

Original Paper

Academically Achieving Hmong American Students in Higher Education

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Abstract

As the largest Asian-American ethnicity at one large public Institution of Higher Education in California, undergraduate Hmong students as a whole are falling behind other sub-groups in graduation rates. Fortunately, a handful of Hmong students do find their way through the challenges of their collegiate experiences to attain academic success. This study identified and connected with four high achieving undergraduate female Hmong American students at the IHE to explore the factors for a successful academic experience counter-narrative. This qualitative asset-based in-depth, semi-structured virtual interview approach allowed discovery into unique and shared narratives regarding their academic achievements. Verbatim transcript analyses in relation to the current literature on Hmong American college students and the frameworks of the Model Minority Myth, Critical Race Theory, and Microaggressions, illuminated important themes as considerations to cultivate increased undergraduate Hmong American student academic achievement. These included aspects of recognizing the mismatch of traditional Hmong cultural norms and the individualistic values of the U.S. IHE, supporting student self-advocacy, and increasing awareness of the Hmong ethnicity as distinct from other Asian groups to dismantle the harmful consequences of the Model Minority Myth on Hmong student success.

Keywords

Hmong students, higher education, interviews, model minority myth, social justice, academic success

1. Introduction

Learning to navigate the undergraduate years at an Institution of Higher Education (IHE) is a challenge in itself, and not every student is privileged to have the needed support to succeed (Supple, McCoy, & Wang, 2010). This paper focuses on one such student ethnic subgroup—Hmong American. At one large public IHE in California, Hmong students make up 6% of the overall full-time first-time freshmen undergraduate student population, but only 3% of these students graduate within four years (Takahashi & Nottbohm, 2019). The reflection of performance by undergraduate Hmong American students at the IHE served as a basis to start the conversation about how this IHE and others with similar student populations and needs can better support Hmong students for social justice. Additionally, one researcher, as Hmong American, has deep personal interests in advocating for Hmong students and families in the community, and the other researcher is a committed ally to the work.

This study sought to delve deeper into the experiences of Hmong students who, despite the odds, graduated or are on track for graduation in one IHE. These Hmong student narratives surrounding their academic achievement are necessary to understand ways to counteract the negative published trends for this subgroup in order to attain an increase in educational attainment and in turn, socio-economic advancement.

1.1 *Hmong in the U.S.*

In order to better comprehend challenges faced by undergraduate Hmong students enrolled in American IHEs, it is essential first to provide the context of the Hmong people in the U.S. During the Vietnam War. The U.S. became involved in secret military operations in Laos by backing local troops, made up of mostly Hmong male civilians (Yang, 2017), to fight against the Pathet Lao, an encroaching military communist group (Her & Buley-Meissner, 2012) known now as the *Secret War*. Unfortunately, when the U.S. pulled out of the Vietnam War, it also pulled its military support supplied to the Hmong troops fighting on the U.S. behalf (Yang, 2017). This left Hmong troops and civilians vulnerable and desperate to escape out of Laos. The Hmong people fled across the Mekong River into refugee camps in Thailand (Yang, 2017) and then immigrated to various parts of the world, including a large California settlement.

1.1.1 Traditional Hmong Practices

Over the 40+ years in which a growing number of Hmong have resided in the U.S., many traditional practices continue to maintain Hmong culture. This includes the practice of animism, a belief in multiple souls working in conjunction for a balance of health, ancestor worship, and interconnectedness between living individuals and ancestors who have passed on (Gerdner, 2012), and a firm patriarchal social structure (Cha, 2010). The patriarchal practice places emphasis on the development and well-being of sons over daughters in large part due to carrying forward the clan name, whereas daughters will marry, drop their surname in favor of their husband's, and become an outsider (Cha, 2010). In alignment with a patriarchal society, gender roles are crucial to cultural practices as males are expected to complete heavy physical tasks and maintain spiritual practices, whereas females are taught to dutifully complete household chores and childcare (Vang, 2013).

1.1.2 Valuing U.S. Education

While working to maintain traditional practices in a new country, early refugee Hmong families also pressed upon their children the value and importance of education (Xiong & Lam, 2013). The vast majority of Hmong people led agrarian lifestyles in secluded areas of Laos (Gerdner, 2012), and while early immigrated Hmong parents may not have understood the content of their children's lessons, they demonstrated faith in the public schools to be an opportunity for children to grow and thrive (Xiong & Lam, 2013). The findings of Xiong and Lam (2013) note that this support continued through to college enrollment. Likewise, Vang's (2015) interviews of Hmong American students highlighted family support as reciprocal—students are motivated to achieve educational success to secure financial stability for themselves and their families. Hmong parents, based on their lack of formal education, instilled in their children from an early age that gaining a higher education was a way to a better future (Vang, 2015), and Hmong students feel a sense of obligation to achieve academic success in order to repay their parents for the ongoing support (Supple et al., 2010).

1.2 Theoretical Frameworks

In conducting this research, three theoretical perspectives helped structure the study: Model Minority Myth, Critical Race Theory, and Microaggressions. These theories provide better insight and understanding of the experiences of marginalized individuals in general. Also, they structure the study by establishing a platform, or starting point, for which someone unfamiliar with Hmong students' experiences can begin to grasp the degree of challenges faced by this student population.

1.2.1 Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) introduces the idea that perspectives surrounding our racial realities shape the way we make sense of how we see ourselves (Schuh, Jones, & Torres, 2017). In a classroom setting, marginalized students can experience racial stereotypes and undue pressure to produce academic capabilities exceeding that of their non-marginalized peers, which negatively acts as evidence of their "belonging" in the White classroom space (Quaye, Griffin, & Museus, 2019).

