

HMONG AMERICAN COLLEGE STUDENTS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON THE  
FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE AND MOTIVATE COLLEGE GOING

by

Malisa Lee

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Dissertation Committee:

Professor Edward P. St. John, Chair

Professor Phillip J. Bowman

Associate Professor Deborah F. Carter, Claremont Graduate College

Professor Mieko Yoshihama

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## **DEDICATION**

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my courageous and supportive parents, Yong Sue and True Xiong Lee, who sacrificed everything to give my siblings and I a better life; my loving and hard working husband Adam Thor, who stood by my side every step of the way; and my thoughtful daughter Sophie who inspires me everyday to be a better person.

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## ABSTRACT

Chair: Edward P. St. John

College choice has a rich and lengthy body of literature spanning across multiple disciplines such as economics, sociology, and higher education, exploring the college process of students. It has provided a framework for understanding how students decide to go to college and has identified critical steps necessary for successful navigation of the college process. However, gaps are present in the examination Hmong American college process. This gap is addressed in this study. This investigation answered four questions: What social and cultural factors are influential for Hmong college students, in their decision to go to college? How does family and culture influence the development of postsecondary aspirations and eventual postsecondary enrollment among Hmong undergraduates? What role do college costs play in the college decision process? And what barriers stood in the way of students' college process?

This qualitative study examined the educational decision process of Hmong American college students (n=34) enrolled at four-year colleges. The purpose of the study was to understand the motivational factors that influenced Hmong students' decision to go to college. According to the 2010 Census, 35.5 percent of the Hmong community had less than a high school education, compared to 14.4 percent for the overall U.S. population. Additionally, compared to 27.9 percent of the U.S. population, only 14.4 percent of the Hmong population had a Bachelor's degree or higher.

Hmong American students revealed three key forces influencing their decisions to go to college: 1) role of family and culture in motivating and influencing their educational aspirations; 2) role of social capital, identified as role models, mentors, and gatekeepers; and 3) role of cultural capital and the influence college knowledge (or lack of) had on their college process,

especially as it related to concerns about costs. Additionally, students' Hmong culture was found to have contradictory influence on students' college process, which had supportive and constraining impact on their college process. The results of this study informed the development of a two-stage predisposition model. This model is proposed as a more comprehensive framework to understanding the college process of Hmong American students.

## **Chapter 1. Introduction**

It is a widely held belief among Americans that a college education is necessary for an individual to have upward mobility. This belief stems from the benefits people have received as a result of attaining a higher education, including increased earnings. In 2013, workers over the age of 25 with a high school diploma earned a median weekly earning of \$651 while those with a bachelor's degree earned \$1108 a week, almost double (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013). Hence, higher education has been identified as a vehicle for economic and social mobility (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013; Becker, 1993; Trostel, 2010). In addition, research indicates that individuals who attend college realize lifelong benefits that are both individual and societal in scope (Baum et al., 2013; Baum & Payea, 2004; Becker, 1993). These benefits include higher lifetime earnings, healthier lives, lower levels of unemployment, increased levels of civic engagement, and commit fewer crimes (Baum et al., 2013; Baum & Payea, 2004; Trostel, 2010). These positive byproducts are well documented and are espoused through the ideology of the "American Dream" where hard work and perseverance will reap economic and social benefits. However higher education remains restricted to the students who are able to gain the college knowledge necessary to apply, enroll, and persist in institutions of higher learning (Engberg & Wolniak, 2009; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Hossler & Stage, 1992; Hu, 2010; Kim & Gasman, 2011; Kinzie et al., 2004; O'Connor, Hammack, & Scott, 2010; M. J. Smith, 2009). College knowledge generally is defined as having the necessary tools to prepare for college. It is important because individuals who have it understand the process and are able to prepare and plan for college by taking the appropriate classes to meet requirements, applying, and making a

decision that culminates in college enrollment. In contrast, individuals who do not possess college knowledge are at a disadvantage when it comes to preparing for and attending college.

While there are many communities facing barriers to higher education, Hmong American<sup>1</sup> students in particular are consistently left out of the discussion because of the *model minority* stereotype, which asserts that Asian Americans<sup>2</sup> are able to make it on their own without any assistance (S. J. Lee, 1996; Ng, 2007; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Ong, 2000). Asian Americans are positioned as the “model” which other minorities should look up to for success (S. S. Lee, 2006; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Teranishi, 2002; Teranishi, 2010). The educational attainment and achievements of Asian Americans, in general, have been so successful that they are at times no longer viewed as minorities (Pang, Kiang, & Pak, 2003). For example, in Astin’s (1982) *Minorities in Higher Education* and Ogbu’s (1978) *Minority Education and Caste*, both concluded that Asian American are not educationally disadvantaged and thus they are excluded from their studies (Nakanishi, 1989, 1995). It is common for educational research to exclude Asian American students from studies (Perna, 2000a), combine Asian Americans with Whites, or cluster Asian Americans in an ‘other’ racial category (Fletcher, 2013). This in essence discounts Asian American educational experiences. The prevalence of the *model minority* myth masks the ethnic differences within the Asian American racial category. Specifically, it makes invisible and ignores the low college participation and educational attainment rates of Hmong Americans<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> This study specifically addresses Hmong Americans but does not imply that other racial and ethnic groups do not face similar educational barriers.

<sup>2</sup> I recognize the more appropriate umbrella term to describe the collective community is, Asian American and Pacific Islander. I use the term Asian American for this study because I do not include literature on Pacific Islanders.

<sup>3</sup> This is not to imply that Hmong Americans are the only Asian American ethnic group with low college participation and educational attainment rates. Pacific Islanders and Southeast Asian Americans generally have lower educational attainment rates compared to East and South Asian Americans, who have higher attainment rates.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine the educational decision process of Hmong students enrolled at four-year colleges to understand the motivational factors which influenced their decisions to go to college and the barriers they faced as they acquired the necessary knowledge to be successful during the college-going process. As a fairly recent immigrant community in this country, their educational needs have been poorly addressed in research and continues to be overlooked. In addition, as a Hmong American, I am inclined to give voice to my own community as I have witnessed firsthand the barriers faced by this community, which impedes their ability to gain access, persist, and succeed in higher education.

## **Background**

Before moving forward, a brief background on Asian American immigration, Hmong history, and Hmong educational patterns will be presented. This will provide readers a better understanding of this community before the literature review and methodology is discussed in chapters 2 and 3.

**Historical immigration patterns.** In terms of immigration, there have been two large-scale waves of immigration<sup>4</sup> from Asia to the United States. The first wave began in the 1840's and continued until 1930. Like their European counterparts, Chinese, Japanese, and a smaller number of Filipinos, Koreans, and South Asians immigrated westward, to work in the United States. Many of the immigrants were from the poor working class and immigrated to the United States in search of the "American Dream." For example, the Chinese were drawn to America, like many immigrants, by the new possibilities inspired by stories of the "gold hills" (Takaki,

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<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that Pacific Islanders are not immigrants. They are natives of islands, such as Hawaii, Fiji, and Samoa. Their islands were colonized thus becoming nationals of the United States and their children became citizens of the ruling country (e.g. the U.S. and Great Britain).



1998). During this first wave, numerous laws were implemented to curb immigration from Asia such as the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act prohibiting the immigration of Chinese laborers, the 1907 Gentleman's Agreement limiting Japanese immigration, and the 1917 Immigration Act which banned immigration from almost all countries in the Asia-Pacific region, to name a few (Takaki, 1998).

The second wave began after the passage of the 1965 Immigration Law and continued until the late 1990's. It led to a significant break from the historic pattern of immigration based on national-origins quotas. There were two types of immigrants from Asia. The first were mainly professionals and people from cities, in contrast to the farmers and rural laborers of the past (Takaki, 1998). These immigrants entered high technology and service economies rather than industrial or agricultural. The second wave came to the U.S. largely due to the U.S.'s involvement in wars in Southeast Asia. Between 1975 and 1990, the United States 1975 Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act and the 1980 Refugee Act, helped resettle Vietnamese, Cambodian, Hmong, and Laotians in the United States who were displaced from their war-torn countries (Chan, 1991). Unlike many Asian American groups, the majority of Southeast Asians came to the United States as refugees and were increasingly poorer, less educated, and mainly came from agrarian societies (Portes & MacLeod, 1996).

When the Vietnam War ended in 1975, many Southeast Asians who opposed the communist regime fled their respective countries (i.e. Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam) due to fear of persecution and death. Currently Southeast Asians, consisting of these refugees and their children, represent 15.1% of the 14.6 million people reporting to be Asian and/or Pacific Islander descent (U.S. Bureau of Census, 2000; U.S. Bureau of Census, 2010). Of the four groups, Vietnamese Americans represent the largest number of Southeast Asians with approximately 1.5

million people, almost half of whom reside in California. There are also approximately 231,000 Cambodian Americans, 191,000 Laotian Americans, and 260,000 Hmong Americans living in the United States. While it is likely that the experiences of Southeast Asian American students are similar given their shared experiences during the Vietnam War and their refugee status, this study is limited to only Hmong American students, to address and understand the specific experiences of this particular community. It is especially important because this community's needs have been ignored largely because of the *model minority* stereotype.

**Asian American success: Model minority stereotype.** The Asian American identity in the United States is inextricably bound to the model minority stereotype that portrays Asian-decent students as uniformly high achieving. Asian Americans' success has been well documented in the media and research, leading to term Model Minority, which was coined in a 1985 Newsweek story from their college-campus magazine with the cover titled, *Asian Americans: The Drive to Excel*. The lead article was titled "Asian Americans: A Model Minority." In 1986, NBC Nightly News and the McNeil/Lehrer Report aired a special news segment on Asian Americans and their success entitled, "Why are Asian Americans doing so exceptionally well in school?" Mike Wallace added, "They must be doing something right. Let's bottle it" (Takaki, 1998, p. 474). A number of articles were published from the 1980's to the present about the successes of Asian Americans. However, even before the term was coined Asian American 'success' was utilized in the political sphere as a mechanism to counter the 1960's Civil Rights Movement. Exemplifying a racial minority that was able to achieve without

any ‘changes’ to the system, positioned Asian Americans as the ‘model’ to which all minorities should look for success<sup>5</sup>.

The *model minority* stereotype initially referred only to the educational successes of Asian Americans has been broadened, to uphold the ideals of the ‘American Dream’ (Lew, 2011). Its reach includes all aspects of the Asian American lifestyle – education, work/career, socioeconomic status, etc. Asian Americans were congratulated on their success not only by the media but also by the White House. President Ronald Reagan declared in 1984, that Americans are in search of the American Dream and that Asians “preserve that dream by living up to the bedrock of values” the principles of “the sacred worth of human life, religious faith, community spirit and the responsibility of parents and schools to be teachers of tolerance, hard work, fiscal responsibility, cooperation and love. It’s no wonder that the mean income of Asian and Pacific Islander American families are much higher than the total American average” (Takaki, 1998, pp. 474-475).

The *model minority* stereotype has been promoted and supported by academic research. Large-scale statistical analysis comparing the achievement and attainment levels between racial groups offers compelling support that Asian Americans are successful. Due to aggregate data, research masks the tremendous differences in attainment and achievement among Asian Americans. The differences between those who have been in the U.S. for multiple generations and more recent arrivals, are lost in aggregate data (Ngo & Lee, 2007). This has led many critics

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<sup>5</sup> The significance of this political tactic (among many others) and on how it has influenced the perceptions of Asian Americans is beyond the scope of this study and is not included. For more information, see: Wu, F. (2002) *Yellow Peril: Race in America beyond black and white*. New York: Basic Books.

of the *model minority* stereotype to refer to it as the *model minority* myth<sup>6</sup> ---an inaccurate stereotype supported via aggregate data that has led to a skewed understanding of the overall Asian American population. Researchers from various disciplines (e.g. sociology, psychology, education, and economics to name a few) have concluded that Asian Americans earn higher grade point averages, score higher on standardized tests, and go to college at higher rates than other racial groups (Astin, 1982; Perna, 2000b; Sue & Okazaki, 1990; Zhou & Bankston, 1998). These unpacked results continue to fuel the model minority stereotype. This complicates our understanding of the educational experiences of Hmong Americans. They are assumed to be academically and economically successful because they are Asian American, therefore the reality of their struggles are ignored and unaddressed.

**Educational achievement and attainment.** When considering the high school educational achievements of Asian Americans over the age of 25, the percentage of Asian Americans with less than a high school diploma was comparable to the overall U.S. population (14.6% and 14.4% respectively) in 2010 (Table 1). In comparison, a larger percentage of the African and Latino American populations had less than a high school education (18.1% and 37.8%, respectively). This aggregate data confirms the model minority stereotype that Asian Americans are successful in education when compared to other minorities and gives credence to why they should be considered a model minority. However, when looking at the Asian American population disaggregated, the educational attainments of Hmong Americans provides a different perspective, with 35 percent of the Hmong American population having earned less than a high school diploma compared with 14.4 percent of the overall U.S. population (almost three times).

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<sup>6</sup> The model minority stereotype refers to the largely held belief that all Asian Americans are smart and successful – hence they are the model minority. The model minority myth refers to the inaccurate stereotype and is focused on demystifying the Model Minority stereotype through the use of data.

The educational attainment rates of the Hmong community reflects a pattern similar to African American and Latino American communities, which are far lower than the U.S. population. It is important to recognize that compared to 2000, the educational gap for Hmong Americans obtaining a high school education has narrowed almost in half from 40 percent to 21 percent compared to the overall U.S. population. This illustrates the Hmong American community has made more progress over the past ten years compared to Latino and African American communities, which can lend support for the model minority myth. However, given the differences in the size of the Hmong American community than the Latino and African American community, it is difficult to conclude if this is indeed true. The data illustrates that in 2010, Hmong Americans continue to have just over one third of their community with less than a high school education. Hmong Americans are the segment of the Asian American population

**Table 1. People 25 and over with less than a high school education**

| Population                     | 2000        |                             | 2010        |                |
|--------------------------------|-------------|-----------------------------|-------------|----------------|
|                                | Percentage  | Percentage Gap <sup>7</sup> | Percentage  | Percentage Gap |
| <b>Overall U.S. Population</b> | <b>19.6</b> | <b>-</b>                    | <b>14.4</b> | <b>-</b>       |
| African American               | 27.8        | 8.2                         | 18.1        | 3.7            |
| Latino American                | 47.6        | 28                          | 37.8        | 23.4           |
| White American                 | 16.4        | -3.2                        | 12.3        | -2.1           |
| Asian American                 | 19.5        | -0.1                        | 14.6        | 0.2            |
| <i>Chinese Americans</i>       | 22.9        | 3.3                         | 18.8        | 4.4            |
| <i>Japanese Americans</i>      | 8.9         | -10.7                       | 5.2         | -9.2           |
| <i>South Asian Americans</i>   | 13.3        | -6.3                        | 9           | -5.4           |
| <i>Korean Americans</i>        | 13.6        | -6                          | 8           | -6.4           |
| <i>Cambodian Americans</i>     | 53.3        | 33.7                        | 33.9        | 19.5           |
| <i>Hmong Americans</i>         | 59.6        | 40                          | 35.5        | 21.1           |
| <i>Laotian American</i>        | 49.6        | 30                          | 32.8        | 18.4           |
| <i>Vietnamese Americans</i>    | 38.1        | 18.5                        | 30.4        | 16             |

Source: U.S. Census (2000, 2010)

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<sup>7</sup> Percentage gap from the overall U.S. population.

with the largest percentage gap and this reflects a similar high school education gap as the Latino American community.

The numbers do not improve for Hmong Americans, when looking at Bachelor's degree attainment (Table 2). When lumping all Asian American ethnic groups into one category, the census demonstrates that Asian Americans have a higher percentage<sup>8</sup>, almost double (50.2%), compared to the overall population (27.9%) and at least triple the percentages of African Americans and Latino Americans with a bachelor's degree (17.7% and 13%, respectively). This data again lends support to the model minority stereotype. However, while 50.2 percent of Asian American have a bachelor's degree or higher, only 14.4 percent of Hmong Americans have a bachelor's degree. This is a similar percentage to African American and Latino American communities. Additionally, the bachelor's degree attainment for the Hmong community has doubled between 2000 and 2010 (7.4% to 14.4%, respectively) the bachelor's degree gap compared to the U.S. population has only slightly changed from 17% to 13.5%. These numbers support the need to disaggregate data on Asian Americans as the difference in high school completion and higher education attainment are drastically different within the Asian American racial/ethnic group. The census data offers evidence that it is important to look at the educational experiences of sub-populations (ethnicities) as the data indicates that almost 35 percent of the Hmong community has less than a high school diploma and less than 15 percent have a bachelor's degree.

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<sup>8</sup> Remember the immigration patterns from Asia over the years, as more recent Asian immigrants (excluding SEA) were highly educated and entered professional careers, hence it is not surprising that API have such a high percentage of Bachelor's degree holders.

**Table 2. People 25 and over with a bachelor's degree or higher**

| Population                     | 2000       |                  | 2010       |       |
|--------------------------------|------------|------------------|------------|-------|
|                                | Percentage | Gap <sup>9</sup> | Percentage | Gap   |
| <b>Overall U.S. Population</b> | 24.4       | -                | 27.9       | -     |
| African American               | 14.3       | -10.1            | 17.7       | -10.2 |
| Latino American                | 10.4       | -14              | 13         | -14.9 |
| White American                 | 26.1       | 1.7              | 29.3       | 1.4   |
| Asian American                 | 44.1       | 19.7             | 50.2       | 22.3  |
| <i>Chinese Americans</i>       | 48.1       | 23.7             | 52.6       | 24.7  |
| <i>Japanese Americans</i>      | 41.8       | 17.4             | 47.3       | 19.4  |
| <i>South Asian Americans</i>   | 63.8       | 39.4             | 70.7       | 42.8  |
| <i>Korean Americans</i>        | 43.8       | 19.4             | 52.9       | 25    |
| <i>Cambodian Americans</i>     | 9.2        | -15.2            | 14.5       | -13.4 |
| <i>Hmong Americans</i>         | 7.4        | -17              | 14.4       | -13.5 |
| <i>Laotian American</i>        | 7.7        | -16.7            | 12.1       | -15.8 |
| <i>Vietnamese Americans</i>    | 19.4       | -5               | 26.3       | -1.6  |

Source: U.S. Census (2000, 2010)

**Hmong History and Background.** Early Hmong history is difficult to trace, since they did not have a written language and used predominately an oral tradition of passing down history. Anthropologists and linguists have found evidence to suggest that the Hmong occupied Southern China as early as the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Livo & Cha, 1991). However in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Qing dynasty imposed repressive economic and cultural reforms, which lead to conflict and large-scale migration where most Hmong emigrated southward toward Southeast Asia.

While the Hmong lived in many Southeast Asian countries (i.e. Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and China), most Hmong Americans who resettled in the U.S. are from the mountains of Laos. They were resettled around the world<sup>10</sup> after the fall of Saigon, when the U.S. pulled out of Vietnam and Southeast Asia. The Hmong were recruited by the American Central Intelligence

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<sup>9</sup> Percentage gap from the overall U.S. population.

<sup>10</sup> The three countries that received the largest number of Hmong refugees are: United States, France, and Australia; with smaller numbers being resettled in Argentina and Canada to name a few.

Agency (CIA) as a special guerilla unit to stop supplies along the Ho Chi Minh trail<sup>11</sup> along the border of Laos and Vietnam (Hamilton-Merritt, 1999). There is no official documentation but many Hmong claim they agreed to fight in the war because they were promised they would be given their own country if the U.S. won the war. Additionally, if they did not win the war, the United States would take care of them. This was important to the Hmong because as their histories reflect, they have continually been fleeing persecution (Hamilton-Merritt, 1999). Even though the United Nations (UN) declared Laos a neutral country, meaning that no country could use Laos in any way to contribute to the war in Vietnam, the U.S. engaged in strategic warfare tactics by using the Hmong as militia. However, Laos eventually became a communist country and when the Americans pulled out of the war after the Fall of Saigon, the Hmong were left behind in a country that perceived them as traitors. Therefore, many Hmong fled Laos due to persecution. Those who were lucky enough to make it to Thailand were processed by the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR) and were relocated around the world<sup>12</sup> (Hamilton-Merritt, 1999).

The first Hmong refugees arrived in the United States in 1975 (Chan, 1994; Hamilton-Merritt, 1999). Since their arrival, many journalists and scholars have written about their adjustment experiences and their cultural differences to mainstream American culture. One U.S. policy analyst wrote, “This country has rarely, if ever, welcomed a group of immigrants so culturally distant from the native social and economical mainstream” (Fass, 1991). Despite so

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<sup>11</sup> This trail supplied the North Vietnamese in South Vietnam to eventually win the war.

<sup>12</sup> Only refugees who were approved by UNHCR processing agents were resettled. Hmong refugees who were not approved continued to live in refugee camps in Thailand till as recent as 2003. The four main countries where Hmong refugee were resettled in the late 1970’s to mid 1980’s include: Australia, Canada, France, and the United States.



much documentation about their adjustment to the United States, there has been little research on the experiences of Hmong youth and their adjustment to the education system.

The Hmong come from an agrarian society where life revolved around farming and the family. The Hmong culture is based on a clan system, consisting of 18 clans, which westerners would classify as surnames (i.e. Chang, Cheng, Chue, Fang, Hang, Her, Khang, Kong, Kue, Lee, Lor, Moua, Pha, Thao, Vang, Vue, Xiong, and Yang). Clan members are presumed to have descended from a common ancestor and therefore, members of the same clan are forbidden to marry each other. Generally speaking, the Hmong culture is very patriarchal with females in charge of all domestic duties and males in charge of taking care of the family financially and politically. This can be seen in the Hmong social structure, where the relationship and structure of Hmong families are based on the male. For example, males are born into a clan whereas females marry into a clan. In essence this causes females to be less 'valued' in families as it is assumed that they will 'leave' the family when they get married to join another 'clan'. This makes females less important/valuable in traditional families and males more important/valuable, as males remain in the clan. While this is not necessarily the case today in Hmong American families, this provides a good understanding of the cultural complexities and nuances faced by Hmong American students.

Given their agrarian background, education was not easily assessable. The first village school was not opened until 1939 and only a few wealthy Hmong families could afford to send their sons<sup>13</sup> to school (Yang & Pfeifer, 2004). In these schools, students were taught how to read and write in Laotian or French because the Hmong did not have a written language until the early 1950's. The Hmong written language employs the Romanized Alphabet created by western

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<sup>13</sup> Daughters were not afforded an education because after marriage they are considered an outside family member. Hence, it was perceived that having sons receive an education would be most beneficial to the family.

missionaries and continues to be widely used today<sup>14</sup>. While this written language was used and referred to as the primary Hmong written language, not all Hmong knew how to read and write. The written language was only taught to those who had access to others who knew how to read and write. Due to this, the Hmong started their educational development and their new life in America at a rudimentary level. For these reasons, it is not surprising that the first Hmong college graduate was in 1966 and first doctorate in 1972 (Yang, 2003). In 2010, there were roughly 260,000 Hmong Americans living in the United States. While they spread across multiple states, the Hmong American community is extremely connected, as an outcome of their culture and clan system. In the United States, the large Hmong communities are in Fresno, CA; Sacramento, CA; Minneapolis/St. Paul; MN, Green Bay, WI; and Winder, NC.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Asian Americans constitute the third largest racial-minority group in the United States (U.S) after Latinos and African Americans. Asian Americans are the fastest growing population fueled mostly by immigration that occurs at a rate four times the general population (Brown, 2014). In 2010, there were more than 15 million Asian Americans in the U.S., representing 4.8% of the total population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000; U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The Asian American population has tripled in size since 1980, whereas the overall U.S. population has grown 24% in the same period (Xie & Goyette, 2003). Researchers agree that the potential for growth in the Asian Americans population is enormous since approximately 40% of all immigrants to the U.S. are from Asia (H. H. Kim & Valadez, 1995; Xie & Goyette, 2003). Additionally, in the last seven years the largest refugee community to resettle in the United States came from Southeast Asia, specifically Burma/Myanmar and Bhutan, representing 56

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<sup>14</sup> Shoua Lue Yang is also credited with creating another written language which he believed was revealed to him by god. However, this written language was not sustained and has been lost.

percent of refugees resettling in the United States in 2011 (Vang & Trieu, 2014). The quickly growing Asian American community has complex needs. Therefore it is necessary to understand the educational needs of this growing community, given their ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity, instead of generalizing their needs with a ‘one size’ fits all solution. While the educational successes of these students is significant for the individual, their family and society, many of these students are underserved and unsuccessful (Rong & Preissle, 2009).

