

Key Life Experiences Contributing to Hmong Students' Matriculation

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Introduction

Research on Hmong-Americans started emerging in the late 1980s (Conquegood, 1989; Hendricks, et al, 1986; Quincy, 1988 & 1994) and continues to flourish to the present (Hamilton-Meritt, 1993 & 1999; Hutchinson, 1997; Lo, 2001; Timm, 1994; Thao, 1999); Vang, 2005; Yang, 1993). Topics studied range from family dynamics and cultural transitions to student achievement and challenges.

Little research has been conducted specifically on Hmong college students (Bosher, 1997; Depouw, 2003; McClain-Ruelle & Xiong, 2005; Root, et al, 2003; Su, 2005; Swirkowski, 1997). More extensive and comprehensive research on the Hmong student experiences has been done at the pre-k-12 level (Hutchinson, 1997 ; Timm, 1994 ; Vang, 1993; Walker, 1989).

In the early 1980s, Hmong students began to enter the University of Wisconsin (UW) System (Druke, 2000, personal communication). Statistics from the UW Office of Educational Policy and Analysis (2007) showed 8,316 Southeast Asian students attending the 13 four-year UW campuses, with 46 percent (3,773) degree completions from 1989-1999. Since the UW System does not break down the Asian/Southeast Asian categories by ethnicity, data on the number of Hmong students attending and graduating is unavailable.

The *Census 2000: Data Analysis* provides more specifics about Hmong educational attainments (Pfeiffer, 2003). According to Yang and Pfeiffer, disparities occur between Hmong levels of educational attainments versus other U.S. populations: (1) 27 percent of the Hmong population has a high school diploma versus 49.7 of the general U.S. population; (2) 11.7 percent of

the Hmong population has an associate or bachelor's degree versus 21.9 percent of the U.S. population; and (3) 1.5 percent of the Hmong population has a master's degree versus 8.9 percent of the U.S. population. One question impends that the statistics do not reveal: what key life experiences contributed to Hmong college students' matriculation, retention, and graduation from college?

In conducting this research and constructing a theory about Hmong college students' matriculation, retention, and graduation from college, I have examined key life experiences of 18 Hmong graduates from the UW System. Based on the evidence from in-depth interviews, participants identified five clusters of key life experiences. These clusters include:

1. Supportive family environment;
2. Social and academic support in a formal education environment;
3. Life lessons: embracing hardships and challenges;
4. Vision and drive for success that includes a college education; and
5. Financial support.

Methodology

Narrative inquiry and interpretive approaches were employed, providing a methodological approach for understanding people's representation of the world, and actions in it, through the stories they tell (Gomez, in press) where meaning was open for negotiation. The participants and the researcher engaged in a reflective process to interpret the meaning of the individual viewpoints (Hmong college students' voices) and how these viewpoints of past and present experiences provided rich descriptions of the Hmong college students' experiences. Grounded theory was also utilized to maximize flexibility of data col-

lection and analysis. The grounded theory approach requires the researcher to derive a theory by using "multiple stages of data collection" and "constant data comparison" (Creswell, p.12).

The study participants were purposely selected. They were first generation Hmong college graduates from several University of Wisconsin campuses, during the period 1995 to 2001. Letters were sent inviting 50 potential participants. The response rate included 18 returned letters indicating willingness to participate in the study.

I then called and scheduled interviews with participants. Interview protocol was shared with each participant, including the questions that would be asked. Three pilot interviews were conducted with non-participants who were first-generation Hmong college graduates.

The 18 participants represented a wide range of different academic disciplines and universities. The age of participants ranged from 24 to 40. Participants' academic disciplines included business administration, political science, criminal justice, graphic arts, public administration, Spanish, elementary education, social work, advertising and public relations, accounting, radio/TV/film, urban and regional studies, mathematics, geography, and biology and chemistry.

Interviews lasted from 45 minutes to an hour and 30 minutes. Saturation of information was obtained when information given by the interviewee became redundant. During the interviews, I clarified, confirmed, and validated responses given by participants before moving on with more questions.

The questionnaires covered elementary, secondary, and post-secondary educational experiences as well as social, economic, and educational backgrounds, professional and personal challenges, and any unique life experiences that may have influenced their matriculation and graduation from college. Participants were asked

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to contact me if additional information needed to be shared.

All interviews were audiotaped (with permission) and field notes were taken. The interviews were transcribed verbatim. The interviewees spoke for the majority of the interviewing sessions, as I listened intently, seeking to identify emergent themes. The field notes provide “color” of the nuances and subtleties that cannot be heard on an audiotape and maybe missed when relying solely on memory.

Throughout the interviewing process, interpretations, questions, and findings were shared with each participant for reciprocal meaning, clarification, and discussion. Interviews, field notes, and participant observations were analyzed and refined between cases and within cases. Emerging themes were utilized to guide or refine the research process until data saturation was reached.

Results

Experiences of a Supportive Family

Participants cringed when reporting that college life is not entertaining and coasting, as they had expected. They experienced difficult challenges and times, academically, culturally, and socially. Many participants were discouraged and deflated when they put in a lot of time studying and still came up short on examinations and assignments. The struggle to understand course materials and concepts due to language and cultural barriers was described as exhausting, and at times undermined their abilities. As a result, their education sometimes became a secondary priority, as they sought to hold their lives together. They reported contemplating dropping out of college and finding employment.