As uncovered by DePeow (2018), this is no different for Hmong students in higher education. After intervention through CRT training, the Hmong students were able to comprehend the reason for being unfairly treated, resulting in feelings of not belonging in college, and navigated institutional systems to advocate for creating an equal and safe learning environment (DePouw, 2018). As institutions of higher education recognize the presence of CRT, they can help alleviate the pressure off minoritized groups to have to carve out a space in which they can feel a sense of belonging (Quaye et al., 2019).

1.2.2 Model Minority Myth

One of the reasons why Hmong students feel academically inadequate in comparison to their peers includes the pressure of having to live up to the Model Minority Myth (MMM; Her, 2014), which is applied universally that all Asians are gifted above other minorities, and positioned as "foreigners" superior to Black peers (Poon et al., 2016). This unrealistic contrast between two minority racial groups further denies the unique existence and challenges faced by separate Asian ethnicities, such as the

Hmong students in the case of this study, who had been overlooked in this IHE data until disaggregated (Takahashi & Nottbohm, 2019).

When different Asian ethnicities are merged into one general group, and high performing Asian ethnicities overshadow the struggles of lower socio-economic status individuals, struggles can easily be disregarded—the cornerstone of the MMM (Kim & Lee, 2014). Perceiving all individuals of Asian descent as smart individuals who do not require academic support is how the model minority myth is inaccurately applied (Her, 2014). Inflicting the myth across all Asian ethnicities suppresses the dire needs of individuals from lower-performing ethnicities whose voice is drowned out by the brilliant success of their Asian peers. For example, disaggregated data enlarges the disparities between high performing Asians (Japanese, Chinese, and Koreans) with more financial resources and lower socio-economic Asians (Cambodian, Laotian, Vietnamese, and Hmong) by casting a shadow on the needs of those living in poverty (Her, 2014). It is hard enough for low achieving students to acknowledge their struggles and ask for help; added pressure in the form of this stereotype can suppress the voices of those who cannot live up to an unrealistic myth.

1.2.3 Microaggressions

The presence of subtle statements or acts made against marginalized groups is how microaggression exists in the higher educational setting across the larger campus culture and climate (Schuh et al., 2017). The difficulty with addressing microaggression is that the remarks are not overt, and addressing them can cause fatigue for the victim. The level of fatigue per individual varies, but it can wear on the student enough to impact developmental and academic experiences (Quaye et al., 2019).

Like other minority groups, Hmong students have also experienced stigma brought on by their ethnicity through microaggressions (DePouw, 2018). The experiences of these students align with the need for institutional engagement of students of color discussed by Quaye et al. (2019), in which students of color reported feeling pressure to prove their academic capabilities meet, or exceed, the level of their white peers as evidence of them deserving a seat in the classroom and a place in higher education. Proving one's worth in higher education beyond that of academic merit creates another barrier for academic achievement of minorities, including Hmong students.

Understanding CRT, MMM, and Microaggressions help center the study's purpose and connect its importance to Hmong students currently navigating the higher education field with less than successful odds.

1.3 Literature Review of Hmong Students in Higher Education

Though Hmong American college students come to IHEs with the assets of family culturally valuing education with emotional and financial support as afforded (Xiong & Lam, 2013; Vang, 2015), the literature, albeit small compared to other bodies of ethnic and race studies in education, underscores perpetual low academic achievement for this student population (e.g., Supple et al., 2010; Xiong & Lee, 2011; Takahashi & Nottbohm, 2019). The complexities surrounding these unsuccessful outcomes

illustrate a mismatch between traditional Hmong family expectations and the dominant culture of IHEs with little to no university support to meet their unique needs.

1.3.1 Mismatched Cultural Expectations

Though Hmong college students report recognizing and honoring their parents' sacrifices in support of a continuing education, cultural tensions have also been noted (Supple et al., 2010). These tensions created conflict rooted in a mismatch between the Hmong parents' cultural expectations around the communal society and the students' shift toward the individualistic culture fostered at the IHEs (Supple et al., 2010). This is even more of a mismatch for female Hmong students when considering the deeply rooted patriarchal structure of traditional Hmong families (Cha, 2010; Her & Gloria, 2016). The encouragement and support, or lack thereof, offered for a son versus a daughter to pursue higher education (Cha, 2016) influences their children's expectations to earn a postsecondary degree or not (Her & Gloria, 2016).

A Hmong woman's relationship with their parents affects varying aspects of their lives, from selecting an academic field of study or college major, finding a significant other, and establishing individual values (Peng & Solheim, 2015). Additionally, Hmong women enrolled in college experiences highlight that gendered expectations to maintain the family household chores regardless of the additional external interests they take on. In this way, attending college is considered an outside interest, not perceived as a necessity (Peng & Solheim, 2015). Whatever support or discouragements a Hmong student receives due to traditional customs will affect academic performance regardless of the IHE context (Xiong & Lam, 2013).

Hmong men, however, also experience discord between the traditional Hmong patriarchal roles and the academic expectations of the IHE. Traditional practices are expected to be carried on by the males, whether or not attending school, causing rifts in the family (Cha, 2010). In turn, this conflict between cultural expectations has negatively impacted academic satisfaction and performance for Southeast Asian American (SEAA) students, including Hmong (Truong & Miller, 2018).