Most research on the relationship of race and college choice leaves out the inclusion of Asian Americans or clumps them in with Whites. Researchers refer to the overrepresentation and over achievements of Asian Americans as the explanation for this (Astin, 1982; Ogbu, 1978; Perna, 2000a). For example, college enrollment literature indicates Asian Americans outpace other groups and have higher high school grades. Therefore it is determined Asian Americans are not educationally disadvantaged (V. S. Louie, 2005). While some researchers provide reasons for leaving out Asian Americans in their analysis such as their achievement is equal to or above White students, others do not provide any rationale (Hearn, 1991; St. John, 1991) – silencing Asian Americans and treating them as an invisible racial group in the context of higher education research (Teranishi, 2002; Teranishi, Ceja, Antonio, Allen, & McDonough, 2004). Hence the research on the college choice of Asian Americans is limited because they are perceived as successful and therefore, in need of examination.

The Asian American population has been and continues to be misrepresented, categorized and treated as a single homogeneous racial group, which hides the complex needs of many groups within the community (Hune & Chan, 1997; Teranishi et al., 2004). The Asian American category in the 2010 U.S. Census included 48 different ethnic categories representing Pacific Islanders, East Asians, South Asians, and Southeast Asians (U.S. Bureau of Census, 2010). This

highlights the fact that the Asian American population is fluid, complex, and expansive. It is nearly impossible to understand the experiences of these communities by grouping them together, as each has different histories, cultures, and needs. Therefore, it is important to study within group differences and not just cross racial differences. Gloria and Ho's (2003) research on the experiences of Asian American undergraduates finds there are many ethnic group differences and calls for ethnic group specific research. The impression that Asian Americans collectively are model minorities is problematic because it ignores subgroup racial differences and creates further stratification as it hides the barriers faced by some groups of Asian Americans. For the purpose of this dissertation, this belief conceals the barriers faced by Hmong Americans to achieving educational success (S. J. Lee, 1996). This community is faced with low educational attainment and their experiences are overshadowed by the overly generalized perceptions of Asian American success. Hence, there is limited interest in research on the educational experiences of Hmong Americans and their voices and struggles continue to go unheard.

### **Significance of the Study**

As mentioned above, the purpose of this study was to specifically examine the college decision process for Hmong Americans to understand the factors that influenced their decisions to go to college. Unlike most Asian Americans, Hmong Americans have been in the country for fewer years, come from primarily agrarian societies, and had little exposure to education before they came to the U.S. This study on the Hmong American students helps illustrate the diversity within the Asian American community by giving a voice to an overlooked population. It also expands the understanding of access and equity by including the experiences of a group that has largely gone unnoticed and further establishes the knowledge base necessary to inform the future direction of research on Hmong students.

As the numbers from the census indicate, while the educational gaps of the Hmong community has improved over the past ten years, they continue to have low levels of educational attainment. This makes it critical to understand and recognize the factors that influence and inhibit the college going process for Hmong students. This research is noteworthy as it adds to the dearth of literature on Hmong American college choice. With little empirical research on the educational pathways of Hmong students around their decision to go to college, this study becomes a building block for future studies interested in examining the college choice process for understudied communities.

### **Research Questions**

The aim of the study is to gain a deeper understanding of Hmong American students' decision process to go to college and their college experiences. The research questions guiding this study are as follows:

- 1) What social and cultural factors are influential for Hmong college students, in their decision to go to college?
- 2) How does family and culture influence the development of postsecondary aspirations and eventual postsecondary enrollment among Hmong undergraduates?
- 3) What role do college costs play in the college decision process?
- 4) What barriers stood in the way of students' college process?

### **Organization of Dissertation**

Seven chapters are presented in this qualitative dissertation. Included in chapter 1 was the introduction of the purpose of the study, background of the study, statement of the problem, the significance of the study, and the research questions. Presented in chapter 2 is a review and critique of the literature related to theoretical underpinnings of college choice and Asian

American college choice. The impact of the model minority stereotype on Asian American students is also reviewed. Included in the review of literature of a discussion of theory that will be used to frame this study. Chapter 2 concludes with a discussion of the conceptual framework that was used as a guide for this dissertation. Chapter 3 presents a description of the research methodology, which includes the research approach, the pilot study, data collection procedures, participant characteristics, data analysis technique, and validity. Chapter 3 concludes with a discussion on the limitations of the study.

Chapters 4 to 6 will present the major findings from this dissertation. Chapter 4 presents the research findings on students' predispositions towards college. Specifically, it discusses the importance of family on the pathway to college and also identifies how family and culture create complex tensions for students. Chapter 5 discusses the role of social capital on the college process. Specifically, this chapter identifies the types of social capital that influenced students' decisions along their pathways to college. Chapter 6 provides the findings on the influence of cultural capital on the college process. It addresses the barriers students identified as the major concerns they had about college.

To conclude the dissertation, chapter 7 will summarize the findings and discusses the implications of the study for students, educational practitioners, and college administrators/faculty. Lastly, suggestions for future studies will be offered to further establish an improved research base for understanding the social and educational needs of the Hmong community and other communities who have been largely excluded in research.

## **Chapter 2. Literature Review**

This chapter summarizes and critiques literature addressing the development of college choice models and examines the college choice research informed by these models. Since the literature on college choice is complex and expansive, covering a variety of disciplinary fields including education, economics, and sociology, it is important to set parameters for the literature to be reviewed. In the following section, I reviewed three bodies of literature: College Choice Models, Asian American College Choice, and Southeast Asian American College Choice. These three bodies of literature aided in the development of the conceptual model, presented at the end of this chapter, which informed this study.

To conduct this review, multiple sources were used including books, dissertations, peer reviewed journals, periodicals, and national policy reports, which included the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the U.S. Census Bureau. These sources were accessed via the University of Michigan Library website through large research databases, such as: Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), ProQuest, Dissertation Abstracts, Web of Science, and Social Science Abstracts. These database searches were performed using a variety of terms related to the topic. These search terms included: college choice, Asian American students, decision making, college enrollment, educational aspirations, educational achievement, and Southeast Asian American to name a few. In addition, in many of the databases I was able to combine search topics such as college choice and Southeast Asian Americans which allowed me to find articles specifically focused on my topic. At times the results included journal articles on immigrant/refugee adjustment to the education system. I did not include these search terms or

these articles because I wanted to exclusively focus on Southeast Asian Americans. Therefore, only articles addressing Southeast Asians were included. Due to the limited amount of research on this topic, no specific time frame was used to capture all research related to this topic.

In the first section of this chapter, I examine college choice models and determine which model to use to inform this study. I discuss theoretical underpinnings of college choice models which have evolved over time. Generally, college choice models identify the stages of the college choice process by identifying, categorizing, and illustrating the many different skills and knowledge required for students to be successful in going to college. Second, I synthesize relevant empirical literature related to the decision to go to college for Asian Americans, beginning with a brief overview of research on Asian American educational achievements. The synthesis focuses on the predisposition stage of college choice.

Next, I discuss the factors that influence college going among Asian American students, which will be followed by a discussion of the factors that influence college going for Southeast Asian (SEA) Americans. Since there is not sufficient literature available on Hmong Americans, literature on Asian Americans and SEA Americans is combined to provide a broader scope of the issues that affect this community. While these communities differ in many ways, there are shared experiences, which make presenting literature on the larger group (Asian Americans) and sub-populations (e.g. Pacific Islanders, Cambodian, etc.) appropriate. Next, I review the factors which influence the college going behavior of Asian Americans and Southeast Asians students. I will offer my critiques and address limitations of the current body of literature. Chapter 2 concludes with a discussion of the conceptual framework used to inform this study. The conceptual framework aids in understanding the factors which contribute to the decision to go to college for Hmong Americans. It synthesizes various components of college choice which are



reviewed in the chapter and helps refine the research questions and guide the study (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

### **College Choice**

The study of college choice has a rich history inside and outside of the field of education. College choice is a complex process because it is not a single event but a process which occurs over time (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000b; Chapman, 1981; Cremonini, Westerheijden, & Enders, 2008; Engberg & Wolniak, 2009; Freeman, 2005a; Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hossler et al., 1999; Hu, 2010; J. K. Kim & Gasman, 2011; Kinzie et al., 2004; O'Connor et al., 2010; M. J. Smith, 2009). Due to its lengthy history, a handful of college choice models have been developed to study the process (Chapman, 1981; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Jackson, 1982; Kotler & Fox, 1985; Litten, 1982). Table 3 gives a brief outline of major college choice models, which have developed since the 1980's. These models attempt to explain how a number of factors influence students' attitudes toward college attendance, shape their selection of institutions, and help them decide which institution to attend. Developed over 30 years ago, these models specifically address the traditional college student. However with changing student demographics (e.g., adult learners, part-time students, underrepresented students, and immigrants), these models have been revisited and revised to be more applicable to current student populations (Abraham & Clark, 2006; Adamuti-Trache & Sweet, 2008; Alfonso, 2006; Bloom, 2007; Bodenhorn, 2004; Braddock & Hua, 2006; Briggs, 2006; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000b; M. Ceja, 2006; Ellwood & Kane, 2000; Engberg & Wolniak, 2009; Freeman, 1999, 2005a; Goyette, 1999; D. Kim, 2004; Kurlaender, 2006; V. S. Louie, 2005; Muhammad, 2008; Nora, 2004; Perez & McDonough, 2008). These recent studies have illustrated the varying processes students undergo as they decide to go to college. Understanding the limitation of

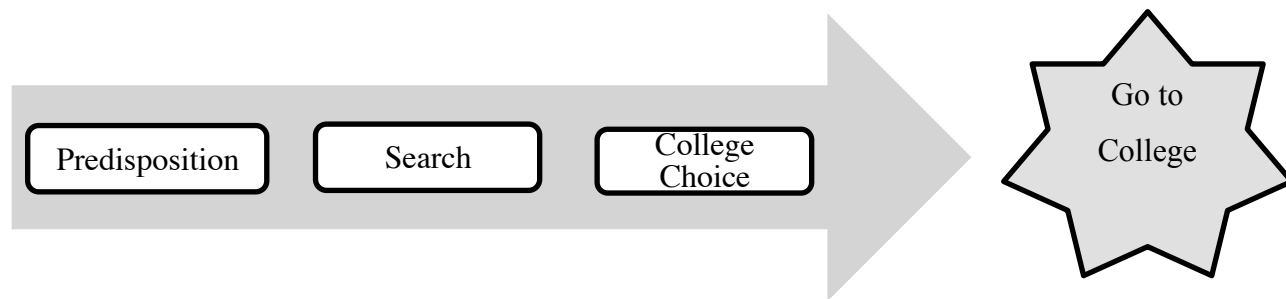
college choice models, this study revisits the college choice framework as it applies to the traditional college age Hmong American student.

**Table 3. Summary of Major College Choice Models Developed in 1980's Forward**

| <b>Author (Year)</b>         | <b>College Choice Stages</b>                   |  |                   |                          |                              |  |          |
|------------------------------|--|--|-------------------|--------------------------|------------------------------|--|----------|
| Chapman (1981)               | Pre-Search                                     |  |                   | Search                   |                              | Application and Enrollment             |          |
| Jackson (1982)               | Preference                                     |  |                   | Exclusion                |                              | Evaluation                             |          |
| Litten (1982)                | Deciding to go to College                      |  |                   | Investigating Colleges   |                              | Application, Admission, and Attendance |          |
| Kotler and Fox (1985)        | Generic Alternatives (college, work, military) | Product forms Alternatives (private or public) | Total College Set | Awareness of College Set | Consideration of College Set | Choice Set                             | Decision |
| Hossler and Gallagher (1987) | Predisposition                                 |  |                   | Search                   |                              | Choice                                 |          |

This study focused on *how* Hmong students got to college. Therefore a detailed explanation of the evolving models of college choice is not included because it is beyond the scope of this study. Instead the three stage college choice model developed by Hossler and Gallagher (1987) was used as the primary theoretical model for this study to help understand how Hmong students decide to go to college. This is the predominant model used in higher education and is the most recent and comprehensive model utilized to understand the college decision process. Jackson (1982) developed the first three-stage model of college choice that was later advanced by fellow researchers. The Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model draws on the constructs of both Jackson (1982) and Litten (1982) and has been described as a three part model which includes a predisposition stage, a search stage, and a choice stage (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Hossler and Gallagher's College Choice Model**



The *predisposition* stage is composed of individual and organizational characteristics that influence an individual's decision to go to college. In this stage students form college aspirations and develop a predisposition to go to college. During this stage, individuals fall into three categories: *whiches*, *whethers*, or *nots*. These categories were first coined by Jackson (1978) through his analysis of financial aid and student enrollment. *Whiches* are students who have always seriously considered going to college. *Whethers* apply to students considering 1-2 local colleges but who may not attend at all. *Nots* are students who never consider going to college. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) refer to four variables which influence the predisposition stage: student characteristics, school characteristics, significant others, and educational activities.

The *search* stage occurs after an individual considers or decides to go to college and begins to seek information. This stage involves the identification of and formulation of the "choice set" as students begin to interact with institutions of higher learning. The choice set is a group of institutions "that a student has decided to apply to and seek more information about in order to make a better final matriculation decision" (Hossler & Gallager, 1987, p. 214). Unique to this stage is that the search process can be conducted in a myriad of ways as students have access to different forms of information. Therefore, there is no specific method students' use to during the search stage. During this stage students will also apply for financial aid to help defray the costs of attending college. The last step is the *choice* stage where students decide which

admissions offer to accept among the institutions they were admitted to. During this stage, students narrow down their choice set. Unlike earlier stages, during the search stage, students will be informed of their financial aid package and have a better understanding of how they will pay for/afford a college education.

Although college choice models have been criticized for being overly simplistic, the discourse on the college decision processes of students has evolved our understanding of how students go to college. With the development of college choice models, the literature has identified: how, where, and when college knowledge is obtained (Abraham & Clark, 2006; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000a; M. Ceja, 2006; Flint, 1992; Freeman, 2005a; Hill, 2008; McDonough, Korn, & Yamasaki, 1997; Muhammad, 2008; O'Connor et al., 2010; Oliva, 2004; M. J. Smith, 2001; C. T. Vang, 2004), there are differential enrollment patterns based on SES and race (Abraham & Clark, 2006; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000a; Callender & Jackson, 2008; Engberg & Wolniak, 2009; Freeman, 1999; Goyette, 1999; Hagy & Staniec, 2002; Hearn, 1984, 1991; Hossler et al., 1999; Hu, 2010; J. K. Kim & Gasman, 2011; McDonough, 1997; O'Connor et al., 2010; Perna, 2000a, 2000b; Perna & Titus, 2005b; M. J. Smith, 2009; Teranishi et al., 2004), the importance of support systems (Abraham & Clark, 2006; Chhuon & Hudley, 2008; Lambourn, Nguyen, & Bocanegra, 2013; Liew, Kwok, Chang, Chang, & Yeh, 2014; Muhammad, 2008; Nora, 2004; Oseguera, 2011; Perez & McDonough, 2008; Perna & Titus, 2005b; M. J. Smith, 2009; Xiong, 2011), and the effects of financial aid and college costs on college choice (Callender & Jackson, 2008; Hu, 2010; Jackson, 1978; D. Kim, 2004; Lillis, 2008; Muhammad, 2008; O'Connor et al., 2010; Paulsen & St. John, 2002; St. John & Noell, 1989; St. John, Paulsen, & Carter, 2005), to name a few. Specifically, the literature on college choice also expands to include different conceptualizations of college choice for Hispanics (B.

D. Ceja, Casparis, & Rhodes, 2002; M. Ceja, 2006; Gonzalez, Stoner, & Jovel, 2003; Haro, 2004; Nunez, 2009; O'Connor et al., 2010; Perez & McDonough, 2008), African Americans (Freeman, 1999, 2005a; McDonough, Antonio, & Trent, 1997; Muhammad, 2008; Pitre, 2006; M. J. Smith, 2001, 2009), and Asian Americans (Boun, 2013; Chhuon & Hudley, 2010b; Goyette, 1999; P. Y. Kim & Lee, 2014; Teranishi et al., 2004; Teranishi & Tchen, 2009; Wong, Wong, & Obeng, 2011; Xiong, 2011). These new developments demonstrate that while there are some similar processes students undergo, there are vast differences in how underrepresented students experience the college choice process. While we have new perspectives on how college choice occurs for different populations, there has not been any literature on Hmong Americans and college choice. Therefore, to begin the examination of college choice for this population, it is important to revisit the foundational conceptualizations which surround the theory of college choice.

### **Theoretical Underpinnings of College Choice**

College choice has been largely shaped by economic and sociological perspectives related to human capital formation (via rational choice theory), status attainment, and social and cultural capital theories (Fuller, Manski, & Wise, 1982; Hossler et al., 1989; Manski & Wise, 1983; Paulsen, 1990; Perna, 2006). In the following section, a closer review of economic and sociological perspectives for the college choice process<sup>15</sup> is discussed, as college choice unfolds according to a range of economic, social, and cultural resources informing the student during the college decision-making process.

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<sup>15</sup> For this study, the theory of status attainment is not discussed, as it was not applied in this study.

## **Economic Perspectives**

Economic perspectives are grounded in human capital theory, which frame the decision to attend college in the language of productivity and investment returns (Paulsen, 2001; Becker, 1993; Long, 2007). Human capital theory presents a way of understanding the cost-related decisions many students, particularly low-income, face regarding higher education. It argued that individuals consider costs and expected earnings when making college choices. This means individuals will only decide to go to college if it results in a greater return for the student compared to non-college options such as working after high school or joining the military. Therefore, students and their families are believed to assess a cost-benefit analysis to select the option which maximizes their utility/investment (Fuller et al., 1982; Manski & Wise, 1983). This perspective asserts that an individual will logically select the option that provides the greatest benefit to them. Thus, perceptions of college cost and profitability can influence underrepresented students' decision to pursue a higher education (St. John, Hu, & Fisher, 2011).

Within this framework, attending college is based on a rational decision process by which the potential gains in productivity, such as earned income by working, are compared with the costs associated with acquiring a college education. Economic perspectives assume students will detail and weigh the advantages/benefits and disadvantages/costs of each option and associate a utility/value to each. Students will then select the option with the greatest utility/value. In these models, a simple economic function is used to understand the complexity of college choice: the production and costs function. In this function, the inputs are clearly tied to the outputs where the output is the sum of inputs. Inputs considered are usually associated with parental education, students' characteristics, family characteristics, school factors, and community related factors.

A limitation of econometric models is that they try to place a value on benefits and costs which are difficult to approximate for each student, as each student associates a different value depending on their background. Therefore, it is hard to estimate an econometric college choice model accurately. Despite the complex process of college choice, economic models use a simple production and cost function to estimate an individual student's decision to go to college. Paulsen (2001) states students' perceptions of the economic benefits and costs of higher education vary across individuals because factors are "often non-monetary, less tangible, and more difficult to assess or estimate" (p. 60). Similarly, the economic perspectives assume individuals will have access to the same types of information. Unfortunately this is not always the case as research has found differentiated access to varying types of college information provide some students an advantage over others (Engberg & Wolniak, 2009; J. K. Kim & Gasman, 2011; S. J. Lee, 1996; McDonough, 1997; McDonough & Antonio, 1996; McDonough, Korn, et al., 1997; O'Connor et al., 2010; M. J. Smith, 2009; St. John, Hu, & Fisher, 2010).

In addition, another limitation of econometric models is that it does not account for the social processes through experience and assume students are rational decision makers, weighting carefully the costs and benefits of each option. However many times "students and their families do not always behave rationally as economists assume" (Hossler et al., 1999, p. 144). Therefore, it is hard to assume students are carefully weighing the costs and benefits before deciding to go to college. Additionally, the process to go to college is not a simple process which the econometric model does not account for. It is a complex process that takes years of planning and preparation. In addition, only if students are accepted, does an individual have the option to enroll in college.

While the economic perspective accounts for some of the observed differences in college choice patterns, it has highlighted the need to account for factors such as access to financial resources (Paulsen & St. John, 2002; Hu, 2010; O'Connor et al., 2010; St. John & Noell, 1989) and college resources (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000b; Engberg & Wolniak, 2009; Perna, 2000a, 2000b, 2006; M. J. Smith, 2009). More specifically, researchers using an economic perspective demonstrate how finances, specifically how low income students and families are more sensitive to college costs (Abraham & Clark, 2006; Berkner & Chavez, 1997; Gandara, 1995; Hamrick & Stage, 2004; Hu, 2010; M. J. Smith, 2001, 2009) and demonstrate a clear link between financial aid offered to students and their likelihood of enrolling in college (Hu, 2010; O'Connor et al., 2010; St. John, 1991; St. John et al., 2010; St. John & Noell, 1989; St. John et al., 2005). The role of financial access and student aid on college enrollment has been well documented in research (Jackson, 1978; 1988; Manski & Wise, 1983; Heller, 1997), finding low income students and families are very concerned about college costs. Furthermore, econometric models do not account for students' social process, as they understand their concerns about college costs and how they will pay for a college education. This is a missing area of study in econometric models, as the financial aspect of college access is central for low-income families because they do not have the ability to afford college without external financial support and guidance. Therefore, family finances is critically important to examine and is directly connected the influence financial need has on the college process.

### **Sociological perspectives**

Sociological models of college choice are rooted in theories of social reproduction and have evolved from the traditional status attainment models (not discussed in this dissertation) developed in the 1960's and 1970's (Blau & Duncan, 1967; Sewell, Haller, & Ohlendorf, 1970;



Sewell, Haller, & Portes, 1969) to recent models which emphasize the constructs of social and cultural capital (McDonough, 1997; Perez & McDonough, 2008). Social and cultural capital describes how variables interact as students make decisions about going to college or which college to attend. They have been useful in explaining the influence of the social context (e.g. family, community, and social supports) on the likelihood of enrolling in college. For example, resources accessed through social networks enable students to gain access to other forms of capital and institutional supports which facilitate college enrollment. Whereas econometric models open possible alternatives for students through rational choice, sociological models describe a process which has acted to narrow a student's possibilities from birth (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000b; Engberg & Wolniak, 2009; Gandara, 1995; Hossler et al., 1999; Hurtado, Inkelas, Briggs, & Rhee, 1997; J. K. Kim & Gasman, 2011; O'Connor et al., 2010; M. J. Smith, 2001, 2009). In sociological models, different variables interact at different points in students' lives and during their college choice process and the influence of these variables may change over time. Given the influence of social and cultural capital on recent college choice models, a deeper discussion on social and cultural capital follows.