Even in these challenging times, according to the study participants, having a supportive family played a significant role in staying the course. Contributing family members included parents, siblings, and other immediate family members.

Parents

Parental support came in the form of encouragement, childcare, financial assistance, and spiritual and emotional healing. Encouragement included storytelling about life struggles in Laos and Thailand, emphasizing the importance of education, and the occasional drop-in visits, phone calls, and small but significant monetary gifts. In their own words:

Participant 1: They [my parents] think I

was responsible and mature. They gave me much freedom. I stayed in the dorm and only went home during Christmas breaks or when they closed down the dorms. They told me what to do and at times, even though I disagreed with them, I took things into my hands and was responsible. They weren't controlling me. My parents were success-oriented. They always stressed doing well in my classes. They made certain you got your work done.

Participant 2: [My parents] were always telling how, now that we are in the United States and that we have the opportunity to get an education, we should take advantage of it, something that you could not have even if they wanted to back in Laos. So yes, they have always pounded that unto me. Go to school, go to school, do well. It was always something like that that came up. To me, education was second nature because of that.

Participant 3: My parents had always pressured us and drilled in our heads that education is the key to success. My parents didn't speak any English, so it was really hard for them to help us with our homework. But they always wanted to make sure that we get our homework done. They'll tell us to go study although they never checked on us. They always stressed education. My parents told us that education was important.

Participant 4: Just as you started to wonder if they have forgotten you, the phone rang and it was my dad asking how I was doing. It felt wonderful just to hear his voice from home. Sometimes they would stop by to visit when they are visiting a relative nearby. They dropped off food and gave me some money. It wasn't much but it was the gesture and showing that they still care. That helped me.

Participant 5: I had several events that could have ended my college career. When I did not do well in several classes or not passing exams, which made thing about a lot of things. Should I quit college or not? Should I continue or not? Should I find a job or not? I encountered these a lot of times but told myself that I cannot quit school and just get married and support my family. If I do that, things will get difficult, so I must not do that. Again, my family is very supportive. I encouraged myself. My family encouraged me. Not all my members have the opportunity to get an education, so when I think about it, it is very important to me.

Participant 6: Living in Laos and Thailand was difficult. Finding a warm place to sleep and warm food to eat was all that I hoped for. Much of the food that we received in refugee camp was left over or food with passed due dates. At times, you

could tell the food was stale and could smell the unfreshness. All I ever wanted to do was find a warm place to sleep and warm food to eat.

For participants who got married before and during college and had children, childcare became a challenge to stay the course. Childcare by parents provided participants with much relief, but it was not without sacrifices. Reliving her story:

There were certain things that you to sacrifice. When we had our first daughter, we had to send her to [my mother]. I went to school thinking about daughter. I would come home crying. Life was hard to be where I am today. If the situation would have been different without my mother's support, I don't think I would have graduated.

In a similar vein, another participant shared the critical role his mother played in providing childcare:

My mother and my in-laws, they helped us a lot. When we were both in school, we didn't have anyone to take care of our children. We knew that my mom would take care of the children. We didn't have to worry about babysitting or cooking. We basically concentrated our time on our education.

Beyond the encouragement and childcare, parents also provided emotional and spiritual support and served as a source of motivation for participants to endure difficult times, particularly for participants whose parents deceased. They sighed but graciously mentioned how their parents became their pillars and reminders of why they journeyed to America; they risked their lives and ways of living so that their children could have better opportunities.

Participants did not consider their parents' deaths as a hindrance or downfall, but embraced such as an inspiration. Rather than being distressed, they worked harder and refused to let their parents' hopes and dreams die. They reminded themselves regularly about the harsh realities of their parents' past memories and histories. Realizing this, participants were not going to disappoint their parents, even in death. Two participants encapsulated:

Participant 1: There was on major event in my life and hat was when my father passed away. It did not have quite a negative effect on me. I have always known that my father wanted me to go to college and do well. Even though he passed away, because of that unsaid promise of going to college and graduating from college, I made certain that I kept that promise

to myself and to him. I think my father's spirit lived through me and helped me.

Participant 2: Also with my father's death, it made me mature a little faster. That might be another reason I made it. Without that event in my life, I would have to make that decision [going to college].

Siblings

In addition to parents, participants' siblings played critical roles. Siblings served as role models and set precedence by attending or graduating from college, challenging participants to attend to college, consistently reminding participants of the importance of education, and comparing and contrasting the reality of their harsh and successful life experiences with those of participants. Several participants elaborated on how their siblings became daily physical and psychological reminders of why participants needed to continue with college:

Participant 1: For one thing, I have an older sister. She went to college, too. I graduated from high school and she decided to stay back and attend college. It seemed logical. If you didn't go to college, you would have to find a job. I didn't feel like I wanted to do that.

Participant 2: When I was in high school, both my brothers went to college. The fact that I went to college also had to do with my brothers. I am the youngest and both went to college. I felt obligated to go.

Participant 3: It didn't hurt that before I even graduated from high school, I had a brother who was attending college, too. So that slightly influenced me to go to college also.