1.3.2 Lacking IHE Support with Additional Pressures

Hmong students have reported difficulty navigating the IHEs as a significant reason for academic struggles (Xiong & Lee, 2011; Xiong & Lam, 2015; Kwan, 2015). Xiong and Lee (2011) found a lack of financial support and study time, along with poor study habits, as contributors to their academic woes. Also included was the lack of interaction or availability of Hmong staff or faculty with whom the Hmong students could establish a professional connection (Xiong & Lee, 2011). Additionally, Xiong and Lam (2013) found that Hmong college students felt uncomfortable seeking academic counselors' advice. As aligned with MMM theory, Hmong students noted feeling worried that staff of other ethnicities would not understand their unique challenges because of generalized assumptions made about students of Asian descent. Furthermore, Kwan's (2015) study on Hmong American college student responses to microaggressions in college classrooms found that respondents felt ashamed to identify as Hmong due to experiences of being questioned about their ethnicity. Respondents reported feeling both objectified when perceived by others as "exotic" and invisible due to the lack of Hmong historical presence in their

academic studies (Kwan, 2015). These harmful perpetuated beliefs of Hmong and other SEAA students need to be considered by institutional leaders to make impactful changes in support of these marginalized students towards academic success (Xiong & Lam, 2013).

Of course, it is not without hope. Kwan's (2015) study also found that Hmong students who experienced more inclusive settings felt comfortable and welcomed to be themselves. Xiong and Lee's (2011) study highlighted findings of campus spaces in which Hmong American students felt supported for their academic journey. Top supports included financial assistance, peer advising, and academic advising with someone who was informative about classes, new events, and career goals (Xiong & Lee, 2011).

As revealed in the literature, there is no easy separation of home life and academic performance, particularly for Hmong students navigating IHEs. Hmong students live with expectations from their parents that may not necessarily positively contribute to their navigation of the higher education system and what it requires of students to do well. Furthermore, they are enduring external and internal pressures placed upon them through the Model Minority Myth and microaggressions, which negatively impact their academic performance. On the other hand, there is hope for Hmong student success with intentional supports with deepening and differentiating cultural understanding at IHEs.

1.4 Purpose of the Research Study

This qualitative study explored successful undergraduate Hmong students' experiences using in-depth semi-structured interviews to discover unique characteristics and shared commonalities of this achieving group. The researchers aimed to uncover the degree the noted theoretical frameworks impacted the experiences of successful undergraduate Hmong students and uncover perceptions on the IHE's role in providing a welcoming space to freely share their challenges without fear of criticism due to their ethnicity.

1.5 Research Questions

To better explore how these theories and contexts interact with academically achieving undergraduate Hmong students at the research IHE, this study aimed to make connections between literature themes and the participants' lived experiences to answer the following research questions:

- 1) What is unique about the collegiate experiences of academically high achieving undergraduate Hmong students at one large public IHE in California?*
 - a. How do the experiences of achieving Hmong students compare with that of their struggling Hmong peers?*
- 2) What factors are attributed to this student group's academic success?*
 - b. What contributing factors arise from on-campus and off-campus sources?*
- 3) How are competing responsibilities as a successful Hmong American college student managed to maintain balance for academic achievement?*

2. Method

This qualitative study focused on narratives of lived experiences of High achieving Hmong American college students to understand respective social practices allowing the researchers to make sense of the research topic. Purposive sampling of these specific individuals using 45 to 60 min in-depth, semi-structured interviews uncovered themes from unique and shared experiences to find impactful ways supporting this student population to graduation at IHEs.

2.1 Participants and Selection

Purposeful and snowball sampling (Lochmiller & Lester, 2018) were used to seek participants for this study. Specific eligibility criteria were imposed (Lochmiller & Lester, 2018) to receive insight from Hmong students demonstrating academic success in their undergraduate collegiate experiences thus far. The participants were selected from those enrolled at one large, public, four-year IHE with high undergraduate enrollment (Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, 2017). The IHE is designated as both a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) and Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institution (AANAPISI) by the U.S. Department of Education (Takahashi & Nottbohm, 2019). The researchers intentionally permitted respondents to determine their own identity, academic level, and academic standing, not influencing whether they met the pre-determined eligibility criteria. The following sections describe the initial connection and invitation and the eligibility criteria for the eventual four in-depth, semi-structured interview participants.

2.1.1 Connection and Invitation

Due to the challenges of COVID-19, much of the initial recruitment efforts for eligible participants consisted of emailing undergraduate instructors and Hmong organization networks within the IHE. The direct researcher emails requested wide electronic distribution to enrolled students and contained information about the study, a survey link, and researcher contact information. When this yielded limited results, researchers personally contacted undergraduate instructors across the university. From there, as students responded to the determination pre-survey, those who were eligible and completed interviews were asked to connect other eligible Hmong students to the researcher providing necessary contact information.

2.2 Instruments

2.2.1 Eligibility Criteria and Determination Pre-Survey

Participants were screened for eligibility using a voluntary self-report electronic interview determination pre-survey (Lochmiller & Lester, 2018). The 7-question self-report survey included informed consent, contact information, enrollment status, race/ethnicity, academic achievement, campus involvement, and willingness to participate in a later 45 to 60-minute virtual interview. The intent was to pre-identify matriculated, undergraduate achieving Hmong students at the IHE who were currently enrolled with full-time status for the interviews. For purposes of this study, matriculation is defined as having gained admission into the institution as a degree-seeking student working toward earning a baccalaureate degree, and academic achievement is defined as holding a minimum 3.00 campus Grade Point Average (GPA) to

delimit transfer units based on experiences from a different IHE. Those who met the eligibility criteria determined from this self-report pre-survey were invited to participate in a voluntary virtual interview.

