

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO HMONG STUDENTS PERSISTENCE AND RETENTION

Pasia Her, Elementary/Middle School Education

Mr. Koua Vang, Director of Asian Pacific/Islander Learning Resource Center
University of Minnesota Duluth

ABSTRACT

At the University of Minnesota Duluth, there are many Hmong students who have decided to continue their education after high school. Even though they are in college, they are facing many barriers that have factored into their lives determining whether to continue their education. In spite of these barriers, many of the students chose to continue their education. The students are motivated to pursue higher education because of their parents' struggle adapting to life in the United States.



Introduction

There is very little data and information about Hmong students' retention and persistence rates in higher education. Therefore, there has not been much research on this topic. As the Hmong are part of the larger Asian population, other minority—Native American, African American, and Hispanic—data and information will be used to discuss the Hmong population.

Problem

Retention rates in 1980 and enrollment rates in 1984 show that Asian and Latino enrollments have increased and that African American enrollment has declined. While the numbers of Asian students seems to be strong, the difference among the Asian groups leaves some groups underrepresented. A prediction (Smith, 2005) believes that within higher education, various ethnic groups would not view higher education as their goal and it is possible they will choose an alternative route for advancement. Additionally, every institution has a different plan to better its students. Researchers state that students of color are less likely to go to college, more likely to drop out and less likely to graduate than white students (Smith, 2005). Perhaps it is the lack of knowledge the student of color knows. There are some students who know they have little chance of graduating and drop out of college before even reaching their senior year (Gordon, 2000). Researchers state that the percentage of freshman college dropouts has declined for the third consecutive year, but students' graduation has decreased (Roach, 2000).

²At the University of Minnesota Duluth (UMD), many of the Hmong students shares similar challenges and barriers as do first generation college students from low income/disadvantaged families. The cultural challenges, language barriers, and so on, may have put the students into the position of academic persistence or retention. Students who are accepted at UMD must meet their minimum admissions requirements. There are still questions as to why the Hmong students make their decision to either come to UMD or drop out when they all are accepted to continue their education. The Hmong students face difficulties at UMD such as racial challenges, independent living challenges, financial

¹ Graphic is taken by the researcher

² The following information, when not cited directly, is the researcher's knowledge of her culture.

challenges, and the struggle to fit into a predominantly white institution. It is concluded from the research that the majority of the Hmong students are from the Twin Cities and they have common experiences by attending similar schools in the same area. Furthermore, Smith's research began in higher education assuming the typical college student was a white, age 18 to 24 years, campus resident, full-time college student, and more likely to be male than female (2005). Historically, in 1940, 5 percent of whites and 1 percent of blacks were college graduates. Then, in 1984, the largest ethnic minority was African American, and accounted for 8.8 percent of enrollment in higher education (Smith, 2005). During the same year, African Americans were 10.9 percent of the general college population, Latinos were 4.3 percent of the enrollment in higher education, Asians were 3.1 percent compared to approximately 2 percent of the general population in 1980, and Native Americans were accounted for less than 1 percent of the whole enrollment and the general population (Smith, 2005).

Retention determines how important success is, but retention is also determined in many different ways. Overall literature and research agrees that minorities, mainly African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans, compared to white students, have lower retention rates (Smith, 2005). Currently, campuses are changing and look different than they did 20 years ago. At a quick glance, it might seem that higher education has made much change in terms of diversity. In the history of higher education, there has been much concern and focus has been on minority enrollments and retention (Smith, 2005). It is also stated (Haskins, 2005) that the racial and ethnic minority group that has the greatest growth has been among the Asian and Hispanic/Latino populations.

²Background of Hmong



The Hmong are also known as Miao and are sometimes mistaken as other Asian ethnic groups such as Chinese, Japanese, or Thai because of the black hair, black eyes, and tan skin color. The Hmong people's homeland is located in the mountainous regions of southern China that cross into northern Southeast Asia.