***Social capital.*** Social capital, conceptualized both in the field of sociology (Bourdieu, 1986) and economics (Coleman, 1988), generally refers to the exclusive and inclusive relationships and resources which shape one's society and social group, such as elite social networks<sup>16</sup>. Field (2008) states, social capital “can be summed up in two words: relationships matter” (pg. 1). In higher education, scholars have investigated the preparation, enrollment, and persistence of college students using social capital as a theoretical framework (Allen, 1992; Bryan, Moore-Thomas, Day-Vines, & Holcomb-McCoy, 2011; Dika & Singh, 2002; O'Connor

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<sup>16</sup> Robert D. Putnam, a political scientist has also published works on social capital but his work is not included here because his theory has not been utilized as a lens to understand college choice.

et al., 2010; Oseguera, 2011; Park, 2011; Perez & McDonough, 2008; Perna & Titus, 2005b; Stanton-Salazar, 1997; Strayhorn, 2010). For example, Perna & Titus (2005a) found college enrollment rates are lower for African American and Hispanics, compared to Whites because they had lower levels of capital and the schools they attended had low levels of resources available to promote college enrollment. Social capital relates to social networks and trustworthy information. Therefore, having access to resources at their respective high schools influenced students' future educational trajectories. This illustrates the importance of social capital theory because it provides a lens for understanding how relationships, networks, and mentoring influence the college choice process for students.

*Bourdieu's social capital.* Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social capital arose out of his critique of economic theory, used solely to understand society's problems (Bourdieu, 1973, 1986). He argued there were a number of capitals operating: symbolic, cultural, and social capitals, which were constantly overlooked when trying to explain inequalities in society through an economic lens. While he believed economic capital was the foundation of inequities, he argued that understanding capital solely in economic terms was insufficient and inaccurate. In an attempt to understand how elites maintained their status in society, he articulated the first conceptualization of social capital, as a part of a larger theory of social reproduction. The concept of social reproduction is the idea that the interplay between a variety of concepts such as social capital, cultural capital, habitus, and field, result in the inadvertent reproduction of social class (Bourdieu, 1972). Social capital explains how resources were embedded and reproduced in social networks of the powerful and the wealthy (Bourdieu, 1986).

Social capital, according to Bourdieu (1986) refers to the social and professional networks an individual possesses which provide "each of [their] members with backing of the

collectively-owned capital, ‘a credential’ which entitles [its members] to credit, in various senses of the word” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 88). These networks are exclusive and the relationship may exist in various forms - practical state, material or in symbolic exchanges. For example in a practical state, social capital can be institutionalized or guaranteed by the affiliation of a certain family name, social class, etc. Therefore, simply through association, certain benefits and privileges are bestowed to an individual. For students, these benefits can include college information, financial aid information, and access to college-educated individuals. Material forms of capital reflect tangible items, such a college diplomas, which afford certain benefits and recognition. In contrast, symbolic capital refers to the accolades an individual receives from their community, through symbolic gestures such as honor, prestige, and attention. These three forms allow social capital to operate and be reproduced.

The size of the social capital an individual holds “depends on the size of the network of connections he can effectively mobilize and on the volume of the capital possessed in his own right by each of those to whom he is connected” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 89). Therefore an individual’s possession of capital is never completely independent of social capital “because the exchanges instituting mutual acknowledgement... exerts a multiplier effect on the capital he holds” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 89). However, Bourdieu (1986) argued that these networks are not a natural or social given and they are initiated institutionally through family and kinship relations. He poignantly states, “the network of relationship is the product of investment strategies, individual or collective, consciously or unconsciously aimed at establishing or reproducing social relationships...into relationships that are at once necessary and elective, implying durable obligations subjectively felt or institutionally guaranteed” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 89). He further explained that these networks are social institutions are endlessly reproduced through exchanges

which produce mutual knowledge and recognition. Furthermore, network members are cautious about who is allowed into their social network, as new members can modify the current boundaries and identity of the group. Therefore, social networks are a mechanism utilized to control and reproduce the institution of obligations. Bourdieu (1972) viewed educational institutions, not as places individuals can achieve social mobility but as places where dominant class structure simply reinforces the oppression of particular groups, such as underrepresented students in higher education.

While Bourdieu is considered the first to define the concept of social capital in literature, his focus on formalized relationships through networks is not well suited to understand in a more open and less structured relationship, like those of students. In addition, Bourdieu's has been criticized for his focus on social reproduction because it denies individual agency and is overly deterministic (Musoba & Baez, 2010). Due to these limitations, the next section explores and discusses Coleman's (1988) conceptualization of social capital because it provides an expansion on the concept.

**Coleman's social capital.** James Coleman's (1988) concept of social capital highlights the significant contribution of information and emphasizes individual social mobility. In contrast to Bourdieu's focus on the social reproduction of the elite, Coleman recognized social capital also existed among and between individuals, families, and communities. Coleman (1988) notes "sociologists see the individual as socialized and action governed by norms, rules and obligations" whereas economists "see the actor as having goals independently arrived at, as acting independently, and as wholly self-interested" (Coleman, 1988, p. S95).

Coleman's approach is (considered to be) the most frequently cited in educational research (Dika & Singh, 2002) and emphasizes the role of social capital in communicating trust,

action, authority, and norms an individual must understand and adhere to, in order to succeed. In education, Coleman suggests there are two types of relationships social capital is derived from: relationships between parents and their children and relationships between a parent and other adults, particularly adults who are connected to the school their child attends (Perna, 2006). More specifically, he described social capital as, defined by its function. It is not a single entity but a variety of different entities, with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structures, and they facilitate certain actions of actors—whether persons or corporate actors—within the structure (Coleman, 1988, p.s98). Therefore, social capital is embedded in social relations and exists only as a result of interactions with others (Coleman, 1988). Additionally, these interactions can exist in various domains and are not limited to elites. The application and potential benefits of social capital are however, limited to particular actions and contexts, meaning “a given form of social capital that is valuable in facilitating certain actions may be useless or even harmful for others” (Coleman, 1988, p. s98). Therefore, social capital is only valuable in environments where it is valued. Hence, not every form of social capital is useful or valuable in every environment or in every interaction.

Coleman (1988) outlines three types of social capital: obligations and expectations, information channels, and social norms. Obligations and expectations are based on trust and reciprocity; “if person *A* does something for *B* and trusts *B* to reciprocate in the future, this establishes an expectation in *A* and an obligation on the part of *B*” (Coleman, 1988, p. s120). Therefore, through mutual obligation, trust is developed because one is able depend on another for repayment. This becomes a source of power and resource because individuals will have someone they can expect to assist, since they have an obligation.

The second type of social capital is information channels which are available through social relationships. These constitute a form of social capital which facilitates action. In this case, the action to go to college is facilitated by information received. Coleman describes information as, “an important form of social capital [and] is the potential for information that is inherent in social relations. Information is important in providing the basis for action. But the acquisition of information is costly” (Coleman, 1988, p. S104). Therefore, having access to information is critical but it does not come without costs. Furthermore, the accumulation of information through these channels alters cultural and social processes because it demonstrates a new perspective not available otherwise. Access to information, especially from trusted persons, is critical for communities for whom college knowledge is not readily accessible because it provides individuals with the empowerment to become pioneers. As pioneers, they embark on a unclear path, plagued with unanswered questions and uncharted pathways.

The third type of social capital is social norms. Social norms are widely accepted behaviors, which are reproduced and reinforced, in respective social networks. They are a powerful, though sometimes fragile, form of social capital and exist in two forms: collective and internal. Collective social norms are reinforced through social support, status, and other rewards. This type of social norm is supported through shared values that provide validation and confirmation of specific behaviors. Therefore, collective norms are shared values and practices. Internal norms are the acceptance of social norms which are established by people or groups of people who are influential to the individual. Internal norms begin with learning what accepted social norms are among a group of people, processing why they are valued and the result of the norm becoming accepted as their own viewpoint and practice.

Coleman (1988) viewed the primary function of social capital as a source that enables individuals to gain access to multiple forms of capital, as well as institutional resources and support. To illustrate this point, Coleman (1988) compared the graduation rates of private and Catholic high schools and found Catholic high schools had lower dropout rates. He states, “The independent effect of frequency of religious attendance all provide evidence of the importance of social capital outside the school, in the adult community surrounding it, for this outcome of education” (Coleman, 1988, p. S115). In this example, children’s norms were attributed to the adult networks in which the children lived with. Meaning students had a collective norm which valued education because the adult community valued education. Therefore education was a collective norm, which was internalized as their own value and practice.

*Critique of social capital.* Bourdieu (1986) and Coleman (1988) offer similar conceptualizations of social capital by focusing on the influence of social networks. However, there are three critical differences in their approaches. First, Bourdieu believed the formation of social capital was a systematic mechanism the elite used to maintain a dominant position, which operated as a tool of cultural reproduction. In essence, Bourdieu’s focus on social reproduction did not include an individual’s agency to change their social status. In contrast, Coleman’s (1988) approach is less concerned about the oppressive social structures that may prevent individuals from reaching new levels of mobility. Instead, Coleman was focused on the individual and identified social capital as not intentional and fixed, but rising out of the pursuit of self-interest – for social mobility (Field, 2008). Coleman stated, “social capital arises not because actors make a calculating choice to invest in it, but as a by-product of activities engaged in for other purposes” (1994, p. 312).

Second, Coleman disagreed with Bourdieu's notion that capital only exists between individuals. He believed social capital also existed between individuals and communities. He expanded the notion of social capital to include all actors: individuals, the collective, the privileged and disadvantaged (Field, 2008). Similarly, he considered organizations, institutions, and societies as potential beneficiaries of social capital too. Third, Coleman moves away from Bourdieu's circular reasoning that social capital can only be generated and maintained by social elites and argues that social capital operates with actors cooperating for mutual advantage (through norms, obligations and expectations). Unlike Bourdieu, who offers broad conceptualization of social capital, Coleman identified the specific mechanisms by which social networks provided social capital to one another through trust, expectations, obligations, norms and information sharing.

These theories of social capital are important because they allow us to understand the power and influence support systems, information, and networks have on an individual as they undergo the college choice process. Combining Coleman's (1988) and Bourdieu's (1972) concept of social capital minimizes the weakness of each approach. Meaning, it does not ignore how the educational systems may act as oppressive forces in some students' lives or undermine individual students' abilities to achieve educational attainment despite their social status. This provides a more comprehensive approach to understanding the experiences of Hmong students. It considers how systematic barriers may impede students ability be successful but it does not discount a students' will and agency to overcome barriers. For example, Hmong students lack of social capital puts them at a disadvantage because they do not have access to networks with college knowledge as few Hmong families have experience with a college education. Having little exposure to formalized education, Hmong students cannot rely solely on their families for



information or guidance. Therefore, students and their families will rely on supportive networks, such as schools to assist in their hopes for social mobility.

Social capital points to the important role relationships have on the college process. However, social capital somewhat ignores and does not address how families and communities acquire college knowledge. Additionally, it does not address how the accumulation of educational knowledge, not limited to college knowledge, is shared with others members in a community. Hence, cultural capital theory has recently been explored in college choice literature as it pertains to underrepresented students to identify how community and family values provide support and encouragement for college (DiMaggio & Mohr, 1985; Dumais, 2002; Engberg & Wolniak, 2010; McDonough & Antonio, 1996; Nora, 2004; Nunez, 2009; Perna, 2000a; Perna & Titus, 2005b; Strayhorn, 2010; Warikoo, 2009; Winkle-Wagner, 2010).

### **Cultural Capital**

Bourdieu (1986) is also credited with the concept of cultural capital, a French neo-Marxist school of thought originally posited as a theory used to explain class and social reproduction. Cultural capital is associated with the accumulation and transmission of knowledge from past generations which can be converted into economic capital in certain circumstances. Cultural capital is the cultural knowledge or competence acquired by an individual which can serve as power and a resource for an individual. For example, knowledge about high status art and music is a form of cultural capital that can be shared with future generations. In education, cultural capital is a resource that allows students to successfully navigate the academic terrain because they have knowledge about educational institutions and credentials. Furthermore, cultural capital can be utilized in social settings where knowledge, skills, norms, and preferences are exchanged for social rewards such as acceptance, recognition, and inclusion.

Bourdieu (1986) classified cultural capital into three stages/forms: embodied, objectified, and institutionalized. Embodied cultural capital is long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body that cannot be transmitted instantaneously. This means, it is embedded in the individual and becomes a habit and a way of life - norm. For example, this form of cultural capital “starts at the outset, without delay...only for the offspring of families endowed with strong cultural capital...the accumulation period covers the whole period of socialization” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 86). The transmission of cultural capital between families is the best hidden form of capital because it occurs over one’s lifetime and is considered to be more strongly censored and controlled because the ‘passing’ of this capital occurs at the discretion of the ‘keeper’.

The objectified form of cultural capital is defined in the relationship with cultural capital in its embodied form. In this case, objectified forms of cultural capital are “cultural goods” which can include writings, paintings, and instruments. This type of cultural capital is tangible and can be consumed materially “which presupposes economic capital and symbolically presupposes cultural capital” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 87). Therefore, objectified capital can be shared among families in the embodied form. This means the tangible forms of high status cultural goods, which are often associated with wealth, are accessible only to immediate network members.

An institutionalized form of cultural capital more often consists of academic credentials. Unlike the other forms of cultural capital, the institutionalized state of cultural capital is relatively autonomous and produces sharp lasting differences, through recognition of particular norms, values and traditions within institutions (such as schools). Bourdieu (1986) refers to this as, “cultural capital by collective magic” (p. 88) referring to the power of instituting and imposing recognition, specifically through academic qualifications.

In the realm of education, Bourdieu viewed cultural capital as a means of social reproduction because education facilitates some cultural capital and students who have acquired the cultural capital valued by the dominant groups will be highly rewarded. Winkle-Wagner (2010) says it best, “educational institutions then reward those students who are already equipped with the cultural and social capital that the system presupposes and legitimates through the process of making it appear that the reproduction of social hierarchies is based on gifts, merits, or skills” (p. 18). In Bourdieu’s perspective, education was a mechanism that perpetuated social stratification by teaching individuals to accept their position in society and rewarding individuals who possess cultural capital valued by the elite. This perspective illustrates educational institutions only reward individuals who have the particular values and norms that are similar to the dominant class, whereas others are taught to accept and not question their position in society.

Interestingly, cultural capital research has been used to explore topics related to inequalities in education, such as the college choice process (Engberg & Wolniak, 2010; Freeman, 1997; Nora, 2004; Nunez, 2009; Perna, 2000b; Strayhorn, 2010; Winkle-Wagner, 2010). Research indicates that cultural capital has a positive significant effect on educational attainment and attendance (DiMaggio & Mohr, 1985; P. Y. Kim & Lee, 2014; Nunez, 2009). In addition, St. John, Hu, and Fisher (2010) found college knowledge was the first crucial form of understanding missing for most first generation college students and their families. Cultural capital may explain why lower SES students have lower educational aspirations or go to college at lower rates, as middle and upper class individuals possess the most valued forms of cultural capital (McDonough, 1997; Strayhorn, 2010; Warikoo, 2009; Winkle-Wagner, 2010; Yamamoto & Halloway, 2010). For example, more educated parents may socialize their children early to prepare them for their educational and professional careers. Therefore, middle and upper class

students may have more information about their educational options and hence, be more likely to attend college because they are socialized to value education and understand the benefits they will receive from a college education. Similarly, Perna (2006) argues individuals who lack the required cultural capital may: lower their educational aspirations or select out of particular situations because they do not know the particular cultural norms, over perform to compensate for their less-valued cultural resources, or receive fewer rewards for their educational investment. Similarly, St. John et al.'s (2011) found the lack of college information available to families of first-generation college students may restrict students' access to or success during college. In addition, even when financial constraints were diminished, student were often encouraged to consider alternative options rather than a college education (St. John et al, 2011).

While research has used these sociological concepts to understand student success, Winkle-Wagner (2010) argues that many researchers often operationalize social and cultural capital as one concept, rather than two distinct concepts. It is important to differentiate these two concepts because they acknowledge the differences between relationships and knowledge. Winkle-Wagner (2010) argues that individuals can possess social capital without possessing cultural capital *or* cultural capital without social capital. St. John et al. (2011) recent development of Academic Capital Formation (ACF) operationalizes social capital and cultural capital as two distinct yet related concepts. In particular, they focus on the aspects of social capital as it relates to building supportive networks, navigating systems, and accessing trustworthy information. In addition, they argue that educational, networking, and financial interventions for families and communities could potentially assist in them overcoming the barriers to college going, especially in easing concerns about college costs.

These major sociological theories (e.g. social capital, and cultural capital) have been utilized to study the college choice process of traditional students. Sociological models are useful to understanding the ways structural constraints and opportunities shape an individual's perspective about college choice. While these models provide a good foundation for studying the college choice process for underrepresented students, they are limited in scope because they do not comprehensively recognize the differing college choice processes of racial groups (Hossler et al., 1989; McDonough & Antonio, 1996). To address this limitation, recent college choice literature has begun to expand our understanding of how underrepresented groups go through the college choice process (Engberg & Wolniak, 2010; Freeman, 1997, 1999, 2005a; McDonough, Antonio, et al., 1997; Nunez, 2009; Pang, 2007; Perez & McDonough, 2008; Strayhorn, 2010; Teranishi et al., 2004; Winkle-Wagner, 2010). However, there continues to be limited literature on the college choice process as it relates to Hmong American students. Specifically, this study aims to contribute to the literature by expanding and including information about this population which has been largely overlooked.

### **Asian American: Explanations for Educational Over/Under Achievements and Aspirations**

For this section, explanations for the educational achievements and aspirations of Asian Americans will be discussed as it pertains only to the predisposition stage of college choice. The focus on the predisposition stage allows for an in depth synthesis of the factors which contribute to the college going process of Hmong Americans. The predisposition stage, as discussed briefly above, is composed of the individual and organizational characteristics through which an individual develops the aspiration to go to college (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Limiting this literature review to the predisposition stage allows for direct emphasis on understanding what factors influence aspirations for college. Hurtado, Inkelas, Briggs, and Rhee (1997) state, "it is

becoming clear that it is necessary to develop more precise models of the predisposition stage to understand vast differences in student preparation for college among various racial/ethnic groups” (p. 64). With the low college enrollment rates of the Hmong American community, the focus on the predisposition stage allows for an in-depth examination of the factors which encourage or impede the development of Hmong students’ aspirations to go to college. Therefore, literature on the search and choice stages of the college choice process will not be discussed<sup>17</sup>.

Earlier research indicates higher education and occupation aspirations have a positive relationship with future educational and occupational achievements (Sewell, 1971; Sewell et al., 1970; Sewell et al., 1969). Therefore, higher aspirations lead to an individual’s pursuit of education and result in higher educational achievements. Similarly, recent literature indicates there is a relationship between aspirations and achievement, as individuals with high aspirations also tend to have high achievement (Pitre, 2006). Hence, it is not surprising high school academic ability is highly correlated with the decision to go to college (Hearn, 1991). Controlling for academic and nonacademic variables, “the most powerful effect on entry into selective institution...[is] academically based” (Hearn, 1991, p. 164). Therefore it is not surprising that students with high aspirations and achievements are likely to go to college.

For Asian Americans students, literature has found Asian American students have the highest educational aspirations and their educational attainment rates are equal to or above that of White students (Arnold, 1993; Hsia, 1988; Kao & Tienda, 1998; Mordkowitz & Ginsberg, 1987). To understand Asian Americans educational aspirations, achievement, and attainment,

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<sup>17</sup> Research indicates various factors such as institutional prestige and selectivity, financial aid, tuition, and location as influential factors during the search and choice stage. See (D. Kim, 2004; St. John, 1991; St. John & Noell, 1989; St. John et al., 2005; St. John, Paulsen, & Starkey, 1996) for more information.

three explanations have been put forward to describe Asian American students' educational achievement and underachievement: Cultural explanations (Kitano, 1969; Routledge, 1992; Zhou & Bankston, 1998), structural explanations (R. Y. Kim, 2002), and relative functionalism (Sue & Okazaki, 1990).

### **Cultural explanations**

Cultural explanations emphasizes how culture either is in conflict with or is in support of educational outcomes. As such, cultural values from Asian immigrants' home countries are said to be transplanted to America and their children are socialized to achieve academic and economic success (R. Y. Kim, 2002). Cultural explanations emphasize how 'Confucianist' values explain and promote the educational success of Asian American children (Kitano, 1969; Ng, 2007; Routledge, 1992; Zhou & Bankston, 1998). Sue and Okazaki (1990) identified four values/practices of Asian American families which promote educational achievements: (1) demands and expectations for achievement and upward mobility, (2) guilt about parental sacrifices and the need to fulfill obligations, (3) respect for education, and (4) obedience to elders such as teachers and school authorities. For example, Zhou and Bankston (1998) found that cultural values help keep Vietnamese teenagers in school and prevent them from dropping out of school. Similarly, researchers have found that Asian American parents and their communities invest in programs leading to the educational achievements of Asian American students, such as private college counselors and community based college preparatory programs (J. Lew, 2007; V. Louie, 2001).

The cultural explanation has been criticized and challenged over the years, as studies have shown that other groups who share similar values do not do well and other groups who do not share the same values still do as well academically (Covello, 1972; Gibson, 1989). This

argument is further complicated because the cultural explanation does not acknowledge the different structural barriers faced by Asian Americans groups and it adds to the *model minority* stereotype (Chang, Park, Lin, Poon, & Nakanishi, 2007; J. L. Lew, 2011; Ng, 2007; Teranishi, 2001, 2002; Teranishi & Tchen, 2009). This is exemplified in the earlier census data, which indicated almost half of Asian Americans over the age of 25 have a bachelor's degree (50.2%), reflecting the larger aggregated Asian American groups. However, less than 15% of the Cambodian, Laotian, and Hmong community have a bachelor's degree. In addition, the cultural explanations do not account for different histories, as certain Asian groups have been in the United States longer than others. Furthermore, it does not explain the variation in educational outcomes of contemporary Asian Americans as more recent Asian immigrants (excluding international students from Asia) are less likely to have similar educational achievements when compared to Asians Americans from groups who have lived in the United States for several generations.

The limitation of cultural explanations is that it fails to recognize the different experiences and values of each Asian American ethnic group and generalizes 'cultural' practices for all Asian Americans. It in essence it applies broad Asian values onto all Asian Americans and assumes, students who are not as successful, are 'less Asian'. Lew (2011) argues the model minority stereotype over-relies on cultural explanations, which are insufficient since they do not account for structural forces. She states, "[Asian American] school success has often been reduced to simple cultural arguments based on individual meritocracy – the values of education, close knit family and hard work – rather than drawing a more nuanced picture of how these cultural forces shift amidst changing social contexts" (p. 615). Given the limitations of the



cultural explanation, a second explanation has been put forward, structured explanations to account for educational achievement or underachievement.

### **Structured explanations**

Structured explanations emphasize the pre-migration group characteristics of immigrant groups and the social structural conditions of the host society to explain their educational and occupational achievements. These include parental education, occupation, and income, which are considered critical to predicting children's educational achievement (Ellwood & Kane, 2000; Hamrick & Stage, 2004; Hurtado et al., 1997; King, 1996; Paulsen & St. John, 2002; Sewell et al., 1970; Sewell & Hauser, 1972; M. J. Smith, 2001; Walpole, 2003). Structural explanations assume higher parental education, occupation, and income levels lead to an increased likelihood children will have greater resources to succeed in school compared to those with lower social class characteristics (Teranishi, 2001; Teranishi et al., 2004; Teranishi & Tchen, 2009).

Structured explanations account for the different histories of each community and for the Hmong American community, this is a very important distinction. For example, the majority of Hmong Americans came to the U.S. mainly as political refugees, fleeing war, persecution, and death. Hmong Americans come from rural backgrounds with little money, education, skills and are heavily dependent on the government for financial assistance. Many have disrupted family structures, as many lost family members as a result of war, fleeing their country, and harsh refugee camp life. The structural barriers of being refugees, poor, living in concentrated low income neighborhoods, and attending poorly funded schools are a few of the obstacles which inhibit the academic success of children of Hmong refugees (R. Y. Kim, 2002; S. J. Lee, 2007; Lor, 2008; C. T. Vang, 2004; Xiong, 2011).