Another participant shared how direct encouragement from siblings about academic life, preparation, discipline and rigor needed to be successful:

There were people who came and recruited me to go to college. The interest and curiosity of wanting to try was there. At least give it a try. My sister told me stories about college and she encouraged me to attend college as well.

More important, siblings were competitors or examples that challenged participants. The actions and examples set by siblings taught participants valuable life lessons. Some siblings did well in college, but not every sibling who went to college was successful. In either case, participants wanted to do better than their siblings.

At times, parents compared participants to their siblings who were successful in college or who did not meet parental expectations such as dropping out. Rather

than being undermined by the experience or comparisons, participants took it as a challenge to succeed:

I wanted to do better than my brothers. One dropped out. One graduated but did not work in his field of study. My brothers got all the attention. As a girl I didn't receive much attention. My parents thought as a girl, I didn't have the capacity to do what my brothers are capable of.

On some occasions, participants were challenged directly by their siblings. Comments made by siblings about future participants' inspirations were demoralizing at times, especially when participants were told they would only end up working as a secretary or general laborer in a factory. Such stereotypes and classifications elevated participants' motivation to succeed even more. Rather than submit to the self-prophecies or stereotypes, participants often saw them as healthy academic sibling rivalry:

My brothers said something to me that still makes me angry to this day. They said that the best I could be would be a secretary. They said that I started school so early. I better not waste my life away. All that Fruit Loops that they wasted on me. I took criticism and said to myself that I could do better. I used the negative criticisms as motivation.

Other Immediate Family

For some participants, a supportive family environment extended beyond parents and siblings. For participants who got married before or during college, the challenge to matriculate and graduate from college demanded more commitment and perseverance. In addition to academics, they had to support their spouses and children, along with other cultural family obligations.

Participants noted that culturally and traditionally, Hmong young adults typically get married anywhere from age 15 to 25 for males and 13 to 20 for females. Raised and growing up with such strong cultural influences, while marriage could have been a hindrance to academia, it instead became a normal life pattern. Married participants found resources to support the new family dynamics.

Some participants stressed that with marriage they became more responsible and accountable for their actions because they wanted to support their family with a college education and stable profession. They felt that leaving college was a short-term solution and an easy way out that would lead to long-term hardships.

Participants concluded that such a route was not an option for them. One married participant stated that she and her husband wanted to set a precedent for their children; if they have a college education, the chances were much better that their children will also pursue academia. In turn, participants challenged themselves and surmounted great educational and cultural challenges to earn college degrees.

Two participants shared the importance of such spousal support:

Participant 1: My spouse and family were there with me through thick and thin. My spouse never told me that why don't you get a job. Support my spouse and family, definitely. If it weren't for them, I don't think I would be where I am today.

Participant 2: My spouse was very supportive. For a husband to be so supportive was unusual in the Hmong culture. In times of needs, he was always there. He kept me going when I wanted to quit to care of our children.

Experiences of Social and Academic Support in a Formal Academic Environment

Unfamiliarity with the educational system and lack of basic communication skills left many participants to feel inadequate when it came to communicating with professors, teachers, and peers and understanding course materials. This initial inadequacy became less of an academic factor as participants slowly immersed and acclimated themselves into the school atmosphere and culture. One participant illustrated the range of social and academic support that he received:

When I got in college, I knew that I will only know things if I studied. I tried really hard to stay in college. I had to record the lectures to pass the course. If I don't understand something, I went to see and talk to the professors. In high school, the teachers came to you. In college, it is a different story. You had to seek out the professors. That's how I managed to stay in college. I also utilized my wife's help. I am not a good note taker so I convinced my wife to take some classes with me so I could use her notes on tests. I also made friends in the classes so that if I need anything I could ask them.

Participants' interaction with teachers/professors, other students, friends, and counselors, along with their involvement in cocurricular activities (support services and educational conferences) were fundamental to participants' matriculation and graduation from college.

Teachers and Professors

Inspired by teachers and professors, participants mentioned that they aimed to fulfill the dreams and beliefs that their teachers and professors envisioned for them. Also noted by participants, teachers and professors were often symbols of wisdom and knowledge. They encouraged and supported participants to do well academically, provided and created an accepting social and academic environment, and motivated and empowered them to attend college. The participants captured the landscape of such support:

Participant 1: My teachers were always saying that someday you're going to become the president of a company. My teachers were always saying that you're going to go far. At first, maybe you didn't believe them, but since they kept saying it, eventually you believe it.

Participant 2: One thing that really impacted my education was having great teachers at all three levels. They were really great teachers, teachers who knew what they were doing and teachers who encouraged us to do the very best we can. They taught us, and they knew what they were doing.

Participant 3: There were no classes but there were some teachers who encouraged you to do better even though they didn't say it directly to you. They kept making encouraging comments that if you try, you'll succeed.

Participant 4: I took a creative writing class during my senior year in college. The teacher encouraged me to go on with writing. The one thing I held on to. All teachers noticed that my writing was above average. That's what they told me. I thought about what I was going to do after college. If I don't go to college, there is work and sitting around the house. My parents yelled at me everyday. Teachers encouraged me to go to college.