2.2.2 In-depth, Semi-structured Interview

Eligible respondents were invited to participate in a 45 to 60 minute in-depth, one-on-one, semi-structured virtual interview. The semi-structured style afforded follow-up questions depending on the unique participant responses without compromising the study (Lochmiller & Lester, 2018). The virtual setting was necessary as the campus community was under mandatory stay-at-home orders per the California Governor due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Hmong identifying researcher conducted the interviews to develop rapport in consideration of like-ethnicity (Atkins & Wallace, 2012), which also made the virtual format important to the design instead of phone interviews. The one-on-one style was also intentionally selected for increased confidentiality, and only the audio was recorded with consent for study purposes.

The interview consisted of 7 main topical questions with five sub topic questions for a total of 12 structured researcher-developed questions overall. During the virtual interviews, respondents were asked a series of questions that explored their experiences as undergraduate Hmong students at the IHE. The researcher permitted participants to respond in their own words and, when necessary, repeated a summary of the response to ensure full understanding was gained. Follow-up probing style questions were used in the interview context, dependent upon the responses for further clarification and elaboration as needed. See *Table 1* below for specific question content.

Table 1. Semi-structured Interview Questions

Number	Question
1	Introduce yourself by stating your name and academic level and share what clubs and organizations you are currently involved in on-campus.
2	As of Fall 2019, Hmong students make up 5.8% (1, 239) of undergraduate students at [this IHE]. I want to share some data collected right here at [your IHE] regarding the retention, graduation, and persistence rate of undergraduate Hmong students. Let me draw your attention to the columns indicating the total graduation rates within four years (4%) and six years (39.4%). How do you feel about this data and its reflection of you and your Hmong peers on this campus?
2a	How does this data speak to what you have seen and experienced as a student here on campus?
3	You have self-reported that you currently hold above at least a 3.00 GPA. What campus services/resources do you feel have contributed to allowing you to achieve this?

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- 3a How did you learn of these services, and how often do you use them?
- 3b Is there a campus service you would like to see offered that is not already in existence?
- 4 What are your study habits, and how do you think those impacted your GPA?
- 5 What responsibilities do you hold outside of your coursework and extra-curricular activities?
- 5a How do you maintain a balance of your various competing responsibilities?
- 6 What challenges have you encountered specifically at this institution?
- 6a How have you addressed these challenges? If you didn't, why not?
- 7 In your opinion, how can [your IHE] better serve undergraduate Hmong students to help them remain in college and ultimately earn a Bachelor's degree? Why?
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2.4 Researchers' Roles

The researchers recognize the importance of acknowledging their identities in relation to the study context. Researcher one is an academically achieving female Hmong-American with academic and professional connections to the research IHE. She has earned both a Bachelor's Master's Degree from the IHE and is a current staff member. Having been raised in the region and claiming Hmong as an identifiable ethnicity also influenced the researcher's impetus for this study. Researcher two and principal investigator is a White female faculty member in the Department of Educational Leadership with longevity in the region for over 25 years as a teenager, student, and working practitioner teaching and leading in local public schools. With her connections to the region, she is an ally working alongside diverse communities to support access and equity in education. These identities are openly acknowledged to enhance trustworthiness.

2.5 Trustworthiness

Data collected from the survey were reviewed for eligibility only. Once interview participants were selected and volunteers secured, all file information was permanently deleted from the secure cloud storage. With the participants' permission, the virtual interviews were audio-recorded for later transcription. Verbatim transcription was contracted through an online service to enhance credibility through in-depth data review and collection of exact quotes (Lochmiller & Lester, 2018). After successful transcription, they were stored in the external thumb drive, and password protected cloud storage.

The researchers reviewed the verbatim transcripts for thematic analysis were reviewed using Wellington's (2015) first four stages—immersion, reflection, analysis, synthesis—to move analyses from general ideas to specific emergent themes by codes. This was first completed individually by researchers and then followed a collaborative review process using a coded spreadsheet for convergence and to mitigate cognitive shift for enhanced trustworthiness (Lochmiller & Lester, 2018). The collaborative coding and member checking process was also essential to mitigate potential cognitive biases due to the first researcher's close connection to the participant identities, as noted in the previous subsection. On the other hand, the same researcher's similar background to participants also strengthened rapport during the interview phase increasing dependability of the responses (Atkins & Wallace, 2012). The ways in which the past personal challenges for this researcher may or may not have been similar to that of the research participants were member checked by the second researcher with intentional effort put forth to understand the unique participant experiences and conduct the research based on information uncovered throughout the study.

3. Result

Four eligible respondents from the predetermination survey were invited for the virtual one-on-one interviews and all accepted. No other participants from follow-up snowballing were found. The four participants were all academically achieving Hmong females with GPAs at or above 3.00, and their class levels were as follows: one Freshman, one Junior, and two Seniors. Each of the participants reported either previous or current involvement in an on-campus club, organization, or program. Of the four participants, three different on-campus organizations were represented.

3.1 Low First-time Freshmen Hmong Student Graduations Rates Not Surprising

Respondents were shown data of first-time freshmen Hmong students' graduation, retention, and persistence rates. Participants were asked to share their reaction to this data and whether it reflected their experiences and that of their Hmong peers on campus. None of the respondents were surprised to learn of the low graduation and retention rates, and all expressed a need to increase the numbers for Hmong peers. Specifically, three out of four respondents connected the data directly to what they already knew of peers, friends, and family who dropped out of college. For example, one respondent said, "*It does reflect, you know, the Hmong community because I know a lot of...friends and family who drop out*". One respondent even made the connection to the number of high school friends who entered the same IHE at the same time, only to experience most of them drop out within the first two-years—"It is accurate because I did come into school with a lot of my peers from high school and a lot of them have not finished...less than 10 of my peers have finished".