Structural explanations allows for the identification and recognition that each community has a different history and culture. These are important distinctions because they provide the opportunity to understand the role community backgrounds have on the educational success of their children and communities. Recent literature on Asian American college choice has begun to address the importance of community histories and culture of student educational outcomes (Chhuon & Hudley, 2010a, 2010b; Chhuon, Hudley, Brenner, & Macias, 2010; Teranishi, 2010; Teranishi et al., 2004; Vartanian, Karen, Buck, & Cadge, 2007; Zhou & Kim, 2006). For example, Chhuon et al.'s, (2010) study on Cambodian American students found family obligations was a prominent theme, as students were motivated to find ways to contribute to the well-being of the family unit.

### **Relative Functionalism**

Cultural and structural explanations have dominated the literature on Asian American educational aspirations and achievement. Cultural explanations overemphasize the influence of culture on upward mobility without giving weight to structural factors. In contrast, structural perspectives often treat culture as unimportant. In addition to these two dominant explanations, Sue and Okazaki (1990) offered another explanation for API success: relative functionalism. They contend, “academic achievements of Asian Americans cannot be solely attributed to Asian cultural values” because similar to other ethnic minority groups, culture does not operate in a vacuum. Hence behavior patterns including academic achievement are a product of cultural values and an individual’s status in society. Relative functionalism is based on two assumptions. First, there is a drive for upward mobility and cultural values can affect educational attainment. Second, opportunities for upward mobility are limited or perceived to be limited in other areas, therefore education is selected as the option to invest. Overall, Sue and Okazaki (1990) argues,

“although culture is an important factor in achievement, education has been functional for upward mobility, especially when participation in other arenas, such as sports, entertainment, and politics, has been difficult” (Sue & Okazaki, 1990, p. 919). Thus, Asian Americans invest in education because it has worked for others in the past. Education is considered the least risky option, given they have not seen many Asian Americans achieve success outside this arena. Furthermore, Xie and Goyette (2003) noted, “Asian American youth plan to pursue college education in fields that reward them with high financial gains” (p. 491).

The limitation of relative functionalism is that it downplays the power and influence of culture and society because it does not acknowledge the inequalities in education. Relative functionalism emphasizes the influence of cultural factors on achievement and focuses on how individuals select college as a functional/rational choice. While it recognizes the inherent lack of representation in non-education sectors, it does not acknowledge how structural factors can impede success. Furthermore, relative functionalism disregards the educational barriers to achievement and success experienced by communities like the Hmong American community, and assumes hard work is enough to overcome them.

Together, these explanations (cultural, structural, and relative functionalism) provide a good framework to understanding what factors contribute to the successes and challenges faced by Asian Americans. Without going into detail in this section, it is important to understand that cultural and structural explanations, as well as relative functionalism, have been used primarily to explain the educational achievements of Asian Americans such as Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and South Asian Americans, with little or no reference to the underachievement or educational barriers faced by Hmong Americans (or SEA Americans and Pacific Islanders). While these explanations have limitations, they each provide background information to understanding the

Asian American population and offers a baseline rubric to explore the educational experiences of Hmong American students.

### **Factors Influencing the Predisposition to College**

Explanations for the aspirations and achievements of Asian Americans provides a good framework to understanding the reasons why Hmong Americans may aspire for a higher education. While educational aspirations and achievement increases the likelihood of going to college, it does not address the specific factors, which influence an individual's predisposition to go to college. In this section, I will examine the literature on the educational experiences of Asian American students, with a focus on educational achievement and attainment, as a proxy to understanding their predispositions for college. Students with successful achievement and attainment are more likely to have the predisposition for college (Ellwood & Kane, 2000; Hossler & Stage, 1992; Hurtado et al., 1997; Pitre, 2006). This section will discuss the major factors identified in the literature as influential on the educational experiences of Asian American students and provides background for understanding Hmong Americans educational experience. These factors will be discussed and are separated into three major sections: background characteristics, cultural factors, and structural factors.

#### **Background characteristics**

College choice literature suggests several background characteristics influence the predisposition stage of the college choice process, by either encouraging or inhibiting college going. Background characteristics include ethnicity, gender, SES, generation status, parental education, and English language proficiency.

**Ethnicity.** The available research on Asian Americans has illustrated the significant ethnic variations in the Asian American community (P. Y. Kim & Lee, 2014; J. L. Lew, 2011;

Teranishi, 2001, 2010; Teranishi et al., 2004; Teranishi & Tchen, 2009; Vang & Trieu, 2014). More recently, community and national advocates have begun to voice their disagreement with the way data is collected on Asian Americans, which hide the nuances within the Asian American racial category. This is in part due to the larger national initiative among Asian American advocates (via the White House Initiative on Asian American and Pacific Islanders) to disaggregate data on Asian American and Pacific Islander community (Aina, 2012). Simply put, research indicates the Asian American community is not homogenous and the community is no longer happy with the way data is collectively portraying Asian Americans (Chang et al., 2007; J. L. Lew, 2011; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Nozaki, 2007; Teranishi, 2010; Teranishi & Tchen, 2009). This further demonstrates the importance of considering ethnicity in research.

In addition, research on SEA American students demonstrates a variation in achievement in the Asian American community, with Vietnamese Americans doing better than Hmong, Laotian, or Cambodian Americans (R. Y. Kim, 2002). To explain the ethnicity variation in achievement, Kim (2002) suggests that being from a country with greater westernization and structural development explained Vietnamese American success, compared to other SEA Americans. The relative educational success of Vietnamese Americans, compared to their SEA American peers, is further supported through data from the U.S. Census (2000, 2010). As indicated to chapter 2 (see table 2, page 11), Vietnamese Americans have a higher percentage of people 25 and older with a bachelor's degree than African, Latino, Hmong, Laotian, and Cambodian Americans (U.S. Bureau of Statistics, 2010). While there are no studies on the aspirations of SEA Americans, it is plausible the aspirations of Vietnamese American students are higher than their SEA American counterparts since research has demonstrated the correlation between aspiration and educational attainment (Flint, 1992; Goyette, 1999; Hirschman, 1986;

Kao & Thompson, 2003; Kerchoff & Campbell, 1977; Or & Reynolds, 2014; Sewell et al., 1970; Sewell & Hauser, 1972; Teranishi et al., 2004; Walpole, 2003). The difference in educational attainment demonstrates there is a relationship between an individual's ethnicity and their subsequent achievement and aspirations.

Lee (2006) discussed the intersection of class and ethnicity and indicates that there is significant variation in educational success across groups and ethnicities. She finds poverty is concentrated in certain ethnic groups and is hidden in aggregated data. In their analysis of Asian American test scores, Pang, Kiang, and Pak (2003) found school districts with high concentrations of SEA American students had a higher number of Asian American students who received failing scores compared to districts with largely South Asian or Chinese American populations. In addition, their study also highlights the significant class differences among Asian American ethnic communities. Communities with large South Asian and Chinese American populations were middle and upper class, whereas large SEA American populations are largely working class and poor (Pang et al., 2003). This provides further evidence of the difference in educational experiences among Asian American students and the limitations of current data collection.

Furthermore, a recent report on the status of Asian Americans in higher education found that Asian Americans are evenly distributed in 2-year and 4-year institutions with majority attending public institutions (CARE, 2008). They also found, Asian American students achieve a wide range of scores on standardized tests and their enrollment is increasing at a faster rate at public 2-year community colleges than in 4-year colleges. This demonstrates a very different backdrop to the Asian American educational composition than what has been previously presented in larger educational research (Astin, 1982; Ogbu, 1978; Perna, 2000a) .

As the aforementioned research studies and report suggest, there has been limited research on the wide range of educational experiences in the Asian American community. This is largely because of the lack of disaggregated data available on Asian Americans. This restricts the ability to provide a realistic snapshot of the Asian American community and makes it challenging to give voice to smaller Asian American communities. It is likewise challenging to distinguish differences unique to the various Asian American student populations and communities, which affects their access to and choice of higher education institutions.

**Socioeconomic status.** Research has indicated family socioeconomic variables – parental education levels, parental occupation, and family income - have a powerful effect on an individuals' measured ability and inadvertently, their decision to go to college (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000b; Callender & Jackson, 2008; Ellwood & Kane, 2000; Hamrick & Stage, 2004; Hearn, 1984, 1991; Hu, 2010; Lareau, 1987; S. J. Lee, 2006; V. S. Louie, 2005; Sewell, 1971; Sewell et al., 1970; Sewell et al., 1969; Walpole, 2003). By 1970's, socioeconomic status (SES) became a common background measure defined as a combination of family income and parental education.

Cabrera and La Nasa (2000a) found low SES students are 24.3% less likely to be college qualified than the national average and only 65.6% apply to 4 year colleges compared to high SES students (90%). For example, if two individuals with identical school performance and test scores with equally educated parents, but one is poor and one is well-to do, the odds of attending college will differ by ten percentage points (Ellwood & Kane, 2000). This highlights the important role SES has on the college pathway of students and further supports earlier research on the influence SES has on educational attainment.

Similarly, researchers have found poorer students come from culturally disadvantaged homes who do not promote academic success (V. S. Louie, 2005). More specifically, Knight, et al. (2004) researched the differences in the college information of students and indicated low income families provide contradictory college information to their children. This challenges students to sift through the information to determine which most pertinent and useful. Furthermore, low-income families have increased financial need and were less likely to have access to college educated individuals and attend less academically qualified high schools (Gonzalez et al., 2003; Perez & McDonough, 2008). Hence, low-income students were less likely to be academically prepared to go to college, had higher financial need, and many ended up not going to college because they were not prepared.

Studies have explored the intersection of educational attainment and SES and have found the difference in educational attainment and achievement across Asian American groups appears to be related to SES (S. J. Lee, 2006; J. Lew, 2004; V. Louie, 2001; Teranishi et al., 2004; Zhou & Kim, 2006). For example, Louie (2001) found middle class parents steered their children toward the best schools and invested in academically oriented private lessons for their children. Middle class parents generally were more educated and knowledgeable of the school system and were able to use this knowledge and their financial resources for the benefit of their children. In contrast, while low-income parents were very preoccupied with their children's schooling, they were confronted with disadvantages (e.g. financial concerns and lack of college knowledge) which hinder them from providing similar support as middle class parents did.

Similarly, Lew (2007) found social class structured the educational resources available to students and the parental strategies utilized to encourage and support their children varied by income. Therefore, high SES Asian American families are able to capitalize on educational



resources because of their economic capital, by sending their children to elite academic counseling whereas low income students had limited social and cultural capital which hindered them from getting important college information (J. Lew, 2007). For example, Zhou and Kim (2006) found Chinese and Korean enrichment programs – ‘buxbans’ and ‘hagwans’ which rivaled the Princeton Review and Kaplan. These programs were extremely expensive which made them only affordable for middle and high-income families. These specialized educational programs are common in Chinese and Korean communities for families who can afford them and were utilized to ensure the academic achievement and educational attainment of their children. Therefore, higher SES students are afforded benefits not available to low SES students.

In a 2004 CIRP study on Asian Americans, researchers found SEA Americans (43.3%) represented the greatest proportion of families with a combined income of less than \$25, 000 per year and had the lowest rates of citizenship (58.4%). Similarly, SEA Americans have the highest rates of poverty and welfare dependency among all Asian American groups and the U.S. population (Rumbaut, 2000). This confirms the 2000 and 2010 census numbers presented earlier in chapter 2, Figures 1-2. Teranishi, et al. (2004) concluded, “students from different ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds attend college at differential rates” (p. 545) with Chinese and Korean Americans having greater representation at selective institutions than SEA Americans and Filipinos. While this study provided a good benchmark to understand the college choice of Asian Americans, a limitation of this study is data was collected only from incoming first time freshmen students for one year. Therefore, the data does not represent students who did not go to college. Without this, this data reflects only college going populations. Therefore, it is impossible to see trends in college going among SEA Americans.

Research indicates college cost as an influential factor in whether or not low-income students go to college. For many low-income students, without the appropriate information, the fear of accruing debt outweighs the perceived benefits of a college education. Therefore, the only rational decision for some low income students because the fear of debt, results in the decision to not go to college. With the Hmong community consisting mostly of low-income families, this population is highly influenced by the cost of college. Therefore information about financial aid is critical. Without the proper information, Hmong students and their families are less inclined to consider college as an option.

**Gender.** The larger body of educational achievement research indicates gender is an important variable to consider when examining the educational experiences of students. The limited research on gender in the SEA student population confirms gender is an important variable to consider when examining educational experiences and aspirations. However, the Asian American literature on gender is limited because it specifically focuses only on female students. There is a dearth of literature documenting the male SEA student experience which limits the full understanding of how gender impacts the educational achievement and aspirations of Hmong students.

The literature on gender has found female students are burdened with domestic responsibilities related to being a daughter and are expected to stay home as much as possible (Chhuon, Kryatzia, & Hudley, 2010; Fendya, 1995; S. J. Lee, 1997; Ong, 2004; Shah, 2007). For example, Shah (2007) found SEA females and males undergo a different educational experience, due to the traditional values of the SEA community. For example, the path to college for females was more challenging because they had more family responsibilities and were expected to care for younger siblings while their brothers are given more freedom and flexibility.

Shah (2007) stated, “[females] are expected to cook, clean, take care of younger siblings, and sew in preparation for their adult roles as wives and mothers” (p.37). Therefore, the educational experiences of females are impacted because of the additional responsibilities and differences in expectations from their families.

The gendered difference in expectations is a major intergenerational issue between parents and their daughters, which results in family conflict and tension when female students challenge this cultural value and practice. This cultural tension is reflected in the research and demonstrates the challenges it places on students and their families. For example, while Zhou and Bankston’s (1998) case study reported Vietnamese parents expected their children adhere to strict traditional values relating to marriage and family. In contrast, Lee’s (1997) study of Hmong American women argued the educational success of her participants forced Hmong families to reexamine the traditional role of females in the family and in the community. More recently, Chhun, Kyratzis, and Hudley (2010) found female Cambodian college students managed to resolve the contradictions in their lives, as they balanced their traditional identities with their non-traditional decision to go to college, by restructuring their decision around their family obligation. This meant female students recognized they were not adhering to a norm/value in their family but justified their decision as a means to accomplishing family success, through a college education. The research points to the importance of examining gender, when studying the educational experience of Hmong students.

**Generation status.** Literature indicates the generation status of Asian American students is an influential factor on educational achievement outcomes. Louie (2001) investigated the differences between one point five generation (those born abroad but raised in the U.S. for the last 3-8 years) and second generation (U.S. born) Chinese Americans in the United States. He

found generational differences, which was a result of distinct parental strategies utilized to aid in the educational achievement and potential attainment of their children. He found, one point five generation were generally more poor and had limited resources to help their children with schooling. In comparison, second generation students generally had middle-income parents who were actively involved in their education process, tapped into community resources, and played a central role in the college admissions process (V. Louie, 2001; V. S. Louie, 2004). This research highlights the importance of looking at immigrant needs to improve educational achievement and opportunity as they differ by immigration and generation status.

Particularly for Hmong Americans, it is critical to consider a student's generation status (e.g. first generation, one point five generation, second generation) because their generation status provides a better understanding of their individual and family background. One point five generation students essentially were raised in the United States but are familiar with their home country. In comparison, second generation students were born in the United States and are unfamiliar with their parent's homeland. This distinction is necessary because individual background can dictate their educational and income level, employment status, and the educational aspirations of the family once they arrive in this country (Pang, 1995). Louie (2005) states, "the cultural experience of being poor and having immigrant parents is arguably different from the experience of being poor and having native born parents" (p. 86).

Lee (2001) finds there are cultural gaps between parents and children which can subsequently influence the educational achievements of Hmong American children. In her study, she found one and a half generation students (born abroad but raised in the United States) retain more of their traditional values, through placing high importance on education and family obligations and are perceived by parents and teachers as model students. Lee (2001) also found

that one point five generation students are able to compare their experiences of discrimination in the U.S. with the difficulties they faced in their native country. Therefore, these students are more willing to overlook the instances of discrimination and focus on the positive opportunities they have in the U.S. One point five generation students embrace the concept of economic and social mobility through education because education was not available to them in their native country. In comparison, second generation students (born in the United States) are viewed as “bad students” because they wear baggy clothes, exercise their independence from school officials, and rebel against their parent’s rules. Unlike one point five generation students, second generation students do not have a frame of reference to compare their experience with. They see the United States as their home and do not conform to the traditional values of their parents.

Generation differences reflect the varying student perspectives on culture, which confirms the need to consider generation differences when examining educational outcomes of students. Researchers argue a loss of culture or “over-Americanization” results in youth delinquency and distrust with their family culture (S. J. Lee, 2001; Zhou & Bankston, 1998). Therefore, individuals who retain identities in both cultures are more successful than those who identify mainly with one culture. However, Lee (2001) indicated students were skeptical of the educational opportunities and social mobility because they see racial discrimination as a permanent part of their lives in the U.S. Additionally, Chhuon, Hudley, Brenner, and Macias (2010) found most Cambodian students characterized their home as incongruent and stressful when describing their transitions between their home and school. This further confirms the importance generational status has on the educational experiences of students.

**Parental education.** Literature on API college choice has also identified parents as a major influence on educational aspirations and attainment. For example, Kim and Valadez

(1995) found that parents have the greatest influence on Asian American educational aspirations and attainment. For example, students who have parents with a college education will have access to college knowledge that a first generation college student will not have. Research indicates students with college educated parents are more likely to be advised to take college preparatory courses and receive helpful information during the college admissions process (Choy, Horn, Nunez, & Chen, 2000; D. H. Kim & Scheider, 2005; Lor, 2008; C. T. Vang, 2004; Yamamoto & Halloway, 2010). For Asian American families who immigrated to the U.S. in the 1960's, parents are generally more educated and it is likely that their children have more college knowledge. Therefore, part of the influence parents have on a students' educational outcome, depends on the college knowledge they have accumulated to share with their children.

**English language proficiency.** The Asian American population has grown tremendously in both communities who have long histories in the U.S. and more recent immigrants. The growth in the Asian American immigrant population is reflected in the number of people who speak an Asian language as their first language. According to the 2000 census, 79% of Asian Americans age five and over speak a language other than English at home (Reeves & Bennett, 2004). In 2010, 76% of Asian American spoke a language other than English at home (U.S. Census, 2010). With recent immigrants, the proportions of Asian Americans who speak a language other than English at home are high. For example, 94% of Hmong and over 80% of Cambodians, Laotian, Pakistanis and Vietnamese speak a language other than English at home (Reeves & Bennett, 2004).

English is not the primary language in Hmong American homes and many families struggle with language issues when they arrive. With the already limited English proficiency programs at K-12 levels geared toward Spanish speakers, APA students do not receive adequate

language preparation at the secondary level (Suzuki, 2002). In addition, Kiang (1992) found many immigrant and refugee students experience academic and social difficulty because of their language barrier. For example, students are afraid to speak up in class or ask questions due to fear of being ridiculed by classmates because of their ‘accent’ or inability to articulate their questions or concerns. This type of academic environment alienates students and for some, places them at risk of dropping out (Rendon, 1994).

Due to difference in language skills, Asian immigrant parents encounter significant barriers in the work place and in interaction with schools. Lee (2006) states, “a common phenomenon in immigrant families involves the role reversal between immigrant parents and their children whereby the children have to help parents negotiate life in the USA” (p. 21). Role reversals prevent children from participating in activities such as extracurricular activities, due to their adult responsibilities. Research suggests role reversals often disrupt parental authority, thereby leaving youth at greater risk for delinquent behavior (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996). Therefore, as recent immigrants, SEA students have the responsibility of taking care of their parents, which many “traditional” students are not burdened with. This results in increased stress on SEA students as for many, the livelihood of the family is in their hands.

### **Cultural Factors**

Consistent with the explanations for educational achievements of Asian Americans, literature indicates various cultural factors (internally and externally) influence college going. The role of parents on the educational achievements of Asian Americans has been well documented in the cultural explanations of Asian American educational success (J. Lew, 2007; Pearce & Lin, 2007). Specifically, Asian American parents encourage and instill the value of education in their children at a young age as the only path to social mobility (J. Lew, 2007; V.

Louie, 2001). Through parents, the value of an education is internalized among students and their families. The unwavering valuing of education is exemplified through parental and community investment, by the development of 'buxbans' and 'hagwans' (referenced above). These programs/services cater to Asian American families who are invested in ensuring their child's educational success. They utilize additional services outside the school system, to ensure their children's achievement.

While dominant literature indicates parental involvement and engagement is correlated with student success, research on Asian American students offer a different perspective. In terms of direct parental school engagement, research indicated parental involvement – measured by attending school events and meetings, speaking to teacher/counselor, and visiting classes resulted in a negative influence on Chinese Americans (Pearce & Lin, 2007). This directly contradicts dominant mainstream literature, which emphasizes parental involvement in school. Pearce and Lin (2007) found Asian American parents have a different cultural lens and defer the education of their children to the authority of school teachers and counselors. Visits to the school occur only at the request of school authorities, generally for disciplinary actions (S. J. Lee, 2005; V. S. Louie, 2005; Pearce & Lin, 2007). Although Chinese parents were less involved in direct school related activities, Pearce and Lin (2007) found they were actively involved in the education and college process of their children at home by enrolling their children in outside tutoring, hiring college counselors, and encouraging their children to do well in school. This indicates while parental involvement is important, it is not practiced in the mainstream ways researchers conventionally measure parental involvement. Therefore, it is important to consider how cultural factors result in non-mainstream involvement, which also impact students' educational experience.



Recent literature has begun to look beyond parents, to the influence of families and culture on the development of college aspirations. Students are choosing to pursue a college education because it has been identified as being in the best interest of their families. For example, Chhuon et al. (2010) found Cambodian students identified familial duty as their motivation for academic success by protecting the family image and serving as a role model for younger members of their families. They state, “participants generally felt that despite their high school achievements, it was equally necessary for them to succeed in college to positively shape expectations and opportunities for younger family members” (p. 41). For these students, family and culture were interrelated and provided them rationale and motivation to pursue their educational aspirations.

While families are a source of support, they are also a source of pressure and stress for students. Kibria (1993) argues that Vietnamese families’ approach to educational pursuits creates enormous pressure for students to do well, especially since the family’s future hinges on their success. The pressure on students is compounded because they become language brokers for their families and assume parental responsibilities, such as communicating directly with school teachers and staff and making decisions about their own education (Kibria, 1993; S. J. Lee, 2002).

The literature demonstrates the influence culture has on educational aspirations, achievement, and attainment. Culture is transmitted through family and social interactions with the outside world. Therefore, cultural factors influence an individual internally (family) and externally (outside family). As illustrated in Asian American literature above, parents are both positive and negative influences on college going. While the Asian American culture emphasizes the investment in education through family and community, this proves to be a source of

tremendous pressure for students and results in mixed results. It both encourages and discourages students (Chhuon, Hudley, et al., 2010; Kibria, 1993; S. J. Lee, 2002). Therefore, it is important to consider the role family (e.g. parents and siblings) have in the educational process of Hmong Americans students as they are faced with the burden of being either the family's success story or family failure. In addition, literature has documented the role of extended family in the education process of students, especially when parents or siblings do not have the college knowledge to share with their children (Aldous, 2006; Ellwood & Kane, 2000; Fendya, 1995; Freeman, 2005a). The influence of social capital extends beyond the family, to include the formal and informal relationships in schools and the community.