Participant 5: As I was sitting in a study hall, a teacher I had the previous year came to where I was sitting. I didn't think he would remember me. He approached me and asked what I was going to do after school. I replied, like most high school students, that I didn't know. Then he asked me about going to college. I mean I thought about college before but I was uncertain if I was going to make it. He said with my skills, if I continue to work hard, I should be able to make it through college. He said that I should seriously consider going to college. From that moment on, it changed my life.

Participant 6: One day in class, she said that in life, the heart and mind would always want to do different things. The

heart will want you to do something and the mind will want you to do something else. This is a continuous battle and challenge. Whatever they want you to do, always remember to do the positive things. This advice I kept and go to often when I have to make difficult choices. In college, I had to make many difficult choices and I always try to choose the positive things do to regardless if the heart or the mind made the choice.

Participant 7: I had several events that could have ended my college career. When I did not do well in several classes or not passing exams and that made me think about a lot of things. Should I quit college or not? Should continue or not? Should I find a job or not? I encountered these choices a lot times, but I told myself that I cannot quit school and just get married and support my family. If I do that, things will get difficult, so I must not do that. I did the positive things as my teacher once told me.

On numerous occasions, participants provided insight into the important relationship that they experienced with teachers and professors and how the relationship contributed their decision to pursue higher education. Participants recalled they felt most comfortable with teachers and professors who were personable and professional. They enjoyed learning from teachers and professors who showed genuine interest in their well-beings by making them feel welcome during class, office hours and extra-time spending to help them with understanding course content. They deeply appreciated teachers and professors who encouraged and supported them when they were stressed out or experiencing difficult and challenging times.

In addition to these relationships, participants stressed that their success in college is a tribute to teachers and professors who knew how to teach and kept the class environment interesting and lively. Many participants did not enjoy long lectures or taking notes. They preferred more informal teaching strategies that concurrently required vigorous academic expectations. By capturing the participants' interests and imagination, teachers and professors extended participants' understanding and contributed to their growth and development. In turn, such climate and environment motivated participants to attend college, stay in college, and eventually graduate from college.

Participant 1: The professor went out of his own way to guide me when I was accepted into the program. We had an informal professional relationship, which

was important for me. Our discussions were not always about academics. He had an open door policy. In turn, I felt accepted and appreciated. The professor provided me with hope and confidence that I will graduate.

Participant 2: My field experience supervisor always encouraged and kept reminding me how one day I would be doing something great as a teacher that will benefit society. She commended me for my effort in student teaching and for to persevere. She reassured me that success was within my grasp.

Participant 3: I had good and interesting professors. They knew what they were doing and they knew how to teach the subjects in a fun way so that I didn't get bored of the subjects.

Participant 4: There is only one professor that I really enjoyed having as a teacher for my classes. Through him, I learned more about business than my other business classes, and he wasn't even in the business department. He was a communication major. He was the only person that I really enjoyed going to class.

Classmates and Friends

In addition to teachers and professors, classmates and friends significantly impacted their educational success. They witnessed friends staying focused on their education semester in and semester out. Even with so emphasis on social experiences in college, they did not see their friends derailed from their goal of obtaining a college education. Classmates and friends mutually supported each other in times of crisis such as marriages, failing classes, or contemplating dropping out of college.

They learned from friends who allocated and prioritized family and educational events. Not surprisingly, participants mentioned that the competitiveness among friends and classmates was critical in establishing their inner drive to do well in college. If one person is doing well, others strive to do the same. Nobody wanted to be left behind. Doing well academically was an unstated value that existed among friends and classmates. The competition encouraged and motivated participants to achieve academic excellence.

Participant 1: I guess it was the people you choose to hang around with and become close with. I think that's important to get through college. There are those who are there to party, drink and do whatever. Choosing the right people to hang around with at certain times in your life will get you through most situa-

tions and I am thinking that I made good decisions from now. I guess that's why some people make it.

Participant 2: What kept me college was the interaction with people my own age. I know every year you went back, "Oh yeah, nice to see you again, how are you and what did you do over the summer or whatever?" I would still be in college even if it wasn't for the work. The environment was great. I like the college environment. You get to see your friends. The age group of people. They have similar interests and they didn't really care who you were or what you do. They accepted you for what you were.

Participant 3: Also I met great people in college. People who I became friends with, have great relationships with them, the fact that they also came to college to learn helped. It was not always a party, party life. It was a learning experience also and college life itself is something special that not everyone gets to experience, especially in the traditional sense of living on campus and going to school. All that contributed to me staying in college.

Participant 4: I was fortunate enough to find a group people that could relate to. People who have the same values. College is fun but academics as well. They focused on academics and had fun. Finding a group like that really encouraged you to stay and at least get good grades so you're failing. That really helped to have a support group. At the first college I went to, I think they had a pretty good system—multicultural support.

Participant 5: It was my group of roommates. We were pretty close. We helped each other, as time needed, whether it was homework or someone to have fun with. My last year in college was the best year in college just because the environment that I was in (where I was living and the roommates that I had) that really pushed me also to graduate. Graduating was important to me.

Participant 6: One of American friends was going to go to college and I was doing better than he was. I was receiving better grades, so maybe I should go too. If he does and I don't, I would be a 'loser.' My peers motivated me to succeed and go to college and graduate from college.

Participant 7: It also helped that I had friends who wanted to learn. Sometimes we competed to see who would have the highest grade. That competition encouraged me to do better also.