3.2 Campus Services and Resources Utilized for Academic Success

When asked to share what campus services and resources were perceived to have supported the respondents' ability to academically achieve at or above a 3.00 GPA, there was a common finding of regularly using campus services but did not illuminate one over another. Responses ranged from

attending a program entitled *Supplemental Instruction*—a peer-assisted program which connects current students with an “SI Leader” who has previously successfully passed that same course (Learning Center, 2018)—to the Student Health Center, Cross Culture and Gender Center, Career Development Center, and the Student Cupboard. Only one of the four respondents mentioned attending a professor’s office hours as a contribution to academic success at the IHE. This particular respondent had previously attended an on-campus tutoring service but found it less personable than desired and preferred one-on-one faculty conversations to clarify academic content. They also added, “*You don’t have anyone necessarily holding your hand or, or encouraging you to...keep on going unless you have good mentors or good role models or good idols that you look up to or connect with*”.

3.3 Personal Study Habits Highlighted as Expected Student Roles

When asked about their study habits, respondents reported a range of habits: completing assignments on time, doing homework as assigned, paying attention in class, taking notes, not procrastinating, setting study goals, and attending study groups. Regarding how the respondents viewed these habits played a role in their academic achievement, each saw these habits to be part of what students are expected to do to learn. The responses emerged as nonchalant routines fit into their daily schedule—no more, no less. For example, one noted, “*I just go home and just basically, like, do my readings, do my homework, and then just study before the exam. That’s how it helps I guess*”. Another shared, “*I just go over the materials with myself...I have to teach myself the subject, you know, if I can’t teach myself then I don’t actually fully understand*”. A further respondent discussed working to avoid procrastination—a “*typical thing people do*” by “*working on things earlier so [they] have more time*”. The last respondent eluded to being an active learner in class selecting the style needed at the moment sharing, “*Sometimes I feel like I need to write it down. Sometimes I feel like I just need to listen, but I try to make sense of it, in the class itself. That’s really just it*”.

3.4 Family Roles and Job Responsibilities Create Full Schedules Alongside School

When respondents were asked to share their responsibilities outside of the classroom and campus environment, they all had full schedules, mostly devoted to family roles. Three of the respondents reported living at home with their parents and siblings, sharing that their parents expected assistance with either caring for younger siblings, completing household chores, or helping with the family farm. One respondent shared, “*There’s a lot of responsibilities just being a Hmong American who’s also a woman...watching my younger siblings or cooking for them when I have time or cleaning up...a lot of the house duties*”. Similarly, another illustrated her expected family roles since she lives at home—“*I have little siblings who are still in elementary school. I would take them to school...there are times when I have to pick them up from school, or cook for them or read, and help them do homework*”. Another respondent also shared that her weekends included helping her parents pack and sell their farm produce for all-day farmers markets in San Francisco, about 3 hours from their home in the Central Valley. This respondent noted that she did not have much free time out of school and the weekday and weekend family responsibilities. “*For me, I don’t have weekends...I go and help my mom...and we don’t get back [home*

on Sunday] until like 7:00 p.m.”.

Unlike the others, the last respondent focused on her part-time job as an elementary afterschool tutor as the largest challenge as a full-time student. She reported responsibilities outside of specified service hours to prepare for the following day explaining, *“It’s not one of those jobs where you get to go there, do your work, come back and don’t have to think about it...you have to plan the next lesson, ...the next enrichment, ...what you need to print out for the students for the next day or the next week”.*

What each of these academically achieving full-time Hmong females had in common were the roles and responsibilities taking up much of their time outside of school hours and studying. As reported by each participant, there was little free-time left for anything other than work, family expectations and school.

3.5 Maintaining Balance Requires Communication and Setting Priorities

With the many roles and responsibilities expected of these respondents, understanding how they established a balance in their lives was necessary to understand since they also maintained a successful GPA. The respondents’ narratives illuminated the vital role of honest communication with family and friends while also prioritizing responsibilities. Example answers included, *“just being very honest with my parents...I’m just hoping that you guys can be patient with me. You know, I can’t just be there at the snap of a finger. Which is what they were used to before I became even more busy with college”,* and, *“I know that family is a priority...sometimes it’s very difficult to even balance things. You just gotta prioritize.....letting friends and my family know...I’m going to do homework at this time please don’t bother me”.* Another noted her mother’s role in supporting the balance, sharing what her mother would tell her: *“If you want to do something then you will find the time for it”.* Thus, the respondent makes family a priority and strives to successfully tackle the school responsibilities she has decided to take on. The participants did not allude to any negative family conflicts due to these critical decisions in pursuit of academic success, as noted in the findings of Supple et al. (2010). Nothing was detailed regarding affected relationships, but instead, responses emphasized the importance of adequately managing time needed for their success across various responsibilities.

3.6 Self-advocacy Central to Overcoming Academic Challenges

Respondents were asked to reflect on their collegiate experiences thus far and share any challenges they may have experienced, as well as how they overcome those challenges. The responses overwhelming pointed to self-advocacy as key for academic success. Each respondent discussed the challenges of getting waitlisted for classes. One shared her way of self-advocating by working to get *“priority registration...by helping a visually impaired student”* in their classes. Another shared, *“I had to take another class at a different college to make sure that I stayed on track”* to creatively advocate for their success. When asked how she learned of this route, the participant replied it was a method followed by many of her classmates. She later confirmed with an academic advisor that the transfer course would be acceptable, but no initial guidance was received from the advisor regarding how to remain on track with course requirements.