Social capital is critical to college choice given the majority of Hmong American parents do not have a college education and are unable to provide guidance on the college going process. Thus, individuals who want to go to college will go through the process alone unless they find family members who have experience with college, a role model, or an institutional agent who will act as a gatekeeper to college. Gatekeepers of college knowledge are critical to opening the door for Hmong Americans as they will provide support and guidance on the college going process as well as dispel myths about college applications and financial aid. For many low-income communities, high schools become the main source of college information. Chhuon et al. (2010), identified high schools as bridges because the, "positive academic environments in high school were significant for helping students reconcile contradictions in their family worlds and navigate the boundaries of their different contexts" (p. 45).

In addition, peers may also transmit necessary social and cultural capital. Research shows students are more likely to enroll in college when their friends also plan to go to college. Similar to peer pressure, individuals surrounded with peers who do well in school and aspire to go to

college have an increased likelihood of attaining greater achievement and aspirations (Carter, 2005; Engberg & Wolniak, 2010). Therefore, having friends with high educational aspirations and expectations may be effective in raising the educational expectations of low SES students because they are surrounded by a peer culture which has normed college expectations. Students may also acquire information about college through their involvement with peers in high school activities (Hossler & Stage, 1992; McDonough, 1997). Similarly, Lee (1996) demonstrates how Asian students build social and cultural groups which either encouraged or discouraged achievement and aspirations. For example, depending on how they identified their social and cultural identity, which was largely defined by their social group, students choose to reject or accept the model minority status of Asian Americans. Hence, peers have a tremendous influence on the achievement and aspirations of individuals.

These cultural factors have been identified in literature as having a profound impact on the educational experiences of Asian American students. The examination of cultural factors is important when studying the predisposition of Hmong students because it provides a lens to understanding the role culture has on the development of aspirations for college.

### **Structural Factors**

Higher education remains predominately restricted to individuals who accumulate the knowledge necessary to apply, enroll, and persist in college. Therefore, students who possess the cultural knowledge valued by the dominant class will have greater access to resources which promote college choice (McDonough, 1997). Gandara (1995) states, “the schooling system in the U.S. is ordered in such a way as to channel upper-income students into educational opportunities...and lower income students into the vocational tracks that preclude them from competing for jobs with their upper income peers” (p. 25). Gandara (1995) highlights structural

effects of academic tracking on individuals' educational opportunities. This hinders low-income students from having access to college information and to be less prepared for college. Limited access to critical information is a great impediment to education (Um, 2003). Without the necessary information about higher education, college preparatory courses, and college admission, Hmong American students are left without the knowledge, information, and preparation to position themselves for academic advancement. Chhuon et al. (2010) found Cambodian students who were tracked into 'college-bound' programs and benefited by being more prepared for college. However they recognized other Cambodian Americans were mostly absent from their college preparatory classes, even though they represented a large share of the high school population. They stated, "Cambodian American students in their same school and community were largely absent in their daily academic routines, suggesting that the rich academic contexts from which they benefited in high school were unavailable to the majority of other Cambodian American peers" (p. 46). By being tracked into specific educational tracks, students are either positioned to have a successful transition to college or to disregard college as a viable option. This demonstrates the structural constraints of the American educational system which 'tracks' students into specific programs preparing them for vocational or college careers after high school.

The educational achievements of Asian Americans are also influenced structurally by societal stereotypes which categorizes them as being overly successful in education, even though research has found contradicting evidence invalidating the model minority myth (Choi & Lahey, 2006; P. Y. Kim & Lee, 2014; S. J. Lee, 2007; J. L. Lew, 2011; Ng, 2007; Ngo & Lee, 2007). In an ethnographic study of east coast Asian American high school students, Lee (1996) examined the model minority stereotype and its impact on students. In her study, she found students were

divided into four identity groups – Asian American, Asian, Korean, and Asian new wave - and each group had a unique reaction to the stereotype. While three of the groups (Asian American, Korean, and Asian new wave) believed the model minority stereotype was inaccurate, they all partially embraced it – some more than others. However, Asian identified students who associated primarily with Asian students aspired to live up to the model minority stereotype by investing in education. Furthermore, they expected other Asians to live up to the stereotype too. Asian identified students believed in hard work and though they recognized discrimination would limit their potential, “they did not challenge discrimination...instead they altered their expectations to fit what they perceived to be their opportunities” (S. J. Lee, 1996, p. 31).

In contrast, the Asian new wave group, made up of refugees from working class poor families rejected the model minority stereotype. New wave students did not see education as the key to success in the U.S. These students are the antithesis of the Asian model minority because they engage in a culture of resistance against Asian stereotypes by “making it their business to get around school rules and school work” (S. J. Lee, 1996, p. 35). This study demonstrated how a “relatively” positive stereotype can also have negative consequences exemplified by students actively engaging in activities to dispel the stereotype. Lee’s (1996) study illustrated the diverse and multifaceted complexities of the Asian American community. While one group wanted to achieve the model minority status, another group wanted to dismantle it. This demonstrates the influence of society’s perceptions, through stereotyping, had on Asian American students.

Living up to the model minority stereotype was a burden. Research on Chinese American first and second generation college students revealed some students benefited from the model minority stereotype (Louie, 2004). Higher achievers shared that being a good student was synonymous with their Chinese identities and consistent with societal expectations of them.

Participants suggested that the stereotype garnered them high expectations from their family, peers, and community. However, they also reported that their education overall was stressful because of the constant pressure to excel. The structure of the model minority stereotype, created only two outcomes: adherence to the stereotype or complete rejection. For Southeast Asian American students, the stereotype created a double perception— as high achievers or low achieving drop-outs (Ngo and Lee, 2007; Um, 2003; and Lee, 1996).

High school climate can either encourage or discourage the aspirations of high school students. Building on Bourdieu's social and cultural capital, McDonough (1997) illustrates how high schools often give different and unequal college resources that enable different outcomes. For example, Teranishi (2002) found overt and covert forms of racial stereotypes Chinese and Filipinos experienced in high school. These stereotypes influenced school climate and the interactions students had with school authorities. Chinese students reported being treated as model minority students with high academic expectations placed on them by teachers and counselors. Chinese students are encouraged to take college preparatory courses and received information about college. In contrast, Filipinos experienced negative stereotypes. They were perceived as gang members by school teachers and counselors, and subsequently were placed disproportionately in vocational courses. These courses put them at a disadvantage and did not prepare them for college. These different and often contradictory stereotypes of Asian Americans impacted their educational aspirations and made "it difficult for [Asian American Students] to create a positive self-image of their racial and ethnic identities" (Teranishi, 2002, p. 151). Chinese Americans were made to feel that they deserved college preparation and the opportunities that came with it. In contrast, Filipinos were sent signals of failure and delinquency that influenced their academic self-confidence. Similar to the self-fulfilling prophecy, school

climate and perceptions influenced their academic aspirations. The school climate structured the perceived options for Chinese and Filipinos, which yielded differential educational experiences and outcomes.

Similarly, Chhuon and Hudley's (2010) study on Cambodian American high school students found students and their high schools associated East Asian students with high achievement and academic motivation. Cambodian students were assumed to be poor, low achieving, and involved in crime. In addition, Cambodian students were largely absent in the college preparation academy. Of the few who participated, they, "were especially in a precarious position because they often had to straddle a double perception of their racial and ethnic group by staff and peers in school" (p. 348). The negative perceptions of Cambodian Americans created two groups: ethnic Cambodian and Cambodian identified students. Ethnic Cambodian identified students were fundamentally determined to do well in school despite the negative stigma attached to their ethnic group. Whereas Cambodian identified students, primarily male, responded to the negative perceptions and low expectations of their group by fulfilling those expectations instead of rejecting them. This demonstrates how social stereotypes creates barriers which impede students ability to be successful, because they are overlooked and misunderstood.

Studies on the impact of the model minority on Asian American students concludes that the model minority myth places Asian Americans in a position where they are either replicating a stereotype or dismantling it (S. J. Lee, 1996). This stereotype influences the high school climate and the interactions students have with school authorities (Chhuon, Hudley, et al., 2010; Teranishi, 2002). Social stereotypes are a means to discriminating against certain groups. Thus, the presence of discrimination faced by students influences the achievement and aspirations of SEA American students.

Similar to the unequal college resources provided to students, studies indicate minorities face discrimination in and outside the school which negatively influences their educational achievement. Lee (2001) found marginalized students who did not conform to the model minority stereotype believed racial discrimination was going to be a permanent facet of their lives. For some students, this led to the development of an oppositional culture (Ogbu, 1991) because they did not see the benefits of investing in education. This indicates social stereotypes can lead to a culture of structural barriers which work to impede students and communities from achieving upward social and economic mobility.

### **Lessons from the Literature**

Research provides evidence that students do not have similar access to the same resources to prepare for college and to make an informed college decision (McDonough, 1997). Literature on Asian American college choice demonstrates Asian Americans have nuanced factors which influence their educational achievement and aspirations. Many of these factors resemble the findings from larger college choice literature, like: gender, parental education, and SES that have an impact on educational achievement and attainment (Hossler et al., 1989; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hossler et al., 1999). However, there were a number of factors, which have not been identified in college choice literature like: differences by ethnicity, generation status, English language proficiency, cultural factors (e.g. role of family, community, and peers), and structural factors (e.g. institutional support or lack of and stereotypes). This illustrates the limitation of using a one-model fits all approach, such as Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) college choice model for all students.

In the few quantitative studies available on Hmong students', census data is predominately used to demonstrate the educational attainment gap, given the limited data



collected on Hmong students (Xiong, 2011). These studies all reflect census numbers, which indicate the educational attainment of the Hmong community, remains low and majority of the community continues to live in poverty. Other quantitative research on Hmong students are district school reports and select post-secondary institutions with high concentrations of Hmong students (i.e. Minneapolis/St. Paul, MN; Fresno, CA; Sacramento, CA; Hickory, NC; Green Bay, WI, and Madison, WI). In these reports, they provide descriptive statistics on enrollment and persistence rates but offer no deeper analysis of the numbers (M. Lee & Madyun, 2008; Pfiefer & Lee, 2004; C. T. Vang, 2004; H. Vang, 2004; Yang & Pfiefer, 2004). Therefore, the quantitative studies available on Hmong students are limited in quantity.

The qualitative studies on Asian American students focused primarily on high school students and how their environments (culturally and structurally) influenced their educational success (Chhuon & Hudley, 2010b; Chhuon, Hudley, et al., 2010; S. J. Lee, 1996, 2001, 2002). In these studies, students had tremendous difficulty dealing with social stereotypes which were applied onto them by schools administrators (Chhuon & Hudley, 2010a; Chhuon, Hudley, et al., 2010; S. J. Lee, 2005; Ngo, 2008; Ong, 2004; Pearce & Lin, 2007; Stritikus, 2007). Therefore resources to prepare students for college was provided only to select students who mirrored the appropriate image administrators believed would make them successful (Chhuon & Hudley, 2010a; Chhuon, Hudley, et al., 2010; Teranishi, 2002). More importantly, these studies illustrate how high school environments influence students desire to further their education by measuring their educational achievement, predominately by grade point averages. However, what we do not know from these studies is, of those who achieved educational success in high school, who actually went to college. It cannot be assumed that their success in high school would

automatically translate to college enrollment, especially if they do not have the support system inside and outside the home to encourage and foster the desire to go to college.

The majority of the research on Hmong American students utilized exploratory qualitative methods to understand the educational experiences of these students. These studies were often a master's theses and doctoral dissertations exploring the educational experiences of Hmong American students – ranging from high school to college experiences (Moua, 2007; Tabrizi, 2011; Vue, 2007; Yang, 2008). These dissertations were conducted in communities with large Hmong communities and included rather small sample sizes, ranging from 5-10 students. They found that Hmong students encountered many barriers to college success, however they were adamant and determined to go to college. One dissertation (Vue, 2007) focused on the experiences of Hmong women and found they often experienced cultural pressures to conform to traditional Hmong female roles. However, they utilized their cultural identities as sources of pride and passion to continue their schooling and often pooled together resources to support other Hmong female students. These dissertations provide a glimpse at the educational experiences of Hmong students'. However, due to the limited amount of research on Hmong students, these dissertations did not have much to draw from. Of research available on Hmong students, it is clear qualitative methods have been the most widely used and have provided the richest descriptions on the experiences of these students. It is not surprising most research on Hmong students is qualitative, since there is very little data available on Hmong Students to allow for a rich quantitative research study to be conducted.

In summary, this literature review reveals there is a scarce amount of research on the educational adjustments of Hmong Americans (M. Lee & Madyun, 2008; S. J. Lee, 1997, 2001, 2002, 2007; Xiong, 2011). There is almost no literature on the Hmong American college

students. Hence we know little about Hmong college students and do not understand how they are encouraged to further their education. Therefore, this study on Hmong American college students will help fill the void in the literature and give voice to a population which has been largely absent in college choice research.

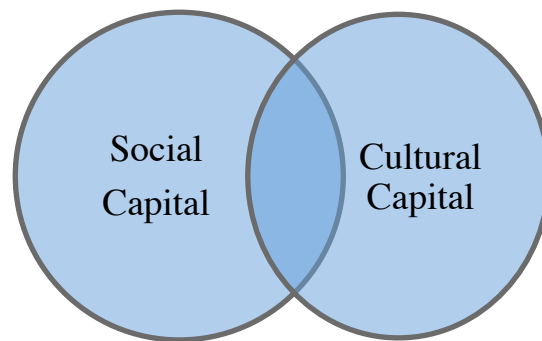
### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework is a tool used by researchers to guide academic inquiry (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Also known as a theoretical perspective or conceptual lens, a theoretical framework assists in determining variables and provides insight into relationships. When researchers select a framework, they make assumptions about what entities, variables, and relationships are important, and perhaps, which ones are not. Therefore, it is important that researchers challenge existing frameworks, compare and contrast conceptual models and explore new ways of understanding new and existing problems.

This study utilized social and cultural capital theory as the framework to understand the factors influencing Hmong Americans' predispositions to go to college. This theoretical framework is grounded in the literature describing Asian American predispositions, as an aspect of aspirations/achievement and from theory and research on college choice. Earlier in this chapter, economic and sociological perspectives were discussed as they pertain to college choice. From the economic perspective, via human capital research, we learned students make the decision to go to college by considering costs and expected earnings when making college choices. Students with more financial need were more likely to have increased barriers because they are more sensitive to college costs. In addition, we learned it is critical to consider the significant role costs and financial aid have on low-income students and their decision of whether or not to go to college. From the sociological perspective, we learned about the

influence of parents, SES, aspirations, and social and cultural capital on the college choice process. While social and cultural capital was discussed as two separate concepts, it is important to understand they are not mutually exclusive and share similar traits, which often overlap one another (see Figure 2). For example, the cultural capital an individual accumulates is received/given from someone in their social network. Therefore, it is important to think of the two forms of capital as interrelated concepts which often encompass one another.

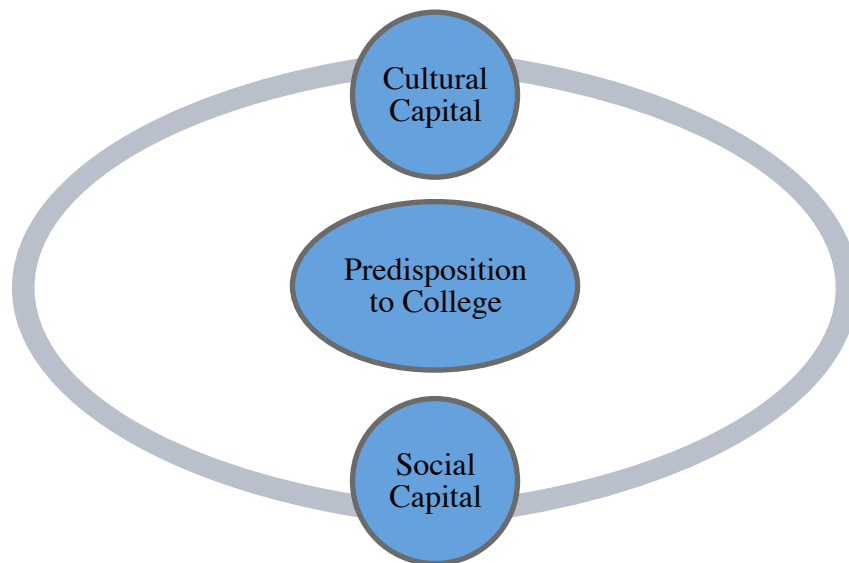
**Figure 2. Relationship of Social and Cultural Capital**



Literature on cultural and social capital indicates capital is influential on an individual's predisposition towards college. Figure 3 illustrates how cultural and social capital contribute to the development of individuals' predispositions to college, mainly by creating educational aspirations and achievement. Cultural capital provides an individual with the knowledge and know-how about importance of college and how to prepare for it. However, not all individuals will have access to the same types of information and will prepare for college. The information individuals receive will depend on their social network, which is why cultural capital and social capital are interconnected. Social capital provides a network of relationships which instill the proper encouragement and navigational skill to an individual. Their social network in essence influences their norms and values, which inform their everyday habits. These networks help students aspire to plan for and successfully go college. For individuals without access to

individuals with college experience, are left to navigate the process alone and often without any knowledge on the next steps. Therefore, they do not have the privilege of having cultural capital to build upon and rely on getting this information elsewhere. Hence, social and cultural capital is both influential to an individual's predisposition towards college by having direct and indirect affect on students' college aspirations and achievement.

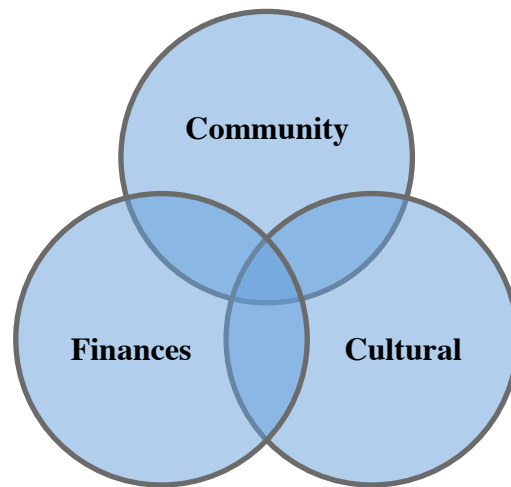
**Figure 3. Relationship of Social and Cultural Capital on the Predisposition to go to College**



In addition to the influence social and cultural capital has on the predisposition to college, it is important to consider the major factors reviewed above. The literature review discussion is summarized in into three categories: Cultural, Finances, and Community. These three categories depict how research has described the educational experiences of Asian Americans (see Figure 4). Cultural factors reflect how personal characteristics in families influence students' educational pathways. Included in this is the dual role and influence parents have in encouraging students to invest in an education and the stress students experience from the parental pressure to excel. In addition, cultural factors also include the intergenerational cultural gaps experienced by

students and their families, especially as it surrounds gender, which challenge students to live in dual worlds, which are often not congruent with one another.

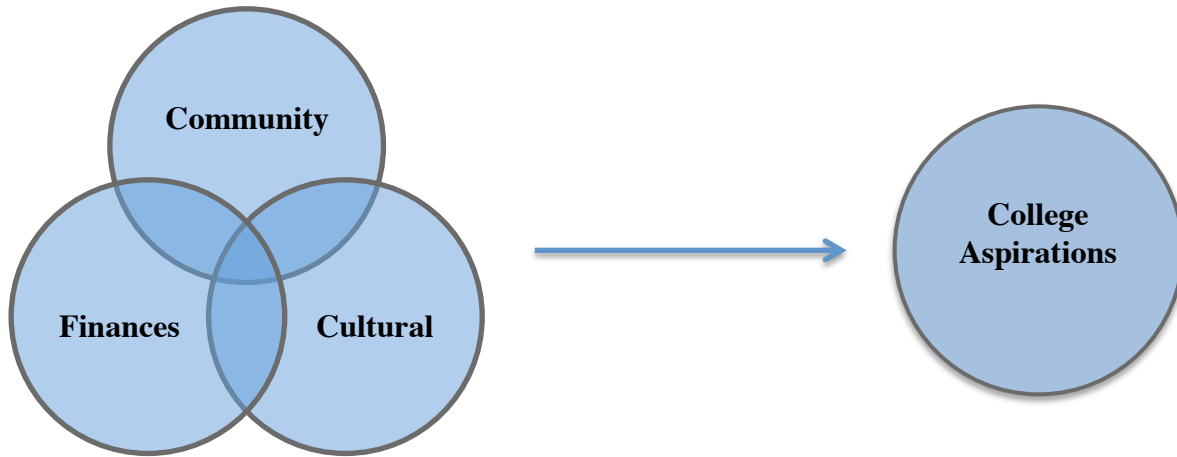
**Figure 4. Summary of Factors Influencing Asian American Aspirations and Achievement**



Finances focus on the concerns of costs and impact of student aid, highlighted partially in the economic perspective of college choice and the literature on low-income students. The financial need of these students have a powerful effect on whether an individual goes to college because they are not sure how they will afford a college education (St John, 2001). In addition, concerns about college costs have a critical influence on a students college process. Therefore it is important to understand the connection between family finances and financial need because it influences students' college process. This is discussed specifically in literature on low-income Asian American communities, which have found low-income Asian American student and families, who have financial need, are mostly concerned with college costs and debt accumulation (Hune, 2002; S. J. Lee, 2006; Teranishi & Tchen, 2009). Hence it is not surprising Asian American enrollment at public 2 year colleges is increasing at a faster rate than public 4-year colleges (CARE, 2008).

Lastly, community factors include the role of high schools and community agents in supporting or discouraging educational achievement and attainment among Asian American students. This is mostly due to larger social stereotypes on Asian Americans, which impact their understanding of the needs of Asian American students. Community refers to constituents outside the school and family that influence a student's educational trajectory. For example, in St. John, Hu, and Fisher's (2010) book, *Breaking through the access barrier*, they conceptualize academic capital formation, defined as "social processes that build family knowledge of educational and career options and support their navigation through educational systems and professional organizations" (pg. 1). They examine three successful reform initiatives that have a record of success in improving academic preparation, enrollment, and attainment of first generation students. These programs helped ease concerns about college costs by providing aid guarantees. This allowed students and their families to focus on building academic capital that would allow them to navigate the college process. Through the support of these programs, students gained new social networks and cultural capital that allowed them to become successful. Research highlights the significant influence encouragement programs have had on the educational success of first generation students. Therefore, while the literature on Hmong students (and SEA students) does not discuss the benefits of college encouragement programs, it is important to address how similar programs influence the educational pathways of Hmong students. Together, these three factors: Cultural, Finances, and Community influence the development of college aspirations for Asian American students (see Figure 5 for visual depiction).