Support Services

Throughout the study, participants spoke highly of the support services they received in a formal educational

setting. Support services included counseling, academic services, cocurricular activities, and educational conferences and workshops. These services provided programs that helped meet participants' academic and social needs. In addition, the services helped build character and leadership skills. Participants felt the services provided much needed personal and academic support since many had little experience with schooling in America and at the college level and had little or no directions when it came to going to college. Participants enthusiastically mentioned that utilizing these support services rejuvenated their desire and passion to do well in school.

Participants also credited their academic and personal counselors for success in school. They started utilizing these services when they were in middle and high schools. Middle and high school counselors guided them about which courses to take and helped them with the college application process along with seeking potential scholarships. Several participants stated that university counselors provided a warm and welcoming environment. They were symbols for academic and social support away from home.

Academic advisors played a critical role in helping develop academic plans and course sequencing for participants to follow, as well as moving participants forward toward graduation. The counseling, specifically multicultural services, gave participants a place to vent frustration and relieve academic and social stress. One participant shared his experience about a supportive counselor:

The counselor at the university also really helped me to stay in college and graduate. Many Hmong university students got homesick. An African-American counselor helped me through. When I had a hard time with my education during my freshman year, she would call the professors and arranged me to take tests or do other things to satisfy the course requirements. I had a friend in the counselor. The counselors talked to me and made me feel comfortable. Without the counselors and the services I received at the university, I don't think I would have made it.

In addition to utilizing counseling services, many participants felt that joining cocurricular activities gave them the opportunity to meet other students outside the school environment who shared similar dreams and goals, underscored the importance of leadership qualities, and provided the opportunity to succeed

and gain leadership opportunities and a sense of accomplishment. Participation in these activities provided participants with the opportunity to use the skills and tools that they acquired in the classroom. In addition, it motivated participants to do well in academics:

In middle school I played soccer. In order to play soccer, I had to maintain good grades. I worked really hard to stay on the soccer team. In 8th grade, I still had to maintain my grades so that I could stay on the track team.

The participant felt that if it were not for soccer and track, he would have been motivated to achieve academically. For other participants, joining cocurricular activities advanced their leadership skills and independence.

I got involved in many school activities. In high school, I got involved with Hmong student organizations, clubs and associations. I was the president of my high school Hmong organization. In college, I was also the Hmong Student Union president. These opportunities built leadership and gave me the opportunity to show people that I have the qualities to lead. Yes, these opportunities made my decision to attend and graduate from college easier.

Aside from counseling and cocurricular activities, participants found time to attend educational conferences sponsored by multicultural programs and services. Guest speakers and workshops reinforced many participants' goals and expectations, including matriculation and graduation from college. As two participants shared their experiences:

Participant 1: During college, there were conferences that you could attend. To be able to attend these conferences and to see some other people who went to college and graduated from college telling their stories made you feel like you're doing fine and on the right path. So I just kept going.

Participant 2: I went to different educational conferences. They had different speakers talking about education as they the key to success. I saw some elder Hmong individuals who did not speak English clearly who went to college, so I thought I could too.

In addition, participants said that support services such as cocurricular activities and educational conferences contributed to their academic success in the following ways:

1. Give participants the opportunity to meet other students who shared similar

dreams and goals outside of the school environment.

2. Underscore the importance of leadership qualities and opportunities.
3. Reinforce academics and social skills.
4. Be committed to participants who seek academic and social resources.
5. Provide multicultural services and opportunities.
6. Advance leadership qualities and independence.
7. Reinforce their goals and expectations through guest speakers and workshops.
8. Rejuvenate ambition and passion to matriculate and graduate from college.
9. Provide leadership opportunity and a sense of accomplishment.

Participants derived several benefits from their positive interactions and experiences with an engaged and supportive teacher or professor. These benefits included psychological and academic support that fueled participants' desire and confidence to be successful while in primary and secondary schools and to pursue higher education.

Psychologically, teachers and professors reportedly established a comfortable classroom atmosphere, had an inviting personality, and nurtured and encouraged participants to succeed. To sustain a high level of academic confidence in the participants, teachers and professors continuously and genuinely commended and praised participants' academic and social efforts. In doing so, teachers and professors empowered participants to envision a future with a college education.

Experiences of Life Lessons: Embracing Hardships and Challenges

Challenges and hardships are not new to these participants. Many lived and survived the Vietnam War, the harsh and enduring conditions they faced on their journey from Laos to Thailand, and while living in refugee camps in Thailand, in addition to the demanding acculturation process involved in relocating to the United States. Participants enthusiastically, rather than gloomily, stated that the life lessons they acquired from such experiences created and nurtured an infrastructure of passions and desires to succeed and influenced them to persist and persevere in college. They have embraced these hardships and unexpected events

and used them as encouragement and motivation to succeed.

Life in Laos, Thailand, and Early Days in U.S.

A participant shared the challenges that her family experienced in Laos and suggested that this planted the seed of wanting a better life, including a college education:

They were farmers in Laos. Having farming experience in the United States, you have a sense of how hard it must have in Laos. They did not have the technology to help them back in Laos. Having these connections just makes you want to do better and not struggle as much as they did.