The Hmong people are located in Asia and are scattered over many countries: Laos, China, Thailand, and Vietnam. To the communist bosses of China and Laos, they remained a minority and—being mistreated—faced many dangers in their lives (Lindsay, 2004-2005). The Hmong people have struggled through many sufferings from tragic events like the Vietnam War. In gratitude for helping the United States in the Vietnam War, the U.S. opened the gate to a better future for the Hmong people. For the past 20 years, many Hmong people migrated from Thailand and Laos

to the United States in search of a better future for their families.

²Culture

Culture is what makes the Hmong people who they are; it plays an important role in their lives. In the Hmong culture, there are many last names and different clans have different leader(s). Even though there is only one Hmong culture, there are two different kinds of language: white Hmong and green Hmong. The differences in the two languages are in the vocal accents and in the style of clothing they wear. Even though there are about 15 different last names, every last name has white or green language depending on what is most spoken at home. In addition, the Hmong are known as one of the cultures with the earliest marriages. Because family was what made living easier, the earlier one was married, the more help one received. Traditionally, the age of 12-15 was the time for Hmong teens to get married. The ages may seem young, but back in Laos and Thailand getting married and starting a family was the traditional way of life.

¹ Graphic is taken by the researcher

² The following information, when not cited directly, is the researcher's knowledge of her culture.



² Gender Roles

Many young girls did not have the opportunity to attend school; they were prepared to become housewives. Many boys were allowed to attend school, but some did not get the chance due to financial problems, and there were some families who would rather have the whole family work the farm and field to make a living. Currently in the 21st century, girls and boys have an equal opportunity to get an education, yet there are still some teenagers who choose to get married around the ages of 12-18 years old. A majority of the teens who are married at such a young age still continue their education, at least finishing high school. Even with a high school diploma it is still hard to find a good job; finding a job is harder now because money is one of the biggest factors. Many couples who are married young struggle through their

marriages; most of them have to work ten times as hard as those who have already established their lives to make a living (Lindsay, 2004-2005).

² Religion

In the Hmong culture, one of the major beliefs is in shamans—worshiping spirits of their ancestors during ceremonies, healings, etc. They often sacrifice animals such as chickens, pigs, and cows for good luck or for a better life. The Hmong people are connected to their spiritual side. In present days, some Hmong have converted to Christianity; however, there are still many that practice shamanism.

² History

Many people misunderstand why the Hmong people migrated to the United States. They think that the Hmong came here to enjoy the economic benefits, but the fact is that most came here to escape the death and horror of a war against them by the Laotian and Vietnamese governments. While the Hmong served during the Vietnam War, between 10,000 and 20,000 Hmong men, women and children were killed, and more than 100,000 fled to Thai refugee camps (Lindsay, 2004-2005). There are 27,000 Hmong in Minnesota, and an estimated 5,000 to 7,000 of them fought in the CIA's Special Force (Lindsay, 2004-2005). Many people are not aware that the Hmong helped the Americans in many ways such as taking orders from Americans, cooking food for them, guarding them, carrying them when they were wounded, and wrapping their bodies when they were killed (Lindsay, 2004-2005).

²When the Vietnam War began, the United States made a promise to the Hmong people that if the Hmong helped fight the war; they would be given a better life in America. The United States sponsored many Hmong families to come to America, and since many of the sponsors were Christian, many of the Hmong families begin to practice this new religion. After the first Hmong generation settled down, they began to sponsor their families who were still in Laos and Thailand.

Barriers facing Hmong people

²Even though the United States has given the Hmong an opportunity for a better living, the Hmong people still struggle to make a living in the United States because of their minimal English skills, economics, and education in this country. Everything in the United States was new and unfamiliar to the Hmong people, and they had to slowly learn to adapt to the culture. These barriers have held back the Hmong elders, but the future is still bright for the young ones. In hope that the first generation's attending college will change the future, they still struggle through difficulties just as their parents did, only in the field of education.