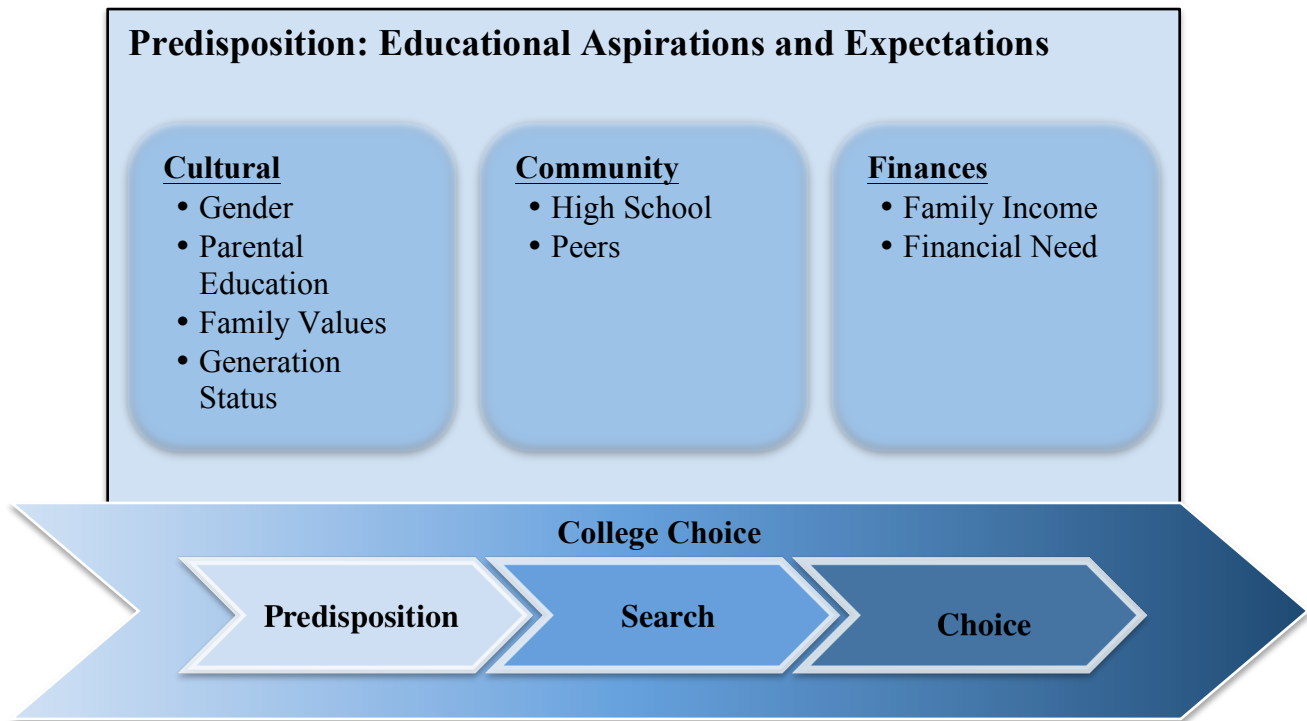
**Figure 5. College Aspirations: Influential Factors**



These three factors were used as the core for this study's conceptual framework. This framework was the guide for this study aimed at finding the answer to the research questions of this study. The following figure illustrates how I saw the concepts, drawn from the previous literature, relate to one another (see Figure 6). This framework was developed after completing a thorough examination of the theoretical underpinnings of college choice and reviewing the literature on Asian/SEA American students. At the core of the figure are the three major factors identified in literature as being influential on the development of Asian American educational aspirations and expectations: cultural, community, and finances.



**Figure 6. Conceptual Framework: Hmong American Predisposition to College**



### **Chapter 3. Methodology**

This chapter outlines the methodology used to understand the college decision process for Hmong students. Specifically, this chapter begins by elaborating on the central research question presented in Chapter 1 and discusses the sub-questions which are the focus of this study. Next, this chapter will provide an overview of the research approach utilized to address the research question. Following the research approach, there will be a discussion on the pilot study which informed the data collection and analytic strategies used in this study. This chapter will conclude with a consideration of the main limitations of the study.

#### **Aim of Study**

The aim of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of Hmong American college students' decision process to go to college and their college experiences. Despite a rigorous search of the literature, I was unable to identify research which directly explored the college choice process of Hmong students. This was in part due to college choice literature commonly leaving out Asian Americans in their studies since aggregate Asian American success demonstrated their achievement was equal to if not outpacing that of White students. The minimal research on Hmong Americans and Southeast Asian Americans focused on the barriers and challenges facing this community in the K-12 system. There was dearth of literature on Hmong Americans that pertained to college choice.

Likewise, despite the evidence which indicated students with different levels of social and cultural capital experience the college choice process differently, there was not an adequate body of empirical studies which linked student's ethnic/racial background and experiences to

how they approach the college choice process. For Hmong American students, it is important to understand their educational pathways and identify ways to improve the educational attainment rates of this community. With over 30% of the community in 2010, with less than a high school education and less than 15% with a bachelor's degree, it is critical to examine the needs of this community in order to address the existing educational gaps (U.S. Census, 2010). In light of these issues, I identified three main purposes of this study. The first purpose was to explore how Hmong college students navigated the college choice process. The second was to understand the factors, which positively influence the process for Hmong students. And finally, to identify the major barriers faced by Hmong college students.

### **Research Approach**

To understand the college decision process for Hmong students, I used a qualitative research method to collect and analyze data. The strength of qualitative research is its ability to provide an account of the means by which individual outcomes are achieved by considering both environmental context and participant meaning. As mentioned earlier, research indicated there were barriers to educational access and success. There were only a few studies which looked at *how* successful students navigated the pathway to college. For this reason, a qualitative study and approach was imperative because it would allow the researcher to explore, understand and explain the social phenomenon of going to college in the Hmong community. In addition, this approach allowed me to, as Bodgan and Biklen (1991) state, "better understand [their] human behavior and experience...[and] seek to grasp the process by which people construct meaning" (p. 38). Through the use of qualitative research methods, I gained a richness in responses which would have been difficult to achieve if I had used a quantitative method of inquiry (Patton, 1990). Additionally, the use of qualitative methods allowed me to better understand the

educational experiences of these students since they are understudied and not understood. As Ritchie and Lewis (2003) put it, “qualitative research explores the broader context within which change takes place...captures the full set of factors that participants perceive as contributing to change or [the] outcome” (p. 54).

The study employed a phenomenological qualitative research method to explain the meaning of a social phenomenon, with as little disruption of the natural setting as possible (Merriman, 1998). Phenomenology is a school of thought which underpins all of qualitative research and draws from the emphasis on experience and interpretation (Merriman, 1998, p. 15). Phenomenology focuses on the structure/essence of an experience (phenomenon) that is based on the assumption that there is an essence or essences to a shared experience that are the core meanings mutually understood through a phenomenon commonly experienced (Patton, 1990). Miles and Huberman (1994) point out two additional features of qualitative research. First, the employment of qualitative research can help a researcher to advance his or her study from a conceptual stage to the development and revision of conceptual frameworks. Second, they assert that the voices of informants recorded in a qualitative study can become useful information for future research, policymaking, and practice.

### **Pilot Testing**

With little empirical research on this community, it was imperative to complete a pilot study to identify and understand the complexities a full study would entail. Weiss (1995) suggests a minimum of three or four pilot interviews are needed in order to maximize the benefits of a pilot study. With this in mind, I conducted a pilot study in the Summer of 2010 with five female Hmong college students enrolled at two midwestern<sup>18</sup> state colleges. Participants

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<sup>18</sup> To protect the anonymity of participants, their names and their institutions were all assigned pseudonyms.

were recruited through communication with Hmong student organizations on their respective campuses. The pilot study demonstrated that recruiting participants through Hmong American student organizations on college campuses was a successful method because it provided the best central communication with Hmong students on each campus. With each participant, I completed a one-hour semi-structured interview and utilized this opportunity to test and refine my protocol. The pilot interviews were transcribed, coded, and analyzed (as completed in the full study). The results of this pilot study were published as a book chapter in *Readings on Equal Education* (M. Lee & St. John, 2012).

I learned three very important things from the pilot test. First, I was unable to recruit any male participants, which indicated that the recruitment of male students would likely be difficult. In consultation with my advisor and colleagues, I was recommended to oversample male students since I had a hard time recruiting them for the pilot study. Second, conducting a study in the summer would not yield large numbers, as most students were not enrolled in classes during the summer. And lastly, I learned that participants were excited to share their stories with me and were especially interested in participating in a study which addressed their experiences directly. These lessons proved to be helpful and provided insight for my full study.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

To participate in the study, participants had to meet a specific set of criteria. For this study, the criteria was: they had to self identify as a Hmong<sup>19</sup> undergraduate student, be enrolled at a 4-year institution in a select midwestern state, and be willing to share their story about their college pathway. The specific criteria included students who enrolled at a community college

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<sup>19</sup> I used the term Hmong here instead of Hmong American to accurately reflect the self-identification of participants, as some participants did not refer to themselves as Hmong American. This was particularly the case for Hmong students who recently immigrated to the United States in the mid 1990's and self-identified as Hmong only.

initially after high school and transferred to a four-year institution. I interviewed participants who were in their first year to last year as undergraduates because it captured the experience of a range of students.

**Recruiting Informants.** Recruiting informants beyond the five participants in the pilot study proved to be challenging, therefore I used multiple recruiting methods to find participants for the full study. Initial recruiting was aimed at Hmong American Student Associations at four-year colleges in the selected Midwestern state. This method of recruitment proved to be successful in the pilot study because it provided an opportunity to reach a group of Hmong college students. In addition, a formal Hmong Student Organization meant there was an adequate concentration of Hmong students on each respective college campus to form a student organization. For this reason, colleges with Hmong Student organizations were the initial focus of recruitment. I searched the respective Office of Student Organizations websites of every 4 year institution in the state and identified five registered Hmong student organizations. With this information, I contacted each student organization leadership team via the email listed on their website and their staff/faculty advisor. The email (see Appendix C) defined the purpose of the study, its goals of the study, a call for participants and my contact information.

The initial contact with student organizations resulted in three outcomes. First, student organization presidents acknowledged my email and forwarded my email to their membership list. Second, staff and faculty advisors thanked me for reaching out to them and asked the respective student organization president to support my study. Third, I was invited to and attended one membership meeting for three organizations in the Fall of 2011. At these meetings, I discussed my study and left my information for participants to contact me if they were

interested in the study. These meetings provided participants with an opportunity to ask questions and sign up. Through student organizations, I recruited 12 participants for my study.

After attending the student organization meetings, I learned not all Hmong college students on each respective campus participated in these organizations. The organization served a cultural and social purpose for members Hmong and non-Hmong to explore and learn from one another. This made initial recruitment a challenge because there was no obvious method to contact all Hmong students on each respective campus. This was not exposed to me in the pilot study because I conducted it over the summer. I spoke to participants who informed me the number of Hmong college students enrolled at each of their respective college had dwindled over the years, which impacted their membership numbers. This presented a challenge because the number of Hmong college students was not very large to begin with. This made the initial round of recruiting difficult since there was not a large number of centralized Hmong college student to recruit from. Therefore, I could not rely solely on student organizations as the primary method of recruitment, as I had originally planned from the pilot study, because it would result in substantial numbers. Hence, I utilized three additional methods of recruiting with the hope of reaching individuals not affiliated with the student organization on campus.

In an effort to contact students who may not be involved in the student organization, I contacted community organizations, which worked and interacted with the Hmong communities. This provided me with the opportunity to attend and be engaged in community meetings and gatherings where I could share information about my study and post recruiting flyers (Appendix E) on community bulletin boards and handed them out. This also allowed parents and community members to hear about my study and become more familiar with me. Unfortunately, this method did not yield any additional participants. However, this method was helpful in

spreading the word among parents and the community. In addition, through my interaction and engagement with community organizations, I was identified as a resource for parents and the community and was contacted by parents specifically to provide guidance and assistance with the college process for their high school aged children. This provided me with direct insight into how families utilized their networks to obtain information for their children.

Secondly, I searched the five college directories that had formalized Hmong Student Organizations for common Hmong surnames such as Thao, Xiong, Vang, Hang, Moua, Vue, Kue, Lor, Lo, Cha, Chang and contacted students directly via their listed university email address. This proved successful and resulted in a successful yield, with over a 70% response rate from participants (15 participants) I contacted directly. Interestingly, many participants who responded to my emails already heard of the study from family and friends who were present at earlier community meetings and gatherings I attended. So when I reached out, they were happy to participate. Therefore, my attendance at these meetings and gatherings further validated my trustworthiness among participants, which in turn resulted in an increased response rate to my emails.

Lastly, I utilized a snowball sampling technique to recruit an additional seven participants for the study. This is also known as a networking approach, which enables the researcher to solicit participants through referrals from existing interviewees. This technique gives the research additional credibility due to the nature of the referral. This was helpful because participants identified individuals they knew would be interested and was a resource to individuals who had questions about the interview and study.

**Data Collection.** As mentioned, this qualitative study utilized a phenomenological approach. Phenomenological studies require detailed information about participants' experience



with the phenomenon (going to college) under study (Creswell, 1998; Moustakes, 1994). Creswell (1998) notes the most important tenant of data collection in qualitative studies is to describe the meaning of the experience for a number of individuals. This requires the collection of thorough interviews. Interviews are an appropriate method of data collection because they provided, “detailed investigation of people’s personal perspectives, for in-depth understanding of the personal contexts within which the research phenomena are located, and for detailed subject coverage” (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, p. 36). The key feature of in-depth individual interviews are their depth of focus on the individual which provides the opportunity for a detailed investigation of their personal perspective and experience. In addition, interviews “give participants a direct and explicit opportunity to convey their own meanings and interpretations through the explanations they provide” (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, p. 57).

Data for the study was collected through semi-structured interviews, made up of open-ended questions as suggested by Patton (1990). The main advantage of semi-structured interviews are they ensure individuals interviewed were asked similar questions while at the same time allowing for flexibility in probes and the use of additional questions (Patton, 2002). The interview protocol (see Appendix B) was structured to obtain information about college choice experiences of Hmong American college students. The protocol was grounded in the literature review with the first two sections focused on the identification of factors, which influenced college going. The third section focused on their college choice process and was the section where I probed participants the most. The remainder of the protocol was framed around understanding their current college experience and gathered their opinions about the status of the Hmong community and educational attainment.

Interviews lasted sixty to ninety minutes, which allowed enough time for participants to discuss issues in depth (Stage & Manning, 2003). To ensure participants were in a comfortable space, interviews occurred on their respective campuses, usually in one of the on-campus libraries or a nearby public library. This allowed interviews to be held in a location which was familiar and neutral to participants. After completion of each interview, participants were provided a \$10 gift card for their participation. Electronic gift cards were distributed after completion of each interview and sent to each student by email. The majority of communication with participants occurred via email, therefore it worked well to use their emails as the distribution of gift cards.

Data collection consisted of three phases: a pre-interview demographic survey (Appendix F), semi-structured interviews, and researcher reflections. Before each scheduled interview, participants were asked to fill out an online demographic survey (Appendix G), which included questions about their current year in college, major, and parental educational levels. The survey provided me with important information about the participant before the interview and was beneficial because I was able to become familiar with the participant before meeting them.

I utilized the first ten to fifteen minutes of the interview to review the study with each participant, we went over the Consent Form (see Appendix A), I collected a signed consent form, and answered any questions participants had for me. The interview started after I collected the consent form and turned on the audio recorder. At the end of the interview, which lasted approximately 60 minutes to 90 minutes, I turned off the audio recorder and thanked the participants for their time. After each participant left, I documented my reflections on the interview, which assisted me in capturing initial themes I had heard. Also referred to as memoing, this allowed me to document my reflections, additional questions I had, comments on

the interview, and to explore possible themes in the interview. Merriman (1998) states that memoing allows the researcher to “[keep] track of your thoughts, speculations, and hunches as [the researcher is] engaged in analysis” (p. 165). The process of memo writing gave me the opportunity to track ideas and ensured I captured my thoughts. This was especially helpful when data analysis got more complex because I was able to refer to the memos to refresh my memory on my thoughts after each interview.

One minor adjustment was made to the protocol after the first five interviews, which had an impact on data collection. Initially, I made a conscious decision not to share my educational experience with participants because I did not want my experience to influence their narratives. However, I recognized my formal approach with participants, keeping my experience isolated from theirs, resulted in surface level conversations. It was apparent participants held back and were reluctant to tell me their ‘whole’ stories. They offered me generic answers and avoided giving specific details on their experiences. After reflection, through memoing, I realized I needed to focus on building rapport with participants in order for them to trust me with their narratives. Therefore, I made an adjustment to my protocol and spent the first 10-15 minutes before the interview providing additional information about my educational pathway and why I chose to study the educational experiences of Hmong students. I noticed an immediate change in participants’ demeanor after I provided a short personal narrative about myself. It helped me develop rapport with participants. I no longer felt participants were choosing not to tell me their whole story. It was very common for participants to converse with me for an additional 20-30 minutes after the protocol/interview was completed. This demonstrated participants appreciated the reciprocal relationship I developed with them by eliminating the formality of the interview

protocol. It was apparent, they would share their experiences with me as long as I shared my experiences with them too.

### **Participants**

The study was designed with the goal of conducting 30 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with an equal gender distribution. Even though I purposely oversampled male students, I was only able to recruit five male college students to participate. I was, however, able to successfully conduct interviews with twenty-nine females. In total, thirty-four individuals were interviewed for this study. Almost two thirds of participants (70.6%) were first generation college students, meaning neither parent went to college (see Table 1). Participants attended five different four-year institutions of which, three were mid-size regional colleges/universities (two public and one private) and two were large public research universities. All participants were enrolled full time at their respective colleges and were evenly split between attending a mid-size regional institution and a large research university. Roughly 35% of the sample was in their first or second year of college, compared to over 60% of students in their third to fifth year of college. Detailed participant information can be found in Appendix H.

As for self-reported income, participants came from families with average incomes below \$50,000 and came from homes with five to 12 household members, averaging 4.8 members. In 2010, the average Hmong family household was 5.2, compared to the national average of 2.5 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). This demonstrates the sample had a similar household sizes in comparison to the overall Hmong population. In terms of self-reported family income, compared to the overall Hmong population in 2010, the sample reflects a larger percentage of lower income families than higher income families (see Table 5). While the study was conducted in 2011, the

sample is consistent with the family income distribution of the Hmong population in 2000. This means the study may have inadvertently screened out participants from higher income families.

**Table 4. Study Participant Basic Characteristics (n=34)**

|   |  |     |        |
|---|--|-----|--------|
| Gender                                  | <i>Females</i>                         | 29  | 85.3%  |
|   | <i>Males</i>                           | 5   | 14.7%  |
| Average Age                             |  | 22  |        |
| Average Household Size                  |  | 4.8 |        |
| Type of Institution                     | <i>Large Research University</i>       | 17  | 50.0%  |
|   | <i>Mid-size regional University</i>    | 17  | 50.0%  |
| Year in College                         | <i>1st</i>                             | 6   | 17.6%  |
|   | <i>2nd</i>                             | 6   | 17.6%  |
|   | <i>3rd</i>                             | 11  | 32.4%  |
|   | <i>4th</i>                             | 7   | 20.6%  |
|   | <i>5th</i>                             | 4   | 11.8%  |
| First generation College Student*       |  | 24  | 70.6%  |
| First in College**                      |  | 4   | 11.8%  |
| Went to college right after High School |  | 33  | 97.1%  |
| Enrolled Full-Time                      |  | 34  | 100.0% |
| Living Arrangement                      | <i>Live with Parents/Family</i>        | 13  | 38.2%  |
|   | <i>Live on on-campus/own apartment</i> | 21  | 61.8%  |

\* Parent did not go to college

\*\* First in family to go to college.

**Table 5. Self-Reported Family Income: Sample compared to overall U.S. Hmong Community**

| Self-reported Family Income | Study Sample* | Overall Hmong Population <sup>20</sup> |       |
|-----------------------------|---------------|--|-------|
|                             |               | 2000                                   | 2010  |
| Below \$24,999              | 33.0%         | 38.9%                                  | 24.3% |
| \$25,000-49,999             | 36.0%         | 34.8%                                  | 30.0% |
| \$50,000-74,999             | 18.0%         | 16.7%                                  | 21.0% |
| \$75,000-100,000            | 6.0%          | 6.3%                                   | 13.1% |
| \$100,000                   | 6.0%          | 3.2%                                   | 11.6% |

\*Sample reflects 33 students, as one student responded with 'Don't know' for Family income.

<sup>20</sup> U.S. Census Bureau (2000 and 2010)

## **Data Analytic Techniques**

Merriman (1998) states, “data analysis is a complex process that involves moving back and forth between concrete bits of data and abstract concepts, between inductive and deductive reasoning, between description and interpretation” (p. 178). It is for this reason, findings are represented in different forms: descriptive accounts, themes/categories, and axial coding. Each of these data analytic forms reflects different levels of analysis, which vary from concrete simple descriptions to abstractions in theory construction.

Initial data analysis began during the transcription of interviews. Of the 34 interviews, I transcribed 25% and the rest of the interviews were professionally transcribed. As I transcribed each interview, I kept reflective memos on the themes I heard as they related to participants college choice experiences. These memos were compared to the memos I had after each interview. Additionally, all professional transcription was reviewed carefully to ensure each interview was captured accurately. Once a transcript was confirmed to be accurate, the file was uploaded into NVivo to be analyzed.

The first round of data analysis began with descriptive accounts of the participants’ experiences, through open coding. This allowed me to not lose sight of individual experiences while becoming immersed in the data. Open codes (Strauss, 1987, p. 59) are created through the reading of the texts themselves, and not based on using "pre-established" categories of analysis (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995, p. 152). For open coding, I read students’ transcripts with an eye toward identifying the components of interviews relevant to college choice. Additionally, open coding is considered a brainstorming approach to analysis because it opens the data up to all potentials and possibilities contained in the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This helped ensure

the coding was based upon what was actually said by the participants and not by the researcher's inherent biases.

During the open coding process, I utilized a peer-debriefer to enhance credibility of the study. The peer-debriefer provided an opportunity for intensive and in-depth discussion about codes. Lincoln and Guba (1985) asserts there are four purposes of peer-debriefing. First, the process helps keep the researcher honest by probing for meaning, bias, and understanding. Second, it provides an opportunity to test working hypothesis which emerge in the researchers' mind. Third, it provides an opportunity for the researcher to develop and test next steps in the research design. And lastly, it provides researchers with an opportunity to talk about their ideas, thoughts and repressed feelings to achieve some relief. For these positive benefits, it was crucial to utilize a peer-debriefer to ensure validity and trustworthiness to my analysis and findings.

My peer-debriefer reviewed six transcripts, 17.6% of the total 34 interviews in my study. Each of these transcripts was selected purposefully to reflect a range of narratives. The first set of interviews was selected because they offered rich narratives which reflected themes across all participants. The second set of interviews was selected because their narratives offered a contrast to majority of participants in the study and I needed another researchers' perspective on how to address the differences in experiences. The last set of interviews selected had different background characteristics which were not included in the two earlier set of interviews, to ensure my codes reflected the sample accurately.

My peer-debriefer conducted open codes on each transcript. In the peer-debriefing meetings, we shared our respective open codes, compared, and discussed our codes. The peer-debriefer asked probing questions about initial codes and analysis which offered me an opportunity to justify my coding schemes and findings. The questioning approach served to

minimize bias within the inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) because it helped limit my bias. More importantly, the peer-debriefer contributed to the confirmation and disconfirmation of my findings and interpretations. This process revealed new insights about the data, which was later consolidated into categories and themes for this study. Additionally, I shared emergent themes and categories with my peer-debriefer once I completed open coding and launched into the axial coding process. My peer-debriefer provided their own insights on my initial themes, based on the transcripts they read and coded. This process of cross-validation and the challenging of my interpretations bolstered the trustworthiness of my analysis and interpretations.

The second round of data analysis began with category construction which categorized open codes around important themes and relationships (Emerson et al., 1995; Strauss, 1987). This is also referred to as axial coding. At this level, categories were conceptual elements which covered or spanned many individuals. Weiss (1995) states, “the idea in coding is to link what the respondent says in his or her interview to the concepts and categories that will appear in the report” (p. 154). All open codes generated from interview transcripts were carefully reread, sorted, and organized to create subsuming categories which described the key findings that addressed the study’s research questions. These categories were created through a constant comparative method of data analysis which created distinct and separated categories that accurately captured the essence of students’ narratives.

### **Validity**

Merriman (1998) states, “it is assumed that meaning is embedded in people’s experiences and that this meaning is mediated through the investigator’s own perceptions.” As the primary research instrument to collect and analyze data, it is important I acknowledge my subjectivity as I bring personal assumptions and presuppositions to the analysis of data. (p. 6). For this reason,



as the researcher I need to be upfront about my biases because they could permeate the meanings constructed in the data. As such, I disclose my own background to provide context on the conceptions which shape my perspectives.