Stories of hardships and struggles living in Laos and Thailand told by their parents and/or their own experiences also helped shaped their vision of life. In Laos, many parents and participants had no formal education and farmed for a living. It was a daily struggle for families to make ends meet. Hunger and starvation was a daily experience. Looking for food and employment was a daily challenge. Reflecting on these difficult times, participants felt it was their obligation to live a better life and harness the opportunities they have in America:

Participant 1: I don't really recall anything. What I know is from parents. Came in 1978. Before that, I can't remember. I was born in Laos. My parents traveled from Laos to Thailand. Traveled with relatives. They had my other sister and me. Baby cried and luckily, my parents did not feed us opium so that they stayed behind. Later on, they caught up to the relatives.

Participant 2: Occasionally, I remembered some things but not clearly. They were more of a dream. It was fuzzy. My parents talked about hardships farming all the time and always trying to get by. My parents did not have any formal education.

To live a better life and improve their parents' social and academic position, participants were inspired to persevere in times of uncertainty and to strengthen their academic foundation by staying in school and seeking the needed support to graduate. When they thought about dropping out of college, they thought about what their parents experienced in Laos and Thailand. They thought about working in a factory as a general laborer, they thought about the long hours their parents had to work to support the family. Looking at their options, they were not going to drop out of college until they had given their best effort.

The hardships and challenges did not end when they arrived in the U.S. Most participants were saddened to see how hard their parents were working here to make ends meet. One participant relived the experience during the interview:

I think so. Because once we got to the U.S., we were the first wave of U.S. Hmong immigrants. There was prejudice and discrimination. Not too many people knew about the Hmong. We were located in California. The struggle that you saw your parents go through. My parents started out with farming. My mother and father farmed. My father worked part-time in the grocery store. We helped them out at the farm and we didn't like it and we complained. My parents could tell us that we didn't like that kind of job, do well in school and you wouldn't have this kind of life. They kept drilling that idea into us. That unconsciously was always and reminded you all of the time.

The experience taught this participant a valuable life lesson. She learned that she needed to go to college and earn a degree. She did not want to go through what her parents were experiencing, a sense of hopelessness in terms of economic and academic success. She realized that their only hope was their children. She was not going to disappoint them.

Academic and Social Adjustments

For other participants, the challenges encompassed academic and social adjustments. Participants had to assimilate into a new culture and learn a new language. They felt secluded and isolated from mainstream culture and at times sketched a life with riddled uncertainties. Several participants illustrated the academic and social challenges they experienced in school:

Participant 1: When I was in elementary school, I never thought I was going to go to college. I experienced many hardships in elementary school. I came to America not knowing English. I felt like a baby learning how to walk. I didn't really care because I didn't know the meaning of education. We came to Connecticut. We lived with our sponsors. It was a big school system. It seemed like they didn't care about the kids. I went to school. I was good in math. I was terrible in story problems. The teacher told me to skip the story math problems. I was in fifth grade but I was reading at a 1st grade level. The students would read it to me and I just simply repeated it. Even now, I still struggle with reading. I memorize words. I had a time when was in elementary school.

Participant 2: We arrived in US in 1985. There 6 of us children. We settle in Green

Bay. Since then, my siblings and I started school basically by ourselves without any help. Without knowing our ABC's, going through school is like going through a journey without what is ahead. As time progressed, we were able to pick up words and phrases. Our friends and peers also criticized us for things such as we didn't speak well. In turn, that motivated us, especially myself trying to learn new words and terminology. This enhanced my language development.

Participant 3: I did not learn how to write properly in elementary or in high school. Consequently I had a difficult time pursuing my college. So in college, I basically learned to write properly, grammatically. To learn the tools I needed to be successful in college. That was one of the obstacles that I had to surmount. In addition, I didn't have an elder or a role model to guide or help along the way. I had to overcome the obstacles by myself.

Participant 4: In 1983, we moved to Appleton, Wisconsin. My mother said that she was going to miss sister so we moved. My uncle said that Wisconsin is a good state for education, so when we get there to study hard. We lived in Menasha. I was twelve years old. I was too old to be in 5th grade, so they put me in 6th grade, at the middle school level. At this time, I haven't learned to read. There was no ESL program. I was a part of Chapter I. I went to get extra help with reading. In 6th grade, I had a difficult time doing my homework. Sometimes my Chapter I teacher helped me with my homework but it is not a time for homework. It was not the objective of the program. Finally when the grades came out, I didn't know what grade point average was. I got a 2.1 GPA. He said he got a 2.4. He said that his was better. That's when I realized and knew about GPA. I don't know how I learned to read. I just did. After that my GPA went up.

Such experiences did not deter the participants from continuing their education. Through these experiences, they learned to address and improve their academic weaknesses and strengths. Participants stressed the value of hard work derived from these experiences that helped facilitate their decisions to seriously consider higher education after high school graduation.

For several participants, marriage posed another challenge to surmount. In addition to academic and cultural adjustments, they had to worry about the transition of being single to being married and having children. Now they had a spouse and children to support. As pointed out previously by participants, marriage did not derail them from their goal to complete their college degrees. Rather, they gained

more motivation and reasons to do well. As two participants highlighted:

Participant 1: I also like to point out that I got married since my last quarter in 8th grade. Since marriage, I have been a responsible person. That helped me on my path to be where I am today. That could have possibly helped my life.

