	Senior, first-time freshman	123	6	F 2015
Female	24	USA	8	5 +	Health Sci.	FT	Senior, first-time freshman	262	6	F 2015
Female	25	USA	3	0	Theatre/ Arts	PT	Senior, transfer	106	7	S 2016
Male	30	USA	7	5+	Economics	FT	Senior, transfer	119	5.5	S 2016
Female	23	Thailand	9	0	Child Dev.	FT	Senior, first-time freshman	107	5	F 2016

Appendix B
Parent Demographics

Parent	Age	Country of birth	Year resettled in United States	City/state first resettled	Highest level of education	Household Income
Father	58	Laos	1979	Provo, UT	No formal education	\$20,000-\$29,000
Father	46	Laos	1992	Chico, CA	No formal education	\$30,000-\$39,000
Mother	50	Laos	1988	Sacramento, CA	No formal education	\$30,000-\$39,000
Mother	47	Laos	1989	Sacramento, CA	No formal education	Under \$10,000
Father	75	Laos	1979	Portland, OR	No formal education	\$10,000-\$19,000
Mother	59	Laos	1994	Stockton, CA	No formal education	\$10,000-\$19,000

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"Friends who are as motivated as you are, who are in your situation, who are low-income, and for the Hmong students here too, they are great aspirations, great motivators to get you to do better knowing when they understand your background... having peers that are Hmong to give me information and reassure me when I didn't know about things such as financial aid, graduation requirement, or writing/school work. We always talk about the future... When you talk about the future, it's nice to think about it. It's just positivity around you and it makes you want to do better and go forward because you have that dream or goal that you have with your friends. And my friends, they provide me emotional support because we can talk about our stress and we would just be there for one another"

"You have a lot of pressure, expectations that you have to meet because you have two different cultures. You have the American culture and you have the Hmong culture... the crossroad between the both of them, you have to live like two separate lives. Which is at home, you have to live your culture and then when you're outside, you have to live the White culture. But if you try to mix and match both, it creates a conflict when you bring Hmong to the White or White to the Hmong culture... you're either Hmong or too White and there was no middle ground... It affects you in a way that you don't know your own identity because you try to establish yourself say, well, am I Hmong or am I more American?"



"You don't know your roots and you face an identity crisis of who you are. Your parents never told you who you are and the school systems, not a lot of them know about the Hmong people... At times, you felt depressed, you feel sad because you don't have a sense of belonging... It made me feel like we weren't valued here in American society. But I also understand that there's also other races here that that are also not in the textbook and they play a certain role in American society as well but it's hidden away... I actually started coming back to the Hmong community and realizing that I've been away from the community for so long because of the identity crisis and couldn't grasp it. So eventually coming here to Sac State... I took a position to try to figure out who I am and by doing that, it made me more successful in college"



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