I am a first generation college student and second generation Hmong American. As a first generation college student, I was among a handful of students at my high school to go to college and this has always haunted me. I always wondered why I was among the few students to graduate from high school and go to college. As a doctoral student, I have always been interested in learning and exploring the experiences of Hmong American students and took this opportunity to investigate an area of research that has not been addressed in literature. I acknowledged that my membership in the Hmong American community can be beneficial and/or a hindrance to this study. While my identity and experience can help create rapport with participants, my experience could create inherent biases, which could impact the interpretation of results. Therefore, I was very conscientious to not interject my experience onto the narratives of participants.

As the first female in my (immediate and larger extended) family to go to college, I bring a strong feminist stance to data collection and analysis. I have been involved in debates about gender roles in the community and I personally believe feminism and feminist pedagogies are positive contributors to shaping perspectives and values. I do not believe the community has fully recognized or addressed gender inequities. As a result, I am more sensitive to gender issues, especially as they relate to educational attainment and success.

Over the course of data collection and analysis, I was very conscious and tried my best to be alert to my subjectivities. While I do not believe I could eliminate my sensitivities and perspectives, I constantly acknowledged and managed them throughout the data collection and

analysis processes. Therefore, I disclosed my inherent subjectivities to my peer-debriefer to ensure I was checked and my biases were challenged.

### **Research Ethics**

The highest ethical standard was maintained in this study. Prior to conducting interviews, approval was sought and received from the University of Michigan Institutional Review Board (IRB). All participants were informed of study's purpose, their participation was entirely voluntary, and they were told they could withdraw from the interview at anytime. All participants signed the consent form agreeing to participate in the study and their approval to be audio recorded. Participants were aware they could request the audiotaping be stopped and the recorder would be turned off immediately.

In addition, to ensure complete anonymity of participants, a systematic approach was developed to assign a five-digit number to participants the moment they indicated interest in participating in the study. Documents with true names (i.e. consent forms and surveys) was sorted and stored in a separate file and cabinet to ensure information remained anonymous. Participants were offered the opportunity to select a pseudonym for themselves. However, no one opted to select one. All audio files were saved under their assigned five-digit number. In addition, pseudonyms were assigned after interviews were transcribed providing two levels of anonymity (a five digit number and a pseudonym).

### **Limitations**

As with all research, there were a number of limitations that should be kept in mind when interpreting the findings of this study. This study examined the college decision process for Hmong Americans attending four-year institutions in a midwestern state. Therefore, results of this study are not necessarily generalizable to the larger Hmong American community since it

was focused in a specific geographic region in the United States. Although the goal of this study and qualitative research was not to seek generalizable findings (Merriman, 1998), some may consider this a limitation. However, the strength and value of using a qualitative method for this study is its ability to provide in-depth information on the college pathway for Hmong students. Therefore, this study and its results should still be relevant to other Hmong American students.

This study required participants to be reflective and retrospective. They were required to use their memory to recall their past experiences and describe their decision to go to college. Because they had to rely on their memory to reconstruct original experiences, including their perceptions of those experiences, this can be considered a limitation to the study. In addition, with over 60% of participants in their third to fifth year of college, these students may be less able to remember their past experiences in detail. Consequently, participants' recollections of past experiences may not accurately reflect the actual experiences they had. The quality of data is limited to the participants' ability to be reflective about their pathway to college.

Similar to the pilot study, the same challenge of recruiting male participants presented itself again. The recruitment of male Hmong student participants proved to be difficult and resulted in few male participants. I asked the five male participants in the study to provide perspective on why males may be less inclined to participate. I was told unanimously, "Males are just not interested in talking about themselves". I also inquired about how to recruit more male students and was told, "I'm not sure how you can because most Hmong males just don't feel the need to participate." I then asked why they choose to participate and was told that they were intrigued by the topic and wanted to talk about their experiences and take part in a study they felt was very important. As a result, this study was predominantly a female study. While the

recruitment of males for this study was a challenge, the five participants who are in the study, provide some key insight into the Hmong male college experience.

The last limitation of this study is the use of college students instead of high school students who are thinking about or are in the process of applying for college. With a focus on college students, the study depended on the memory of college students to reflect back on their experiences when they applied to college. While it would have been beneficial to use high school students instead of college students for this study, I choose college students because they have already successfully navigated the educational system. Thus this study is not able to address the challenges faced by Hmong Students who did not go to college. Future studies may want to consider a longitudinal study of Hmong American high school students as they go through the college going process, to understand the factors that influence and prevent college attendance. Despite these limitations, the distinct experiences identified by participants in this study have implications for future research and policy development.

#### **Chapter 4. Predispositions: The Role of Family and Culture on the Pathway to College**

This chapter examines Hmong students' predispositions towards college. Predispositions are defined in the college choice process as "a developmental phase in which students determine whether or not they would like to continue their education beyond high school" (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987, p. 209). Predispositions include background characteristics such as parental education and socioeconomic status, attitudes of parents and peers, organizational characteristics such as high school curriculum, and individual characteristics such as student involvement and leadership opportunities. Subsequently, aspirations for college serve as an entry point for students to plan for college. A review of students' narratives in this study revealed their Hmong culture and family had an important and critical role in developing their predispositions towards college.

First, this chapter will examine how families' culture via their history, experiences, and expectations instill a sense of responsibility to family and community in these participants. These responsibilities challenged participants to find ways to sustain family loyalties in the midst of conflicting values, specifically the American value of individualism versus Hmong values that stress the collective with an emphasis on family and community. This will be followed with a discussion of participants' primary motivation for going to college, which is tied to family expectations, and encouragement for post-secondary attainment. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how these findings extend our understanding of Hmong American students' pathway to college.

### **A Balancing Act: Conflicting Values/Dueling Priorities**

Student narratives revealed that they were often challenged with having to negotiate their identities as Hmong and Americans. As students in an American education system and children in Hmong families, participants experienced a radically different socio-cultural context from the one in which their primary worldview had been developed. Hmong culture revolves around the family and adheres to cultural customs that reflect strict gender roles and undisputed acceptance for elder rules. In comparison, American culture values individuality and independence. This creates conflict for Hmong students when their Hmong and American values disagree and creates competing priorities and confusion for participants as they try to manage and negotiate between their dual identities.

Student narratives revealed students were often faced with trying to balance family expectations with their own personal aspirations. Participants were confronted with the difficult task of negotiating when to assert their independence to better align themselves with their personal interest while also maintaining the dreams and aspirations their parents and families had for them. Participants reported having to balance conflicting priorities in three major areas: (1) their own personal identity, (2) selecting a college major, and (3) college choice.

#### **Dual Identities**

In chapter two, a brief discussion of bi-cultural identities was presented to address how students learned to manage having more than one identity. Bi-cultural individuals are tasked with having to find balance between their identities which is complicated when they are at odds.

Respondents spoke often about the challenges of being a part of two distinct cultures and how it impacted their perspectives. Underlying this challenge was the belief that they did not fit

into either one identity completely. Sheng, a fourth year student majoring in Clinical Exercise, shared her experience growing up Hmong American. Sheng said,

I am more into my American side. Like, the thing is that I separate my life so, when I am here at school and work [I'm more American] but when I am at home, then its Hmong and my family. That's how I deal with it. I don't feel like it ever merges, only once when we just started a club (cultural student organization) and that's the only place where the Hmong culture actually touches my college life. I don't think [they can be one], they are just separate.

Her reflection described how she operates everyday with the conscious separation of identities at school/work and home. The need to separate her identities demonstrates how they do not fit together. When asked to elaborate on why she was more into her American side, she indicated,

I'm born in America and how I view the world, uhm, is more American than my Hmong side. I am Hmong too, but uhm, like I feel like my Hmong side is a little old school, like they see girls as more domestic and I don't agree with that.

Sheng's perspective illustrates her disagreement with the Hmong cultures patriarchal practices. Hence she feels some disconnection with her Hmong identity. Being a part of two cultures that offer different perspectives on gender roles has given her the opportunity and constraint to choose among them. However, while she felt more American, she remained attached to her Hmong identity even though she disagreed with some of their perspectives and practices. Sheng's experience highlights how participants negotiate their identities and at times choose one identity over another.

Participants spoke about how their lack of representation on campus made them feel less Hmong because they did not meet others like them or discuss their Hmong identity. Anna, a third

year student majoring in Medical Technology, reflected on the impact of not having many Hmong students on campus,

I identify myself as American, but I still know I am still Hmong. I still carry Hmong traditions and I am not, I am not totally 100% American because Americans don't think I am American. But yeah, I think I am American, I was born and raised here...you don't get a lot of Hmong at [institution]. I think that's why sometimes I think I am American because you don't see Hmong people at [institution]. You see students but there are a couple [Hmong students], so there's not a big community of Hmong people and we forget a lot about our Hmong ethnicity.

Her *forgetfulness* of being Hmong came from not having a space on campus to explore her identity because there were so few Hmong students on campus. This reflection was surprising because Anna attended a college that had one of the largest Hmong college student communities in the state. What was striking about her reflection was that while she felt like she was an American, she did not feel others perceived her as such. Her consciousness of others' perceptions of her indicates her awareness that she did not 'fit' the American identity completely. The challenge of finding balance for participants was complicated by their desire to fit neatly into one identity or the other. While finding balance was challenging, participants accepted their constant negotiations as a way of life. They were less concerned with the challenges and more focused on finding balance to appreciate their unique experiences and circumstances.

With a unique history, culture, and community, participants often had to explain to others who they were. At times, this was an opportunity for participants to share their story. Other times, this reminded participants that they were outsiders and not quite American enough. Jousa a



second year undecided student, commented on having to tell her story to every new person she met. She stated.

I feel like it's almost a responsibility to have to live up to that (kind of)... a lot of people don't really know, you know "what's Hmong" you know, so I feel like it's a responsibility of mine to be able to educate them but also I want them to see that I am not just Hmong. I am a Hmong American student here as well.

While Joua felt responsible for educating others about her culture and history, she also felt it narrowly defined who she was. Explaining her background was a constant reminder that she was not considered an American. Joua wanted to reflect both her identities and be Hmong American. However, she did not feel she was accepted this way. She stated,

It's almost like I have to keep *switching sides* when I am with my Hmong friends I have to fit this Hmong ideal woman and then when I am with my American friends here at the university it's like I can just be me.

Joua's narrative illustrates how she is unable to be Hmong and American. Instead she juggles her identities based on who she is with. Participants also feel they need to choose identities when among select peers. Joua felt the need to change herself to fit a 'traditional Hmong women' mold – someone who was domestic and adhered to tradition, when she was with her Hmong friends. However, when she was with her American friends, she felt like she could just be herself. While she wanted to reflect both identities, she did not believe she would be accepted as both. Therefore, Joua consciously choose certain elements of her identity to display based on what she believed her audience expected of her.

The constant back and forth of juggling identities was a common theme across all participants. Often, this created tension and stress among participants because they felt they did

not fit into either category. Stephanie, a fourth year education major, discussed being Hmong American.

As a Hmong American, it was kind of, difficult juggling the world outside, from being an American and being Hmong, [they are] like totally different from each other. And like, sometimes parents don't understand how difficult it is at school or like outside of the house...growing up it was difficult like, understanding certain vocabulary and my friends would be like, "why don't you know what this is?" like they'd be so surprise that I don't know what a certain item is and my parents never understood that.

Students struggled to find a middle ground between their identities and often felt stigmatized. For Stephanie, her parents did not speak English and she felt their lack of English proficiency made it harder to blend in at school with her peers. Stephanie indicated that she struggled with not understanding certain common terms like 'pantry' and this made her feel out of touch with being American. Not knowing or understanding these terms, made her feel disconnected from her 'Americanness'. Growing up in two cultures that are 'totally different from each other', complicated her ability to fit in. The inability to blend in at school led participants to question their ability to pass as Americans and forced participants to feel they had to juggle their identities.

Other participants in this study did not see their identities as separate but as blended. These students spoke about how they identified themselves as reflecting both identities. Macy, a fifth year student majoring in Asian studies, remarked,

I think I really see [my identities] as one. I can't see myself as just Hmong. I can't see myself just as American. It has to be Hmong American. There are certain things that I don't understand like an American *American* with just that identity would do. And there

are some things that I don't understand as like just a Hmong or even a Hmong American would do. But I've always felt that those two are like what completes me. Those are the two that I identify as, one thing but not as separate, you know. [My parents] have always taught me just be more Hmong, whatever that means and be more American, something when I want to do. But as I got older, I said, you know, I think there are things I don't understand maybe in the Hmong community and the American community but that's okay. I'm still part of those two communities and it makes me one, one person.

While Macy did not fit into each identity perfectly, she was comfortable with how they worked in her life. She did not question how they *should* fit in her life and instead accepted their uniqueness as part of her identity. Although her identities do not always coincide or match up, she saw them both as representing who she was. This was different from earlier participants who spoke about the challenges of having dual identities. Macy saw how each culture differed from the other and embraced them both as a reflection of who she was. Her ability to be comfortable 'not knowing' everything about each of her communities allowed her to be more flexible with her identities. She did not discuss her identities as conflicting, but as collectively representative of who she was.

Being a part of two very distinct cultures often resulted in most students struggling with finding a way to balance them. Students felt disconnected from segments of their identity because they did not fit or blend in particular situations. This created tensions for students because they felt they were 'forced' to choose which identity to reflect in order to appease their families and schools. For others, they did not struggle with balancing their identities because they accepted the blending of their identities.

## College Major and Career Choice

Student narratives demonstrate that participants were influenced by their parents' and community's narrow knowledge about college majors and careers. This impacted students' experiences when it came to selecting college majors because they did not want to disappoint their parents, who often wanted them to pursue specific majors. The majority of participants indicated their parents wanted them to pursue specific college majors because it would lead to specific careers. This had participants trying to balance their own goals and interests with those of their parents. Parents had little knowledge about the United States education system and the different types of careers available and commonly encouraged them to become "a doctor". Most participants in the sample mentioned their parents encouraged them specifically to pursue a medical career. Lisa, a third year student majoring in Health Sciences, explained why her parents encouraged the majors that would result in medical careers,

I feel like [my parents] think that's the only way you can kind of, or it's like it's the stereotypical way of being or of getting the best out of either college or out of life. Like they're just typical or stereotypical good careers. And I feel like [my parents] don't really see any of the other aspects that are available and I think it might be from the community also. So if they hear like someone's going to be a nurse or being a doctor or something, they think really highly of it. Whereas they hear something else and they're just like I have no idea what that is or why are you doing that?

Her family's limited knowledge of careers outside the medical field led her parents to question the need or decision to pursue other careers. The lack of knowledge about careers stems from families not understanding or knowing how majors will be applied outside the classroom. For example, parents can understand what a doctor and lawyer does. However, they are unable to

understand what a sociologist or mathematician would do for a career. The limited knowledge of careers hinders parents' ability to provide support for careers outside the ones often perceived as good careers.

Participants who choose majors outside the ones suggested by their parents took additional steps to educate their parents with hopes of gaining their support. For example, when Lisa decided to major in Advertising and Hospitality, she discussed her decision with her parents to explain what career options she would have after she graduated from college. While her parents were hesitant to agree with her decision, she was persistent. It was important to Lisa that her parents support her decision. She states,

I did research and showed my parents what a typical salary range for my career would look like and what types of places I would work for. Cause my parents, they are not sure what my major meant or what I would do for a job you know. So, I you know, my parents really just wanted to know that I would have a job you know, once I graduated.

By taking the time to educate her parents about her major and potential career possibilities, she eventually gained their support. While college major selection is often an individual choice, participants in the study saw it as an important family decision and wanted their families to support their decision. Family and community perception of careers imposed specific beliefs about which careers would provide students the best opportunities. This narrow definition often had participants concerned they would not have the support of their families to pursue their desired major.

The underlying assumption behind the narrow emphasis on medical careers is the desire for participants to pursue careers that would result in a financially lucrative job after college. Participants spoke about parents wanting them to pursue careers that had a steady track record in

the job market so that they would not have a hard time finding a job after graduation. Gounou, a first year student majoring in Advertising stated why her parents encouraged specific fields, “[My parents] wanted us to go into something they knew would be kind of be guaranteed. Like being a doctor, you are going to find a job if you are a doctor.” This ‘guarantee’ was seen as a way to achieve a ‘better life’.

Parents were very invested in having their children entering career fields they believed had more job security. Additionally, with the economic recession in the United States, participants felt more pressure to pursue more stable careers. Pa, a second year accounting major talked about the impact the economy had on her family and how it influenced her own perspective on education and careers.

[All my parents] lives they have been doing factory work and then, with the [state] economy and stuff, my dad got laid off and he’s encouraging us to get a better education. That way we can be a doctor or be something else.

Pa’s father job loss made it clear to her that she needed to go to college in order to provide security for herself and her family. While Pa’s parents encouraged her to become a doctor, with the support and advice of her siblings, she chose a career in accounting after exploring a few majors. Similar to Lisa, Pa wanted her parents to support her decision to become an accountant but was hesitant to tell them because she was concerned she would disappoint them because she choose not to be a doctor. She stated,

My parents have always wanted me to be a doctor you know and ever since my dad was laid off, it’s really made them concerned about our futures. So, I choose not to tell them I was changing majors because I didn’t want them to be upset with me, cause like, they were hoping and wanting me to become the doctor you know and I don’t want to.

Pa was concerned her parents would be upset with her decision but she also knew she did not want to be a doctor. She struggled a bit with trying to understand how she would balance her parents plans for her with her own plan. Eventually she decided to tell her parents. She explained to them what an accountant did and introduced them to a few Hmong accountants to demonstrate its viability as a career. By doing so, her parents were able to understand how her major would be applied outside of the classroom and she was able to gain the support of her family.

Other participants chose to pursue careers in the medical field because it offered job security and would make their parents happy. For example, Fong, a third year Biology major had plans to go to medical school and become a doctor so his parents, “can be proud of me”. When asked why his parents encouraged him to become a doctor. He stated,

I think it’s because, you know, they struggled, they actually work hard, they actually struggled and they actually want to make it easy on us so they try and make us work hard, and try to go get a good job, basically.

Again, the emphasis on the medical field comes from the desire to attain a good job after college. When asked how he decided to become a doctor, he remarked, “my parents have always said they wanted me to be a doctor and as far as I can remember, I have wanted to be a doctor too. I never really thought about going into another field you know”. For Fong, his dreams and his parents’ dreams were the same. While it is very possible that his parents influenced his career selection, Fong wanted to become a doctor for himself and his family. Becoming a doctor was a **shared family dream**. Additionally, the shared family dream would make his parents proud of him. This was very important to Fong because he saw this as the greatest form of gratitude to his parents, thanking them for their hard work in raising him and his siblings.

Family and community perception of careers imposed specific beliefs about which careers students should pursue. This narrow definition often made it stressful for participants who wanted to major in non-medical fields. While participants' families suggested careers they believed will lead to a successful life, these fields were not always a good fit for the participants. However, students wanted to help their families have hope for a better future and carefully choose their college major taking into consideration their parents' thoughts about their choice. Sometimes participants' major selection matched the suggestions of their parents. Other times there was a mismatch. Participants who found majors outside the 'suggested' fields expressed concern about parental disapproval but ultimately selected careers/majors that interested them and spent time working to gain the support of their families. This exemplifies the complexities of balancing dueling priorities. Participants were often trying to balance these expectations with those of their families.

#### **Gender: College Distance from Home**

This study did not set out to find or explore gender differences. However, student narratives indicated female participants experienced a different process compared to male students when it came to college choice. Female students experienced family pressures when it came to selecting a college to attend. This is mostly attributed to the Hmong cultural tradition of children living with their parents until they are married, especially female children. Therefore, students move out of the home to go to college only if it was necessary. With their families' encouragement to attend a college near home, female students felt pressure to choose a college closest to home. This put female participants in a conundrum when the college they wanted to attend was not located near their family home.



Female participants discussed how distance played an important and critical role in the search and choice stages of the college process. The pressure to pay attention to location and distance from home was unique to female students. This was not something that male participants reported. Meredith, a fifth year English student shared her mother's reaction to her interest in the state flagship campus, which was two hours away from home.

My [high school] senior class took a trip to [state flagship campus] and ... I really liked the [the campus], you know. And like I told my mom when I got home, I was like, "I'm gonna apply to go to [the state flagship campus]," and she was like, "No." And I'm like, "Why not? It's a cool school, like it's really good. It's ranked as one of the top schools." And she was like, "No, because you're gonna be too far away from home" ...she only wanted me to go to [current college] because like it's pretty much in the backyard and like, "You can go home and come back and you can take care of the family." And I was like, "Okay, I guess." And like, I mean that was really the reason why I came to [current college].

Meredith considered applying to other colleges but the lack of support from her mother convinced her to apply only to the college, her mother approved of. While there was a different school that she felt would be a good fit for her, her mother's disapproval was significant enough that she choose to not see it as an option. In addition, as the oldest child, she felt responsible for taking care of her younger siblings and her decision to stay local allowed her to live at home and tend to her responsibilities as the oldest.

Participants who chose to attend a local college near home had a difficult time finding balance between their schoolwork and home responsibilities. This put students under a lot of

stress as they tried to negotiate between their school and home priorities. Stephanie, a fourth year student who lived with her parents while attending college, discussed her experience,

Living at home I felt like it is, kind of, difficult because you have to juggle like family priorities and then like school priorities. It feels like at home people ask you to do certain things and you could be busy with school but you feel, like, obligated to, like, do what they want ... they need you to do but they help you so often, so you can't just not help them, even if I am busy.

While she preferred to focus on schoolwork, she felt obligated to tend to family responsibilities because they helped and supported her. As a full time student, Stephanie had to balance schoolwork with taking care of chores at home, picking up her nieces and nephews from school, babysitting, and translating for her parents. These multiple responsibilities created challenges for Stephanie as she was constantly juggling her school and family priorities in order to fulfill her duties as a daughter and student.

Parental approval of their college choice was desired. However, it was not always necessary. Even though female participants indicated that their parents disapproved of them going away to college, it did not inhibit some from applying to and selecting colleges away from home. Female students who choose to leave home, did so specifically because they wanted to gain some independence from their family. Nou, a second year student majoring in Pre-medicine spoke about her decision to attend a college away from home. She stated,

I just wanted to get away from home cause like I babysit everyday, cause like my parents are always working. I felt that if I was to stay home, I wouldn't be able to do anything and focus, cause you know being in a Hmong family, they always need you to do things for them. So I decided that ah, no matter what my parents say I have to get out. So I have

to apply to university but I had my siblings to help support me through that too. So that's why I went to [Institution]. I know my parents were a little upset at first but they learned to accept it.

She recognized that if she lived at home, she would have to tend to family responsibilities and it would harm her ability to focus on school. Even though her parents were hesitant initially to allow her to go away to college, Nou was adamant about her decision to 'get out'. She indicated that her parents wanted her to go to a college five minutes away but her Aunts encouraged her to go away if she wanted to be more independent. She stated,

They told me that I should go away to college and live on campus because it would give me the opportunity to grow up. You know, and be independent cause living at home, it would be like I was in high school still because my parents would not let me go out and do stuff you know.

With the support of her family, Nou was confident in her decision to go to college away from home. While she received some push back from her parents, she was able to convince them to support her decision.

Participants were very aware of their parents' preference that they attend a local college. For some participants, they kept their parents uninformed about the college they were applying to, since they knew their parents would disapprove. April, a first year student majoring in Human Development knew her parents wanted her to attend a local college, so she kept her parents out of the loop during the college application process. She indicated that she did not want them to influence her decision. April stated,

I love my parents and I don't want to do something just to make them mad. I would do something that will make them happy too, but I just didn't want them to influence me.