Participant 2: Since I was married, I knew that I needed to be more responsible. A college education was something I dedicated myself to accomplishing. If I was single, I don't know if I would have made it through college.

As stated by many participants, overcoming challenges and obstacles prepared them to persevere in college and in life. They learned that nothing in life comes easy, as illustrated by their journey from Laos to Thailand and their relocation and acculturation in the U.S. Participants believed that if you work hard enough and have the desire and dedication to find solutions to your problems, you will eventually succeed. They applied these principles and life lessons when they had difficult times in college, such as failing examinations, challenges in their marriages, and academic and social adjustments.

Experiences of a Vision and Drive for Success that Includes a College Education

Vision

Virtually, all of these participants do not picture their future without a college education. They all expressed a deep belief that they would graduate from college and would have a stable profession. With such vision and drive, they dedicated their lives to accomplishing their dreams. Several participants shared such a mindset during our conversations:

Participant 1: My decision to go to college began way before I graduated from high school. I have always known that I wanted to go to college. When you are little, you dreamt about becoming this and that and as you get higher in school and grow up, you realize that if that's what you wanted to do, you need to go to college. So before I graduated from high school, I knew I wanted to go to college.

Participant 2: I wanted to get a college degree. I wanted to get a good job. I wanted to be able to support my family. I believed that only through education would I have a brighter future. Since nobody in my family went to college, I wanted to be the first one to go and graduate from college. I wanted to be a good role model. It was a must for me to get a college degree.

Participant 3: I believe that without my education, my life would not go anywhere. I have a mindset that I must graduate from college. I am the last one of my family that had this opportunity to get an education. If I get the education, my family will also get it too. If I don't get it, my family members will also lose it, too.

According to participants, dreams and visions cannot become a reality without the love of learning. Participants excitedly elaborated on "learning moments" and the enjoyment of learning. They felt it was their responsibility to learn and for learning to be self-initiated. They discovered and thrived on the benefits and advantages of learning. They were curious and were not afraid to try new things.

Even when course materials were difficult to comprehend and grasp, these students spent the extra-time studying and/or asking for assistance or clarifications because of their love of learning. This perseverance increased their level of knowledge and pushed them to the next academic level, thus only making their academic and social experiences better and more efficient. Several participants conveyed the importance of the love of learning that kept them on course toward graduation:

Participant 1: Learning moments. When the light bulb comes on. Occasionally, I would have these moments. And this keeps me going. When I learn something new, I want to teach it to someone else.

Participant 2: I have always been interested in knowing things. I never waited for my parents to tell me to do my homework or waited for them to tell me to read. I like to exhaust materials or get tired of them. Curiosity and thirst for knowledge, that's a drive that east at you. You just have to find something to do.

Participant 3: I was not afraid to try new things. I learned to invest my time to earn my education. If I didn't understand something, I would ask. I also promised myself the first year that I must walk out and go home without a college degree. That was the promise I made to myself.

Drive

In their lives, these students experienced the drive to accumulate a high level of curiosity and scholarship and used their ambition, motivation, and passion to solve problems and overcome challenges on their way to earning a college education. In addition, they were inspired to help their community grow in the future and wanted to be known and championed as

productive citizens—a college education was an important factor in such endeavors. These experiences lead them to believe in their innate ability and expectations to succeed; failure was not an option. Three participants vividly conveyed their dreams and visions:

Participant 1: My vision was to become a professor, scientist, or astronaut. Typical childhood dreams.

Participant 2: I guess it's just to get that degree at the end and get a job and earning some money. Living your own life. Just to get the degree was a main force that drove me to college.

Participant 3: The four principles that caused me to go to college: I want to have a stable family, I want to complete as high of a degree as possible, I want to be a community leader, and I want to establish a stable career earning a reasonable living.

Participants credited their personal qualities such as ambition, motivation, dedication, and passion to succeed as other determining experiences in their matriculation, retention, and graduation from college. They shared hopes and dreams like most people, but they were successful due to a high level commitment and dedication. They felt a sense of self-pride and self-responsibility. They did not need anyone else to instill these qualities in them.

They were willing to sacrifice and allocate much more time than needed to accomplish tasks and to do better than others. They knew that if they were not going to do it for themselves, nobody else was going to do it for them. If they wanted to have a stable career and be able to support their families, they were going to do themselves. As stressed by three participants:

Participant 1: Driven by your own motivation. If you don't do it, nobody else is going to do it for you. I was also self-driven. I always wanted to do better than the next person. It was just there.

Participant 2: It all comes down to what your motivation is. It is like a marathon, some people finished and others don't. If you were motivated enough, you could probably do anything you really want to. I guess that's just the motivation. I learned soon enough that if nobody is going to do it for you, you have to do it yourself. That was a part of my mentality, my years in college.

Participant 3: I am a very dedicated person. I am willing to invest my time to learn the materials that I don't understand. I am willing to invest 10 hours to learn materials that normally take one hour for another person. I am willing to put in 10 hours.