Two participants also reported struggling with course enrollment but connected the difficulty with declaring a major. One shared, *"I think my biggest challenge is probably deciding on a major and deciding on a career"*. This respondent observed that the inability to select a major prohibited priority enrollment into courses, and *"it is easy for a student to be lost as to what courses are required without a major"*. The other explained that the lack of decision on a major had made her, and others like her, not sure what courses to enroll in after the first 2 years: *"I feel like a lot of students come in undeclared and then when...it's time for them to declare their major, they just don't know. So they're just like, 'I'm not going to go to college [anymore] 'cause I don't know what I want to do with it...' That's something I face and I have friends who face that"*. This participant also knew to access her academic advisor to discuss the course requirements for a selected major and was then referred to the Career Development Center to discuss potential careers. The student admitted never taking the extra steps to explore career options and went with a major at that point. Unfortunately, now she feels stuck, sharing, *"After exploring the types of careers that I can go into with my [decided] major, I still don't really want to pursue those careers"*. In contrast to the other participants' experiences, this individual did not self-advocate by taking steps to get assistance in learning the related career options with specific majors. The impact of this appears as dissatisfaction with prospective future careers linked to their decided major. Ultimately, the decision not to self-advocate holds as much influence on a student's experiences as does taking the self-directed initiative to seek out proper support. One response implied the culturally learned challenges of Hmong people in general to self-advocate in the school setting, sharing, *"Hmong people, they still don't have that drive to join [organizations] or to talk about things [to learn about new ideas]. They just come to school and go home...they don't have that inside that makes them, openly think it's okay to ask for help, but it's just more like 'I'm going to go to school and then go home'"*.

3.7 Serving Undergraduate Hmong Students to Reach Graduation with Increased Awareness

Respondents were asked for their opinion of how the IHE could better serve its undergraduate Hmong student population to assist them in earning a Bachelor's degree. Three major themes arose from the responses: *increasing awareness of Hmong student population on campus; diversifying campus population with Hmong faculty and staff; and, continuing to cultivate a welcoming campus environment for cultural traditions and events*.

Increasing awareness of Hmong student population on campus showed up in various ways, but centered on work to help faculty, staff, and students understand that Hmong are unique from other Asian cultures and that the IHE Asian population is majority Hmong American. It was also highlighted that awareness was needed, not just for others to understand, but for Hmong students as well.

First of all, they all were not interested in a great deal of singling out, and one shared explicitly, *"I don't need any sort of, big O recognition and hey, 'We need to have a whole movement and all this stuff for this specific population' ...but I think that if we can just have a little bit more...acknowledgment of, hey, this is a big portion of [this IHE], too"*. Another, with a similar sentiment, added, *"Maybe making [Hmong] students more aware that, hey, you are an important segment of this school and you continuing your*

education...does make an impact, and it does make a difference at [this IHE]”. A different response with similar feelings, as previously noted, also added how Hmong students should become concretely aware the cultural differences between student expectations and Hmong values. *“I feel like the [Hmong] community is not used to people being so goal-driven and trying to succeed for themselves. But I think it’s a cycle that we can in a sense break and we can influence other Hmong individuals that, hey you know, let’s keep it up and let’s continue on succeeding”*.

Each of the responses indicated that a lacking component of the campus community was seeing and interacting with Hmong American faculty or staff, the basis for the subtheme on how to serve Hmong students more effectively: *diversifying campus population with Hmong faculty and staff*. For example, one respondent noted the problem saying, *“[Hmong students] don’t have a place where we can go and we can get to talk to another [Hmong] faculty member...we don’t have that”*.

The third subtheme was based on the reporting of the already welcoming IHE community in terms of celebrating diverse cultures and experiences. Responses illustrated that the IHE should *continue to cultivate a welcoming campus environment for cultural traditions and events* in order to serve Hmong students as well. Statements included, for example, *“[This IHE] is just a welcoming community, I feel it’s the most important thing because once you feel welcomed, you also feel more comfortable doing things that you wouldn’t do”*. Another response explained the context of what should continue highlighting a welcoming annual experience for Hmong students. She shared, *“Like for example, when we do the, the [Hmong] new year at [the IHE], right? It’s just this is a really small thing we do [as Hmong students], but it does make us feel welcome when people do come and watch us [for the celebration event]”*. The participants all displayed signs of joy during their responses on feeling welcomed, seeming to stem from the power of the communal experience in a welcoming space for people of various backgrounds to connect.

The major takeaway from these responses shows that even high achieving Hmong students are not immune to the desire for a sense of belonging on campus. These students have managed to utilize their experiences and formulate ways to navigate the higher education field without the level of recognition on campus that other ethnic backgrounds receive. However, the institution would be remiss to consider these individual achievements as a win for the general undergraduate Hmong student population knowing the current data on Hmong students.

4. Discussion

After delving into the lived experiences of the eligible academically achieving Hmong American undergraduate student study respondents, connections between the findings, the literature, and the theoretical frameworks were made in relation to the research question. The research questions guide the discussion.

- 1) *What is unique about the collegiate experiences of academically high achieving undergraduate Hmong students at one large public IHE in California?*

- a. *How do the experiences of achieving Hmong students compare with that of their struggling Hmong peers?*
- 2) *What factors are attributed to this student group's academic success?*
 - b. *What contributing factors arise from on-campus and off-campus sources?*
- 3) *How are competing responsibilities as a successful Hmong American college student managed to maintain balance for academic achievement?*

4.1 What Is Unique about the Collegiate Experiences of Academically High Achieving Undergraduate Hmong Students at One Large Public IHE in California?