² Culture Shock

America was a new place with new kinds of people with different skin colors, which was something that the Hmong people had to get used to. They were used to living in houses that were made from their bare

¹ Graphic is taken by the researcher

² The following information, when not cited directly, is the researcher's knowledge of her culture.

hands: houses made of straw. Living in a house where the rain does not leak in, where the wind can not get through, where there is light by switching the buttons on and off, where everything is in one area—was a culture shock to the Hmong people. Coming to the United States was a dream come true—a land of peace and freedom. Another culture shock were the streets where people drive automobiles, the most convenient transportation. This traffic of the daily workforce was something that many Hmong people had to adapt to.

The Hmong people have always lived their lives with hard labor throughout the centuries. There was no such thing as an alarm or clock to tell the time. Their alarm or clock was the rooster, the sun, and the moon. The rooster began to crow at the beginning of the day, and when the moon was up, it meant nighttime. Farming crops and selling their goods in the cities was the way in which the Hmong earned most of their money. The Hmong people have had to work hard to survive; in the Hmong family they have many children to get more work done faster. The only time the Hmong people come together is during the Hmong New Year that happens once a year, but lasts for weeks. Currently, it is celebrated in the United States as a way to reunite.

²*Language Barriers and Challenges*

Coming to the United States without knowing a word of English made life difficult even though life should have been easier. The English language became a barrier for the Hmong people. Many tried to adapt to the English language by going to school, but no matter how hard they tried they could not speak the English language as a native English speaker could. It limited what they could do because they had to be dependent on other people for translations. Another barrier was financial need: the Hmong people came into the United States and many lived on welfare and food stamps, which made life more difficult because they could not get what they wanted. For many years, many Hmong families depended on welfare and food stamps to survive because they had no formal education.

²*Social integration and assimilation*

The Hmong had to adjust to different kinds of people. For the first group of Hmong people who came to the United States, there were some Americans who loved the Hmong people and some who were racist. The Hmong people did not know about other kinds of skin color beside white. They had to adapt to the culture. Currently, the Hmong community reunites their people through big events such as celebrating the Hmong New Year twice a year (usually at the end of November and December) and the Hmong Soccer Tournament in Saint Paul, Minnesota, during the summer in July. It is a place for all the Hmong people to see each other and for many to get in touch with their culture.

²*Educational challenges for Hmong elders*

Many Hmong elders attended school in Laos and Thailand, but in the United States education is a challenge for the Hmong elders. Learning the language was something they had to adapt to, and no matter how much they learned their tongue could not adjust to the vowels. Education became a challenge for the Hmong elders: they had to work twice as hard as many other white students to make it through adult learning or high school.

One reason why the Hmong people came to the United States was to find a better future for their children. All they knew was that the United States was the best place to raise their family. Even though many Hmong parents could not adapt to the American society, they hoped that one day their children would be able to adapt. Many Hmong parents know that education is what makes a better living, so they push their children to pursue higher education. Even though they do not know how much work it is, they do know that it is important. Many Hmong parents would work hard and do anything to further their children's education so that they will succeed. It becomes the parents' dream as well as the children's dream to get an education.

¹ Graphic is taken by the researcher

² The following information, when not cited directly, is the researcher's knowledge of her culture.

Barriers facing Hmong students



It is easy to bring Hmong students into higher education, but they need a good push to succeed. It must be recognized that retention and persistence varies from institution to institution. In 1940, 5 percent of whites and 1 percent of blacks were college graduates (Smith, 2005). Research began in higher education assuming the typical college student was white, was ages 18 to 24 years, was a campus resident, was a full-time college student, and was more likely to be male than female (Smith, 2005).

²Living in the dorms and eating American food was something new that the Hmong were not used to doing everyday; they were used to eating home cooked meals with rice. The environment was different because they were the minority in college, facing financial issues, racism, and discrimination. In addition, as the years passed by, many Hmong students decided to continue their education and still faced many hardships, causing some of the students to stay, but and some students to leave. Even though many of the Hmong students faced similar factors, they were all accepted into college because of the potential they have (Lindsay, 2004-2006). There are many Hmong students who choose to stay close to home, and some that choose to go far away. No matter where the students choose to go college, they are facing independence. They are accountable for what they do. Many students do not find college to be easy, and they have experienced frustration, isolation, confusion, and even bitterness (Newman, 1999).