Derived out of these students' vision and drive was a deep held belief in their innate will and talent to succeed. They knew that sometimes certain steps require time and understanding. It was not because they did not have the ability. They simply did not have the skills yet. For example, one participant stated that he knew it was only a matter of time before he would eventually grasp English. He was not deterred, nor did he let his weaknesses prohibit him from reaching his dreams. He maintained his philosophy and slowly learned to correct his academic mistakes and weaknesses and became a better writer. As two participants put it:

Participant 1: Yes I always know that I had the ability to graduate from college. I think everyone has the ability to do it. I think it's a matter of someone having the guts and mindset to get an education. I know that I have the ability because I am a very responsible person. I know that if something is going to be benefiting me, I am willing to invest the time.

Participant 2: I maximize my time and set my priorities. I stay focus and keep my eyes on the prize. I am a strong willed individual and have a positive outlook on life. I have self-confidence in my ability. My ability is determined by easily succeeding at completing tasks. The future is in your hands. Be persistent. Give it time. There are certain things that you must allow to develop through time.

Experiences of Financial Support

These participants did not come from wealthy families. They stated that their parents' financial resources were not enough to put them through college, as their parents did not have much formal education or enjoy high paying professions. Fortunately, financial assistance was available for those who qualified.

Financial Aid

Financial aid allowed participants to fully engage in their college experience. It maximized their chances of matriculating and graduating from college. Financial support included public assistance, scholarships, work-study programs, part-time or full-time employment, and grants. Grants and work-study were perhaps most important contributors; they covered most of the necessary expenses—tuition, room and board, books and supplies, and meals. This permitted participants to focus more of their time and energy to academics. Participants emphasized that without the financial support they received many would

not have matriculated and graduated from college. As conveyed by one participant:

Without financial aid, I don't believe I would have made it. Regardless of how much I wanted to go to college and graduate, I couldn't have made it without financial aid.

Another participant shared his positive experience with financial aid:

Oh yes. Financial aid was a big significant factor. I had a family and no financial support. Without it, a college education would have been difficult, if not, impossible.

Welfare System

For married participants with children, the challenge to matriculate and graduate from college posed a greater challenge. In addition to paying tuition, they had to support a family. Accomplishing both, with little or no financial resources, seemed both impossible and illogical at times. Married participants with families said that they had to consider giving up their education in order to financially support their families.

They stressed that the welfare system played a significant role in earning their college degrees. Public assistance provided financial security for their families while they could concentrate on their studies. Even with the changes to the welfare system when the W-2 Program was introduced, participants managed to stay in college and graduate due to careful planning. One participant explained how welfare benefited his college success and how he was able to adapt to changes in the welfare system:

Another experience is welfare. Welfare really helped us through college... We were able to gain financial support from the welfare system. At the time, the program helped people who attended college and didn't have to worry about work. We could concentrate on our education. During my senior year in college, the W-2 Program was in effect. I had to find work in order to qualify. I was a Radio/TV/Film major. We had a program at the university and I used the hours I worked there to meet the W-2 Program requirements. That helped. The social worker was able to accept those hours and we got through.

Many participants expressed deep appreciation for the benefits and support they received from federal and state programs of financial aid and public assistance. One participant said that he knew public money was being used to support his education and family. Due to this, he wanted

to graduate from college and contribute to society and the community. He was not going to disavow or waste the peoples' tax dollars that supported his family and his education through difficult times. He wanted to be sure that this public money was well invested. As a result, he persevered and worked hard in college to make certain that he graduated:

Financial aid also played a big factor. Without financial aid, I don't think I would have made it through. I used peoples' tax dollars to pay for my education, so I wanted to study hard and become a productive American citizen.

In addition to financial aid and public assistance, participants were also well aware of the small but critical financial support they received from parents or other family members. Whether the money was for gas to return to school or for a small meal, participants recognized that it was a gesture of support. They knew that, even though such financial support came in small amounts, family members were sacrificing a pair of shoes for a younger sibling or other family members for their education.

Such gestures empowered and reinforced the importance of matriculating and graduating from college. These students did not want to disappoint their parents and family, realizing the sacrifices that had been made for them to succeed in college. One participant clearly showed her deep appreciation and understanding of the value of such small but valuable financial support:

Occasionally, my parents gave me 20 or 30 dollars when they visited. Sometimes they brought food. The amount was small but I knew that they wanted me to stay in college and graduate.

A Blueprint for College Success: The Hmong Student Model

In a nutshell, the five clusters of experiences provide further clarity to an understanding of the Hmong college students' experiences, and add on to, extend, and help solidify our appreciation for the factors that impact their life experiences and lead to their educational endeavors. Specifically, this research makes these major contributions to our understanding of the Hmong students' experiences:

◆ First, the findings highlight the pivotal role that family support plays in the education of Hmong students.

◆ Second, the findings extend and deepen current understandings about the roles that teachers, professors, classmates/friends, cocurricular activities, and counselors play in the life of Hmong students.

◆ Third, with a lack of financial resources available to Hmong students from parents and family members, the findings provide clear evidence of the critical role that financial aid has on Hmong students' matriculation and graduation from college.

◆ Fourth, the findings provide insight into participants' mindset and psychological landscape that has allowed them to matriculate and graduate from college.

◆ Fifth, it will be important for first generation Hmong college graduates to promote and advance the personal and professional benefits of a college education to future Hmong students.

◆ Finally, future Hmong college students must be aware of the changes that are occurring in the Hmong community.

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