Throughout the study, participants openly divulged their collegiate experiences with the researcher providing candid responses about their higher educational journey thus far as Hmong American undergraduate female students. The study sought to explore unique aspects of this particular student population and their collegiate experiences since this population struggles to make it to graduation. The response findings show that these high achieving Hmong American college students do not necessarily perceive their academic achievements as a remarkable feat. The uniqueness of this perception lies in the lack of knowledge about the sizable overall student population for which they hold a critical role. Since these participants are attaining academic success despite the dismal overall undergraduate Hmong students' performance, one would expect that they are in a much better position to identify areas of contribution to their success.

In comparison to their Hmong peers who are struggling, these participants' awareness mainly lies in their personal connection to friends or family members who have struggled in college. Participants have observed peers' challenges while making connections to their own; identifying mostly successful ways to manage their school and home responsibilities. Respondents' inability to fully recognize the significance of their achievements can be related to the Critical Race Theory (CRT). The theory revolves around the idea that an individual's perception of their racial realities is influenced by surrounding perspectives (Schuh et al., 2017). This was evident in the lack of knowledge about Hmong students making up the largest undergraduate Asian ethnicity at this IHE.

Furthermore, participants did recognize ways that Hmong cultural values did not always align with that of the IHE expectations; however, they used communication and time management strategies to navigate the challenges without creating the negative family tension as illuminated in the work of Supple et al., (2010). Interestingly, these female Hmong American students also did not highlight challenges stemming from their role as a female as found in the work of Cha (2010) and Her and Gloria (2016). They were able to, through what seems like honest dialog with family and honoring their roles when available, respectfully negotiate a balance that worked for everyone in their households as well as feeling encouraged to continue with school regardless of their gendered cultural role. It was noted that there may be value in helping Hmong students become aware of this narrative and learn practical ways to balance the challenges with respectful communication of needs at home while still honoring their family roles. This comes back to CRT—when Hmong American students understand perspectives

surrounding their racial and ethnic realities, it can help them make sense of how they see themselves (Schuh et al., 2017). Respondents saw this assist in preparing for the cultural negotiations and communication needed to achieve in school while also honoring their Hmong family values. The respondents added that IHE has a shared responsibility in student achievement outcomes and should help faculty and staff understand more about the Hmong student population to serve these students better. This would imply dismantling the MMM (Her, 2014; Kim & Lee, 2014) in order to truly see and understand the Hmong American students in the classroom space.

4.2 What Factors Are Attributed to This Study Group's Academic Success?

In exploring factors that attribute to the study participants' academic success, it was found that academic success is a result of a combination of several different factors—which are not necessarily the same for every individual. This study illuminated various factors ranging from study habits to engagement with on-campus organizations as contributing to participants' level of academic performance. The themes that arose from participant responses reflected a sense of self-awareness that engagement with on-campus clubs or organizations is something to maintain as an asset to completing their academic course loads. Responses indicated the importance of prioritizing their academic, extra-curricular, and familial responsibilities to maintain balance, and self-advocating for personal academic goals if they, or other Hmong students, were to achieve success in school.

These narratives illustrate the cultural mismatch of the collective society in Hmong culture and the individual achievement for success in the IHE; however, these participants, as previously noted, navigated this with their respective families through what seemed to be open communications. As with Vang's (2105) study findings, there was a shared understanding that these participants' individual academic work was to ultimately benefit the family's economic stability, aligning with the Hmong cultural values in the shifted context of American schooling. This is not a stretch for current Hmong American families when considering the history of the Hmong people as refugees in the U.S. and the aforementioned parental desires for success in American schools for a secure future (Xiong & Lam, 2013).

4.2.1 What Contributing Factors Arise from On- and Off-campus Sources?

In exploring specific on-campus and off-campus factors, participants provided specific campus resources, from one-on-one faculty consultation to student health and well-being services, perceived as having contributed to their academic success. However, these experiences indicated recognition of self-advocacy to reach out to the appropriate on-campus supports and find new opportunities if the previous support did not seem to help. One respondent also recognized that her lack of self-advocacy created new challenges for her moving forward in her major. Furthermore, the participants illuminated the role a welcoming environment played in their success. This is congruent with the works of Kwan (2015) regarding the power of inclusive settings for Hmong student comfort and Xiong and Lee (2011) highlighting the importance of supportive and welcoming campus spaces for Hmong American student success.

The most notable contributing factor of off-campus support was family. Three out of four narratives highlighted family responsibilities, but not once did participants report this as a hindrance. If anything, the responsibility to family was seen as a priority, and their part in contributing to the family was the focus. The role of family responsibility for these participants can be linked to familial-cultural support as a source of motivation as noted by Vang (2015).

4.3 How Are Competing Responsibilities Managed to Maintain a Balance?

Each participant's narrative highlighted ways they make time to ensure success for what they have decided to do outside of the household, without minimizing the role of family and work in their lives as Hmong American women. Beyond their academic responsibilities, participants reported family responsibilities that require their time and dedication or employment obligations that require them to prioritize and manage their time carefully. Participants are having to spend their time fulfilling various additional commitments in addition to classwork and studies. Not to mention, their campus involvement in student organizations adds more responsibilities on top of academic and home obligations. In order to accomplish different tasks, participants have come up with different methods such as time management, prioritizing, and honestly expressing their needs to family and friends to advocate for their academic success.