Research states that parents are the ones who can help students sign up for programs to benefit the students' education (As Program Grows, So Does Minority Student Success). With so many programs available to assist minority students, they have a better chance at succeeding. One of the programs at the University of Kansas that helps students of color succeed is the university's HAWK Link program—started in 1998 during a freshman orientation. The program offers academic and financial aid advising, mentoring programs, social events, and other activities to help first year students succeed in their first year of school (As Program Grows, So Does Minority Student Success). To be able to help minority students, the University of Minnesota Duluth offers a program—Minority Excellent Program—to help minorities to continue their education.² This program offers a certain amount of money to pay for tuitions, books, etc. ²The Minority Excellent Program has helped numerous low-income students and has given the students the opportunity to live their lives differently from the way their parents lived.

The Hmong students attend a predominantly white institution at the University of Minnesota Duluth.² Many Hmong students at UMD are from the Twin Cities, Minnesota area. They have much in common with one another such as similar higher school settings and similar financial problems. Many of the Hmong students become independent and responsible by paying their tuition and housing, other bills,

¹ Graphic is taken by the researcher

² The following information, when not cited directly, is the researcher's knowledge of her culture.

and buying food. Living on their own without their parents nearby to help them, the Hmong students face making decisions themselves. UMD Hmong students are the minority in underrepresented groups at the University. They have to adjust to the setting and become aware of their surrounding. The community is predominantly white and they have to be conscious of how the community views minorities. There are times when the Hmong face racism from many students just because they are a minority. ²After interviewing minority students, the researcher found that minority students from all backgrounds had encountered racism or some form of discrimination from other students or faculty. Many of the minority students also experience culture shock, a place where they are not familiar with and an environment with different values, expectations, or experiences.

A barrier that probably causes minority students to have a harder time pursuing higher education is their poor academic preparation and socioeconomic status (Smith, 2005). There are many institutions that have a small number of minorities on campus. Since they are not the majority, it may seem like the minorities are isolating themselves from the majority, but in fact they are not (Smith, 2005). Besides being a full/part-time college or university student, they also may hold a job and/or have significant family commitments. At the same time, they are focusing on their academic goals. There are students who do not spend time on campus beyond attending classes and do not know the available services on campus, and they do not experience the culture of the campus itself (Smith, 2005).

There are some students who face challenges such as raising a child while still earning a college degree. These students do realize that their future, as well as their children's future, depends on their progress as a student. They have someone who is dependent on them, and it is their choice to make a better future (Newman, 1999). In an institution, there are rules that students must keep up a grade point average of 2.0 or better to earn certain privileges such as financial aid awards, scholarships, or grants. For many students, financial support plays an important role in their education. Financial stability allows students to stay in school with financial support, along with students' support from family members, friends, faculty, and other people; the student is able to succeed (Newman, 1999).

Methodology

Introduction

This qualitative research describes the methodology employed to explore the experiences of Hmong students at the University of Minnesota Duluth. Descriptive data from in-depth interviews provided insights into, and thus a deeper understanding of, the experiences of these Hmong students.

Problem statement

Given that most of the Hmong students came from similar disadvantaged family backgrounds and school settings, and went through similar growing up experiences led the students to where they are. All of the Hmong students are being admitted to UMD under the same admission standards. All Hmong students are facing similar racism, discrimination, and discomfort at UMD. The question is what makes some students persevere through all the barriers, endure all the academic hardships, and graduate from UMD. The purpose of this study is to determine factors that contribute to the Hmong students' academic perseverance at UMD.

The Interview Process: General Procedures

Each participant was engaged in a single, 5-10-minute interview that was audiotaped. The segments were introduced with a question designed to elicit the sought-after information. Additional follow-up questions were also asked in order to set the context for the participant's answers and descriptions or to clarify the material. Given the extreme demand for their time placed upon the Hmong students in this study, it was not reasonable to expect them to commit to three separate one and one-half hour interviews. The condensed structure used in this study became the most appropriate and workable.

Data Analysis

The researcher conducted and analyzed all interviews for a common theme. (Refer to Appendix A for the interview questions)

Past

1. Out of six students, the common factors are parent influence. Five of the six students stated that their parents influence their educational goals. Of the five students whose parents influenced them, two are dropout and three are still continuing their education.
2. All of the six students had both negative and positive advice, all of which was different.
3. Out of six students, three of six students stated that not being born in the United States may have an effect on their education.
4. All of the six students speak two languages: English and Hmong (English as a second language).
5. All of the six students planned to attend college during their secondary years.
6. This cannot be determined because it is inconclusive.
7. All of the six students did not struggle with high school.
8. Out of six students, three of the students stated that they are the first to attend college. One of the students is still continuing, one is currently working to get accepted into an institution, and one is working.
9. This information cannot be determined because the student's parents have their own expectation for each of the students.

Present

1. Two of the six students want to further their education. The other four student's answers are conclusive.
2. All of the students have their own strengths and weaknesses; this information is conclusive.
3. Out of the six students, four students state that they have no difficulty going through the process into college. Three of the four students are still continuing and one is trying to get accepted into an institution.
4. Out of the six students, five students state that they get most of their support from their family members. Three of the five students are dropout and two are still continuing their education.
5. This information is inconclusive because the students have different views of what affected/caused he/her to continue their education.
6. Out of the six students, five students state that they had no expectation of University of Minnesota Duluth.
7. This information is conclusive because everyone has a different major.
8. Six out of six students state that Financial Aid, scholarships, loans, and parents help pay for their education.
9. All of the students live off campus.
10. All of the students were part of the Asian Pacific American Association Club at UMD.
11. Being Hmong students at UMD, the six students have conclusive answers.
12. All of the students currently have jobs.

Future

1. Three out of six students want a good job. Two are still continuing their education and one is trying to get accepted.
2. Five out of the six students want a family. Three are still continuing their education, one is trying to enroll, and one is working.
3. Each of the students has his/her own expectations, but they all want to be able to support themselves.

Results

The factors that strongly support Hmong students' persistence at UMD described in the in-depth interviews are as follows: both the negative and positive advice that was given to the students may have helped each of the students to continue their education. The students were provided with a different aspect of college. Out of the six students that were interviewed, three are

continuing their education to have a better future. The factors that may contribute to the student's decision to leave or stay at the University may have been financial need, support, or so on. Two students of three are currently getting readmitted into an institution, and one is working due to academic and financial struggles.

The "past" questions are to see what led the students to continue their education to higher learning. The "present" questions are to see what their academic life is now and if it is different from their past. The "future" questions are to see what they have planned for long-term goals. In result, all of the students want success and have the opportunity to make their parents happy.

Recommendations

- It is recommended that more than six students be interviewed to get a broader view.
- It is recommended that surveys be used instead of interviews to get more results.
- It is recommended that audiotape is not necessary.

Discussion

Most of the parents try to be by the student's side to help him/her financially and support him/her emotionally. One of the students interviewed states that she decided to take one year off because she was not sure about college anymore during her senior year. The student did not want to make a mistake and went into the workforce. The student decided to work, but soon realized that working a job was not something she expected, so she decided to go to college to do something she enjoys. Most importantly, all of the students agreed to pursue their education because of their parents' struggle in the United States. Furthermore, there are people, such as professors, that gave these students advice to help the students prepare for college. Not all of the six students are U.S. citizens; the students believe that being a non-U.S. citizen is not a factor. All of the students' native language is Hmong and their second language is English. Not all of the students and their families are Americanized, but Americanized enough to allow each of them to continue their education. One student states that because she is a girl, her parents did not allow her to join any clubs or organizations. She had to lie to participate in after school activities. Moreover, all of the students did well during high school and did not struggle. One of the students was even an honor student, but once she was in college, she took advantage of the college freedom and her education was in jeopardy. Even though she had one semester off, she still has the potential to continue college. The student wanted to prove to her parents and herself that she could succeed. All of the student's parents had expectations for them about education. It was something the parents wanted for their child, to make life easier, and not have the struggle they once had.