As discussed by Xiong and Lam (2013), the connection to familial-cultural support is evident in these students' narratives. They showed an understanding that hard work is required to maintain the academic achievements they have gained through their parents' support. The critical role of parental support and its impact on their academic achievements were also highlighted, and as Xiong and Lam (2013) reported, these Hmong American students ensure they give back by contributing to the family unit. For example, seeing the value in sacrificing their weekends, as one shared, to help their parents and support their family's livelihood demonstrates their deep understanding of time spent helping family does not have to come at the cost of their education. The participant responses unearthed an intricate understanding of Hmong family roles and how those strong ties are, in actuality, an asset to their educational achievements.

4.4 Limitations

It is important to consider the results couched in the limitations of this study design and context of the data collection phase. First, the qualitative method framed in one-on-one interviews has strengths in understanding the unique human experiences specific to the study context; thus, the study results are not generalizable beyond this scope (Lochmiller & Lester, 2018). However, the rich experiences can provide considerations for those supporting academic achievement for students similar to these study participants in undergraduate settings.

The second consideration is in reference to the small participant number and short timeline with which the study was conducted. Shortly after the study received departmental human subject's protection approval, COVID-19 was declared a pandemic with immediate stay-at-home orders. The IHE made a mandatory pivot to virtual instruction and university-related interactions. Personal connections to recruit

participants in classrooms or at student organization meetings were not an option. While the researchers used university and personal network connections to email and snowball recruitment information, as previously noted, interest in the predetermination survey was low. Only nine students responded despite the instructors' efforts to share with students. The confounding challenges COVID-19 stay-at-home orders on student well-being due to job loss, shift to virtual learning, and family health is assumed to have greatly impacted willingness to add another responsibility to already difficult circumstances. Not knowing the future timeline of the pandemic and the importance of moving this research topic forward, the study continued based on the narratives of the four eligible and willing participants to illuminate topics surrounding the research questions.

5. Conclusion

Exploring the factors successful Hmong American undergraduate students perceive as having impacted their academic achievements is a critical counter-narrative to understand in order to break the oppressive Hmong drop-out cycle. An IHE that values student success must work towards equity for historically marginalized groups, particularly based on the landscape of students the IHE serves. Student voice is the best way to ensure an institution provides a campus climate conducive to understanding the needs of students of color (Quaye et al., 2019).

In the case of this study, Hmong American students make up the largest Asian ethnicity at the IHE; however, the overall trends of academic underperformance for this student group demonstrate a need for greater intentional focus on equity. Findings underscore that Hmong American students are deeply aware of the overall lack of success for their population. To shift this narrative, these students need to also hear and celebrate, as the largest Asian ethnic group on campus, the Hmong student achievements. In this way, the study participants' shed light on how Hmong American undergraduate students can leverage successful strategies to make graduation a norm and not the exception. Through recognition and sharing their academic achievements, these participants provided an essential contribution to the institution, and higher education as a whole. Participants' narratives and thoughts on what changes they wish to see based on their experiences served as a voice for the larger Hmong student population at the IHE who require additional assistance to graduate.

Through these narratives, participants illuminated ways to educate Hmong students of their presence and contribution to campus and ways to support staff, faculty, and the community to deepen the sense of belonging on campus. Expecting the student population to recognize their performance level alone is not possible without the institution's contribution. The institution must create a rich environment in which all its students can thrive, and CRT provides a foundation in which the institution can reflect and focus on creating the needed space. Specifically, for Hmong American students, the IHE should invent ways to encourage and teach student self-advocacy for growth and development, especially understanding how this may be viewed as a counter-narrative of the collective cultural values. Hmong students will require assistance to learn how to identify their needs and articulate them in a way that will allow for improved

collaboration with the institution and how that ultimately can create success for the Hmong community. By addressing and improving the overall academic performance of this student population, families' economic gain and stability can be a realized goal.

Beyond the institution, society can benefit from taking the time to listen and learn more about the participants of this research because they, too, are contributing members. Like their peers, Hmong students have a role in making society better for all, so their success and challenges are deeply intertwined with their ability to contribute. Rather than view Hmong students' academic performance as insignificant, society should view this population's acclamation as an extension of its membership. Hmong students bring a uniquely layered sense of self, and the IHE should work to embrace the added value it brings to the university setting. Some Hmong American students may arrive on campus with a need to continue their self-discovery. In contrast, others arrive with social-emotional development based on previous lived experiences, which critically affect the college-age students who arrive on the university campus.

Lastly, IHE leaders need to know MMM's negative impacts on students and their academic endeavors, particularly SEAA, including Hmong. An institution designed to provide space for gaining knowledge and growth should afford all its students the same opportunity, regardless of race or ethnicity. This should include rejecting the conceptions of student needs based on myths that do not accurately apply to all individuals who make up the larger group. Instead, institutions need to take the time and learn about the struggles facing the various ethnic groups on its campus and address their needs accordingly. In doing this, institutions will see that the needs of struggling students, such as the Hmong, are not the same as other Asian ethnicities. Therefore, to address their struggles institutions will need first to learn how the MMM does not apply to all Asians; and then look further into how undergraduate Hmong students can be supported.

5.1 Future Research

These study responses were obtained from four undergraduate Hmong students currently enrolled at one IHE and capture a small-scale account of experiences. Additional future studies on this unique student population, with an increased number of participants, would allow for more analysis of student perceptions of campus support at other Hmong serving institutions and will continue to add to this body of research. In particular, studies can explore the connection between specific current campus services, its utilization by the Hmong American student population, and its impact on student academic performance. More insight into undergraduate Hmong students would benefit the students, institutions, and similar communities as a whole.

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