All of the students had their own reason for continuing their education beyond high school. They want to have a good job doing something they love. Getting a degree will open multiple doors, and they will have a successful life. Every one of the students had their own weaknesses and strengths. One of the main weaknesses is studying and time management; their strengths were voicing their opinions and being independent. Even though some of the students are first generation, they had no problem adapting to college. Some had already learned to be independent while others tried to prove to their parents they could do it. Each of the students had full support from their family. A senior states that she is staying in college because she is almost done, while others want to make a better future. One of the students dropped out because he found a job in his field and decided college was not for him. Each of the students did not have many expectations about UMD. It was a place far enough from home and close enough to visit. Further, all of the students have financial aid, outside scholarships, loans, and parental support to help pay for college. The students are currently living off campus because of the cost of on-campus living, and are/were part of the Asian Pacific American Association club at UMD; they all shared that it is a place to socialize with others from the Hmong culture. However, five of the students have no trouble being a Hmong student at UMD, while one of the student states that he had trouble with the professors treating him differently from the other students. The professor had different expectations for him and he was viewed differently.

Five of the students want a family; one is still trying to get back on track so he can have a better future. Although all of the students want to travel and make money, one states that he has too much responsibility to think of traveling. Pursuing their education to higher learning is what will better their future, even though it means facing many challenges.

Conclusion

After researching, it was determined that parents can play an important role in the student's lives. This study found that the main factor which causes students to continue their higher education is their parents. Many of the students want to make their parents happy because of the hard work and struggle the parents faced. Even though parents have these expectations for the students, it is only because they want their children to be successful. Although all of the students decided to continue their education, some of the students faced struggles. Those who struggled in college state that they did not realize that having too much fun has a limit and can negatively affect their education even to the point of dropping out. The parents are the student's motivation and encouragement to continue their education. Further, researchers who plan to research more on this topic may come up with the same results. It has been determined that all of the Hmong students faced similar experiences throughout college.

Appendix A

Interview Questions

Past

1. Who influenced you to continue your education after high school (parents, teachers, etc)?
2. Did anyone give you a positive or negative advice about college?
3. Do you think not being born in the United States effects your education?
4. How many languages do you speak? Which one are you most influent in?
5. Did you plan to go to college during high school?
6. How Americanized was your family? How Americanized are you?
7. Did you struggle in high school?
8. Did you have any family who attended college?
9. Does your parents have any expectations for you about education?

Present

1. What is your reason for going to college?
2. What is your weakness and strength in college?
3. Are you the first generation to attend college? Is it difficult for you?
4. Do you have any support to help you in college?
5. What caused/effect (you not) to continue college?
6. Is UMD what you expected? Why did you choose UMD?
7. What is your major and how did you decided upon it?
8. How do you pay for college (loans, FAFSA, parents, work, etc)?
9. Where do you live (off or on-campus)?
10. Are you part of any clubs/organizations?
11. How do you felt being a Hmong student at UMD?
12. Do you work?

Future

1. Tell me about your future:
 - a. Career
 - b. Family/Relationships
 - c. Money, traveling, etc

References

- As Program Grows, So Does Minority Student Success. (2004). *Recruitment & Retention in Higher Education*. 18. 3, 3-3.
- Gordon, R., Piana, Della L, Keleher, Terry. (2000). Dropout, Graduation, and College Acceptance. *Applied Research Center*.
- Harris III, Dr. J.T. (2005). Higher Education, College Rankings and Access for Lower-Income Students. *Black Issues in Higher Education*. 21.24.
- Haskins & Kirk-Sanchez. (2005). Recruitment and Retention of students from minority Groups. *Physical Therapy*. 86.1.
- Lindsay, J. (2004, 2005). The Hmong People in the U.S. April 3, 2006, from <http://www.jefflindsay.com/Hmong-tragedy.html#back>
- Newman, P.R. and Barbara M. (1999). What Does It Take to Have A Positive Impact on Minority Students' College Retention? *Adolescence*. 34. 135.