Like, it's good that they influenced me. I'm not saying that I don't want their opinion. I'm just saying like my mom and dad are so like, they're always trying to make the decision for me. So, then, I was trying to make the [college] decision by myself. So, like, they are always in my ear like, "Hey, do this and do that," you know. So, I wanted the entire decision to be on me. In the end I did pick [institution] because I didn't want them to drive so far because I know we have a busy schedule too so then, I wanted to be considerate for them as well.

April wanted the college choice to be her decision. Since she knew her parents would try to convince her to make a different choice, she consciously made the decision to keep her parents uninformed of her the colleges she was applying to. April's first choice was an out of state college but after not getting accepted, she made the decision to attend an in-state college that her sister was already attending. April's narrative reflects how focused she was on making sure the college choice was hers, even if it her family did not approve. Ultimately she chose to attend a college her parents approved of because she had limited options, but she was content because the decision was her own.

While some participants chose a college away from home to achieve independence from the family, they still felt accountable for family responsibilities. Kim, a third year student majoring in Speech Pathology, spoke about being away from home. She stated,

I came here because I wanted to get away from home, you know to have the chance to live my own life because at home, my parents are strict. Like, I can't go out. So I needed to get out, but when I, you know when I call home I feel sad that I came here you know. Cause like, I am here and I can not help my family you know, like when I was living at home. It makes me feel guilty for coming here even though I know it is the best decision

for me. I just feel bad because my parents need my help and I am too far away to help them.

Kim's narrative summarizes the guilt many students who went away to college felt when they spoke of their families. While they choose to go away for personal reasons and see that it was the best decision for them, they also saw the drawbacks it creates for their families because they are unable to help at home. This illustrates the tensions students have when it comes to college choice, as they continue to feel responsible to their family regardless of distance.

It appears that while family was a source of motivation and support, family cultural was also an area of contention for participants. At the center of this conflict is the Hmong cultural value of the collective, which focuses on gains for the family. In comparison, the American culture is more individualistic. Because of this, these two cultures come into conflict for participants when they have to weigh their own interests against the interests of their families. While family is a source of encouragement and motivation, it also proved to be a source of pressure. Participants are faced with trying to balance their individual goals with the dreams of their families. For Hmong students, the roles and responsibilities placed on them by their families and by themselves can be difficult to fulfill. Participants are often left to make decisions they hoped balanced family/community and their individual goals. These decisions were most common when it came to selecting a college major and career choice.

### **The Role of Family: The Foundation for College Aspirations**

Student narratives confirm that family is at the center of Hmong life. Therefore, it is not surprising how imperative family encouragement is to the college process. Student interviews revealed families were extremely influential on their pathways to college because they instilled early expectations for college attendance and provided inspiration for college aspirations.

Families are the foundation of students' aspiration for a college education because they foster a strong commitment among participants to aspire for a college degree.

### **Family Values: College was valued and expected**

Participants indicated their parents were their primary motivators because they were taught to value an education and were expected them to go to college. Educational expectations had a major influence on participants because they were encouraged and felt supported on their pathway to college. Kao, a fourth year student majoring in speech pathology, indicated how her family instilled the value of a college education. She stated,

My parents have always beat it into our heads. [My siblings and I] never thought there was an option after high school. We always thought college was the only option...[my parents] would always ask us, like ever since we were little, what do you want to be when you grow up? And then, when we got to high school, [my parents would] ask us, they started telling us to think about colleges we wanted to go to.

In Kao's family, conversations about college and careers nurtured her belief that college was the only option after high school. This allowed her to plan for college because her family consistently kept college at the center of discussions at home. In many ways college was a social norm<sup>21</sup> in her family even though she was a first generation college student. In addition, she had two older sisters in college, which demonstrated to Kao that college was possible. Having the opportunity to witness family members go to college made a big impact on participants because it indicated that college was possible. It allowed participants to see that others 'like them' have made it to college. This was important for participants because it allowed them to see that college was within reach.

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<sup>21</sup> A social norm is a group held belief of on how members should behave. In this instance, the social norm is a belief in the family that everyone will go to college.

Participants and their families' valued education because obtaining an education was not an opportunity Hmong families were afforded in Laos. In discussing her family's educational philosophy, Stephanie a fourth year student majoring in Elementary Education, was the third of her siblings to go to college. She stated,

My dad's philosophy is that education can get you to do anything. Like with an education, anything is possible and I want to carry that on because I believe in it too. Because the people [I know who] all go to college was successful so far like [with an] education you can do anything in the world that you want.

Stephanie saw others (including her older siblings) benefit (eg. get a job) by going to college. She goes on to say, "to better my life, I feel like an education is needed. So that's why I reached out for higher education and I didn't want to, like, end up struggling for the rest of my life." Stephanie's statements reflect the value Hmong participants placed on education. Participants had a firm belief that successful college completion would bring financial security and better position them in the job market. Combined with the influence of their family background, participants and their families' valued education because they saw others who achieved success and therefore, wanted to replicate that success in their own families.

The constant discussions in their families' fostered a strong commitment to education and an expectation that college was not only a necessity but the *only* next step after high school. These expectations allowed participants to think about their futures and to plan for college. Amy, a second year student double majoring in Business and Psychology, shared, "[college has] always been expected... growing up, it was always, 'you are going to college.' It was an expectation. [My siblings and I] didn't know what else to do after high school." The statement demonstrates how college expectations fostered a college going environment in the family. In

Amy's family, her older sister pioneered the path by going to college, graduating, and securing a nursing job. This demonstrated to Amy and her family the benefits of a college education.

Personal success stories, like Amy's sister, motivated and inspired Hmong students and their families to make a commitment to pursuing a college education.

Interestingly, while family expectations were important it did not always result in college going. Unlike Kao and Amy, Kim a third year student majoring in health professions, was the first of her siblings to go to college. Her two older siblings choose not to go to college even though her parents encouraged and expected them to all go. However for Kim, she had no doubt she would go to college and reflected how her parents were her primary motivators.

[My parents] just talked to us since [my siblings and I] were little. They say it a couple of times and it kind of sticks in your head. 'Go to school, finish school, do well in school, go to college, do well in college so that one day you have a good life so you don't have to struggle like we do'.

While Kim's parent's encouraged and expected her two older siblings to go to college, they chose to work after graduating from high school. Kim saw her siblings work minimum wage jobs after high school and struggle like her parents. Witnessing this reinforced her commitment to obtain a college education. For Kim, it did not matter if she went to the local community college or straight to a 4-year college. She was determined to get a college education so she could have the 'good life' –where individuals have secure good jobs and are not struggling to put food on the table. Additionally, both her older siblings encouraged her to go to college. They advised her not to make the "same mistake". Parental encouragement coupled with her siblings' advice made Kim determined to be the pioneer in her family and go to college. Kim wanted to be a pioneer to demonstrate to her family that a college education was obtainable.



College was encouraged because it was understood as the pathway to securing a good job. Andy, a first year student majoring in pre-pharmacy and the third of his siblings to go to college, had parents who were very direct about the importance of college. His parents said to him,

You need education because you want a better job”. He goes on to say, “I know if you just go straight out of high school and go to the work force, you’re not gonna make that much. So, you know, I see money as like an essential part of living.

Andy’s statement illustrates his family’s view on education being the main pathway to obtain a good job and emphasizes the importance of *economic uplift*. While financial gains were emphasized, Andy’s statements demonstrate the belief that obtaining a higher education will better position him in the job market and ultimately in life.

Education was valued because it would provide participants with economic uplift. Participants understood that a college education would allow them to provide financially for themselves and their family. Mai, a third year nursing student discussed how her parents valued and prioritized education to ensure their children had the best chances to achieve success in the U.S. Mai stated,

It’s a really big deal for my parents because they never had the experience to go to school and they want us to be educated. So my dad, telling us their stories of how it was back then, in their hometown...it’s pretty sad what they had to go through not having the opportunity to learn as much as what we can learn here in America. So pretty much both my parents they’re very strict about you know focusing on school and becoming highly educated and most importantly they want us to be successful in life. So education is the main priority for us ...to be successful, so my dad and mom they pretty much [are] very

strict about going to school and making sure that we finish school. So we can help ourselves later in life because they've never had the chance to have the opportunity and it's harder for them to even like survive here in America and they don't wanna see us go through the same thing as they are going through. So they stressed a lot on our education for us.

Mai's parents told her to do well in school and go to college to ensure she had a chance at obtaining a financially stable future. With this encouragement and expectation, Mai and her siblings went to college with ambitions of obtaining a better life.

The majority of participants had families that were supportive and encouraged college going. However, two participants had little to no support or encouragement from their families. For these participants, their narratives offer a different perspective. Kong, a third year student majoring in Media Arts and Technology was the first in his family to go to college and reflected back on his conversations with his parents about college. He stated,

I kind of have this general talk about my parents, like yeah, I'm gonna go to college after [high school]. Since they had no idea what I'm talking about, they're like, 'Okay, good, you're going to college.' But they had like no idea like where to go, which schools were good for your major and like which schools are good for generals or anything. They're just like, 'go to college, any college will do.'

Being the first in his family to go to college presented Kong with several challenges. Most important, his parents were unable to provide support and guidance on how to go to college because they had no college knowledge. Therefore, they were unable to assist him with the nuts and bolts of preparing for college. Since his parents were not actively involved in his college process, Kong felt they were not interested in his college pathway.

While he acknowledged his parents did not have the college knowledge to share with him, their lack of engagement ultimately demonstrated to Kong they were unsupportive of his college plans. Kong did not recognize the connection between his parent's unfamiliarity and lack of experience with the process and how it limited their ability to be actively involved in his college process. While Kong ultimately went to college even without the family engagement he hoped for, his reflection reinforces the important role family support has on the college process. Without their active support, he did not feel his family was invested in his aspirations for a college degree. Additionally, Kong was the only male participant in the study, who was the first in their family to go to college. For the majority of male participants, there was an older sibling already in college, often a sister. With a small sample of males in this study, it is hard to make inferences on what this gender difference is, however it is important to highlight that there was one.

Family background and experiences were important to the college process for Hmong American students. While some instilled motivation, others presented barriers. Parents were key players in encouraging and motivating college participation. However, parents are also key players in creating barriers for students. Families that instilled an early expectation for college. Participants with involved parents versus those with disengaged parents had vastly different experiences from each other. For example, Kong did not receive much family support and his narrative offered a glimpse of why some Hmong students may choose not to go to college. While most participants reported having supportive parents, Kong's reflection offers insight into how critical family support is to the college process and how it enables students to feel more confident in their decision to go to college. Interviews demonstrate the encouragement and expectation participants receive from their families help guide their early aspirations to plan for

college. While the outcome of these early expectations appear to have a gender difference, it is hard to speculate as to the reasons why given the small sample of male participants.

Family encouragement and expectations motivate students to pursue a higher education. Many participants echoed the statement, offered by Gounou a fifth year student who was the fourth in her family to go to college. She stated, “my family has always emphasized the importance of education so they have always told us to go to college”. Thus, families are a major contributing factor to Hmong students’ educational pathways and for many. This reinforces earlier research which have found parents are influential on the predisposition process for low income and disadvantaged students (Hamrick and Stage, 2004; Cabrera and La Nasa, 2000; Gandara, 1995).

### **Higher Education: A Way Out**

A college education is seen as the primary pathway to achieving the American dream, specifically to acquire a way out of the poverty they currently live in. Students’ narratives illustrate how families’ experiences as refugees and their own experiences as Hmong Americans were motivational factors that fueled their desire to pursue college. The majority of participants indicated their parents’ and community’s history of sacrifice, struggle, and adjustment to fleeing from Laos and resettling in the United States, motivated them to go to college. Most students remarked that their parents saw a higher education as a pathway to securing a stable career. Fleeing persecution, Hmong families experienced constantly changing circumstances. This made it difficult to prepare for and predict the future. Participants pursued college with the hope that it would give them an opportunity to improve their financial security and outlook. Pa, a first generation college student, majoring in accounting explained her motivations to go to college as,

[My siblings and I] see how much our parents struggle and how much our family has struggled and it's like, you wanna be able to give [my parents] something good and I feel like the only way to really give back and to get a good job is to get a higher education not only that but my parents have really encouraged us to go to college because they feel like that's *the way out*, to get a good like [job] and not have to struggle the way they did.

With a college education, Pa believed she would be able to get a good job and achieve security so she would not struggle the way her family had and it would allow her to provide for her family. Pa's family background and experiences are influential because a college education would provide her with a '*way out*' and would provide an opportunity to obtain a good job. This theme was consistent among majority of participants, reflecting the belief that an education would provide financial security and a way out of poverty for themselves and their families.

Participants indicated they wanted to achieve the American Dream by getting a college education and a good job. Kim, a third year student majoring in Health professions was the first in her family to go to college. She stated,

It was always like an important thing in the family, in the house I guess. Cause you know, well having parents and family coming from Laos and Thailand, come to the U.S., they don't have the education like most [American] people do. So it's like wanting to be more American and like having your parents in the back of your head. Do well in school, go to school, finish high school, and then go to college, and that was always in the back of my head.

Underlying Kim's plans to go to college is her desire to be an American. She saw her family as differing from Americans because they did not have a college education. Therefore, she wanted to be more American by getting a college education and getting a job so she could help her

parents. Her desire to be more American is a reflection of her wanting to be a part of the norm which would allow her to feel like she fit in as an American. When asked to elaborate on what she meant by ‘having your parents in the back of your head’ she indicated that the experience of her family immigrating to the U.S. influenced her decision to go to college because she was responsible for taking care of her family. Kim was determined to obtain a college degree because she does not “want to go through what [her] parents [went] through” and hopes to give her family a new start on life. Her family’s lived experiences of hardship and struggle motivated and encouraged her to go to college because she felt responsible for getting her family a way out of their current financial situation.

Participants sense of responsibility is an example of how connected family is to the development of college aspirations among Hmong students. This responsibility puts additional pressure on participants because they are tasked with achieving not only for themselves but also for the family. This is an example of how the hope of a better future for the whole family lay on the shoulders of young Hmong students as they pioneer a path towards achieving the American dream, most notably through a college education.

Most students viewed education as a way out of poverty. Pa stated, "my family has always struggled you know and I feel like it’s my job to help take care of my family. Like getting an education, I can get a good job and help them.” This expands on Pa’s earlier reflection on *a way out*. Similarly Kim comes from a low-income family and the experience of struggling financially pushed her to work hard in to achieve the ‘American Dream’ – a life that would be an improvement from how she grew up. Additionally, her desire to go to college also stemmed from the belief that she was responsible for taking care of her family.

Family experiences are personal motivators for these participants. Participants often referenced their families' struggles as an outcome of their lack of education. Education is highly valued by participants and their families because it is an opportunity that was not available to many families historically. Most Hmong parents did not have access to education because it was limited to only the few families who could afford to send their children to college in Laos. Therefore, education in the U.S. was valued among participants and their families because it represented an opportunity their families and communities were not historically afforded. Lee, a fourth year student majoring in biomedical sciences, compared her life to that of her parents',

Well I was born here (in the U.S.) but from everything I hear [from parents and family] it's just sad because over there [in Laos] you don't have the education and if you do, you still can't find a job, and like if you were to put yourself in like in [my parents'] shoes, you wouldn't want to be a family in the third world country, living in a bad (poor) place like that so I *want more*.

Participants understood their parents' history and background and perceived the opportunity to attain a higher education, as a chance to change their families' future. Lee's statement reinforces the awareness participants have of their parents' experience in Laos as refugees and their plight for survival in the U.S. Lee not only wants a *way out*, she *wants more* than what her family had and therefore, sees education as an opportunity to obtain more.

Participants' indicated that witnessing their families struggle financially pressed them to think about their own future as well as their families. Meredith, a fifth year student majoring in English stated,

For me, I didn't want to keep living paycheck to paycheck you know. And like I didn't want to have to see my (future) kids' struggle, like what I had to go through. And so,

that's why I wanted to go to college because like I want, I don't want to be rich or anything. I just want to live kind of a comfortable life where I don't have to worry about it. 'Oh my gosh, I'm not gonna be able to pay my rent or like my bills.' And that's why I wanted to go to college.

Meredith's reflection demonstrates the simple outcome she hopes a college education will supply: the ability to provide for her future family. Coming from a single parent household, Meredith recognized her mom's hard work and struggle to raise nine children. While her family's experiences motivated her to go to college, she hoped to give her future family a different experience. Therefore, she was determined and focused her energies on the goal of finding *a way out* of poverty and struggle. She saw a college education as a vehicle that would afford her a pathway out.

Participants were very conscious of their background and utilized it as a mechanism to encourage and motivate them to pursue higher education. Their experiences of struggle and hardship became a source of empowerment that pushed them to focus their attention on achieving security and stability through higher education. Education was seen as a way out of their current situation and a vehicle to achieve more for themselves, their families, and their future families. For these participants, it was clear that they carry the weight of their family's experiences on their shoulders and they utilized their families' background as momentum to propel them to go to college.

**Family Uplift: They have done enough.**

Participants saw a college education as their pathway to ensure they would be able to provide their families hope of a better life by acquiring a college education. Participants felt this would allow them to show their appreciation and gratitude for the support they received from



their parents and families. Aside from family expectations, participants saw obtaining a college education as an opportunity to achieve family uplift by improving their social and economic statuses in the U.S. Below, Mary a fourth year Advertising major, was the first in her family to go to college, and she described how her parents motivated her to study,

I feel like it's my parents (who motivate me) because like I said, like they really like [had] all their hopes are on me and my sister. So like every time when I feel like, I feel like 'cause a lot of the time I would never want to study or anything but I would think about my parents, you know, I need to make them proud because they're paying this for me and they have so much *hope* in me and faith in me, so I don't want to fail, you know. Like they are waiting on me to do well in school and I don't want to disappoint them you know.

Her parents' '*hope*' pushes her to work harder because their dreams and her own dreams rest on her completing college. This motivates her to keep studying even when she feels like she is unable to anymore. This allows her to look beyond herself and focus on doing well to achieve a dream her parents have for her and she has for herself. The '*hope*' of family uplift influences Mary to focus on her studies.

In addition to giving parents hope, participants spoke about the desire to make them '*proud*', by achieving job security through gaining an education. This sense of pride reflects participants wanting to achieve and succeed. Kao, a fourth year student reflects on why college was important to her. She stated,

Knowing that, learning [from my parents] that education is the most important thing and it is something that everyone should have because you know, you'll find a job later in life. That's the main reason why I decided to go to college or thought about going to

college [but] because I want to go to college. I wanna make our parents *proud* of me and knowing that they never had the opportunity or education to go, to have to go to college. It's really a good opportunity for us kids to even be here (in the U.S.) and we're going to have to go to college. It was a more of what I wanna do for myself because they'll benefit from us, [and] I can benefit from it.

Kao wants to take advantage of an opportunity that was not available to her parents. Her reflection demonstrates that her pursuit of a college education was for family uplift – an outcome that would be beneficial to both herself and her family. She places a strong value on education and believes it is something everyone should have access too. Therefore, she commits herself to obtaining a college education.

Participants are very conscious of doing their best to make their parents proud, as their accomplishments are family accomplishments. Fong, a 3<sup>rd</sup> year student majoring in biology, reflects on the importance of making his parents proud. He said,

I guess sometimes, you know, when I hear my parents say, they're proud of me, you know, that I'm doing this (going to college). It makes me stay focused more, makes me feel better because I know how hard my parents work in their life so, I'm trying to make it easier for my life and theirs, by getting a good job. When I hear them say they're proud and happy, you know, it makes me happy and it makes me want to stay [in college] and [it] helps me focus. I kind of, the way I balance [it] is basically, what I want to do is make them happy and basically when they're happy, I'm happy too.

Fong's statement indicates that he perceives his happiness as equal to the happiness of his family. This convergence demonstrates Fong's deep appreciation for and his responsibility to his family. Therefore, he focuses on staying in school to ensure he will make his parents proud of

him by getting a good job after college. His decision to go and stay in college linked directly to his desire to provide for his family. This demonstrates the deep family responsibility Kong felt about family uplift, as though the dreams and future of his family lay on his shoulders.

In addition to giving parents hope and making them proud, participants spoke about going to college as a way to ‘*repay*’ their parents for the support they have received. Lee a fourth-year student majoring in biomedical sciences, stated

The one thing that encourages me is my dad. I mean he’s done a lot to get us here...we are not super rich but we’re where we can get by and that’s what encourages me cause I want to be able to get something and work hard and, like, give them the good life because they’ve given us the good life. So I want to kind of like *repay* them and have them be able to relax, like not have to do anything.

Lee’s reflection indicates that she wants to ‘*repay*’ her parents for everything they have done for her. Getting a college education and a good job is seen as necessary for participants to be able to ‘*repay*’ their parents, through family uplift. Achieving a college education and securing a job allows participants to provide for their families and their future. This is a common theme among all participants, as they view education as the primary way to achieve individual and collective upward mobility.

As discussed earlier, among participants, a college education is seen as the most stable way to achieve financial and economic success in the U.S. Therefore, participants often refer to how college will help them achieve success and allow them to provide for their families. Hlee, a third year student majoring in health administration and the 3<sup>rd</sup> of her siblings to go to college discussed how a college education would allow her to provide for her family.

I think for me, it's just the fact that my parents came here, you know, and they didn't like – they had to start fresh (with nothing), you know, and so it's just – they just had a hard life going on, you know. And I think like for me, like by having this degree and having a job, I can like guarantee for them ... for the rest of their life, they're not gonna suffer anymore. You know, they don't have to do this anymore like they have done enough. You know, you guys have been through enough.

Like a majority of participants, Hlee is very conscious of her parents hard life and how a college education will help her give her parents a life where they can have some security. Family uplift has critically influenced Hlee to go to college because she wants to provide her family with a better life. Hlee's reflection also indirectly refers to her hope that a college education will afford her with the ability to give back to her parents, to show them her appreciation and gratitude for what they have provided her.

### **Discussion**

The examination of the predispositions of Hmong students in their decision to go to college revealed family was the foundation for most students' college aspirations and parental encouragement was a key source of support. It is important to note, the sample reflected a similar income distribution as the Hmong community in 2010, as indicated in the 2010 census, therefore it was unlikely parental influence differed by family socioeconomic status. The findings in this chapter echo earlier studies which point to the central role of parental influences, regardless of family income, on a students' predisposition found in earlier studies (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000b; M. Ceja, 2006; Gandara, 1995; Hamrick & Stage, 2004; D. H. Kim & Scheider, 2005; Or & Reynolds, 2014; Yamamoto & Halloway, 2010). Quantitative studies have indicated the statistical significance parents have on a students' educational aspirations and achievement

(Engberg & Wolniak, 2010; Flint, 1992; Hossler & Stage, 1992). However, by using a qualitative approach, this study was able to uncover the role parents had on the college process. Specifically, parents had an instrumental role in developing college aspirations, providing encouragement during the college application process, and being supportive during the college choice process. Additionally, aspirations were developed and supported through family values, which viewed higher education as important and expected.

While most predisposition research focused on the influence of parental encouragement on college aspirations, this study found encouragement was not only limited to parents. Similar to Ceja (2006), participants indicated their families, which included older siblings, cousins, uncles, and aunts provided them with the inspiration to commit to a college education through their early expectations for a college education. This broadens the reach and influence of parental expectations to include family expectations on college matriculation.

The predisposition stage of the college choice model proposed by Hossler, et al. (1989) has been widely referenced in literature. However, it does not include how one's culture influences college pathways. The findings in this study extend the current college choice literature and research on Hmong students because it identified the complexities of how cultural factors influence college choice. Revisiting the conceptual model (Figure 5), the results in this chapter illustrate the role of culture via immediate family and extended family have on the college process. Additionally, this chapter specifically addresses how family values and gender influence college aspirations and achievement among participants. Similar to Freeman's qualitative studies (1999, 2005b), this study highlights the important role of culture and family has on a student's pathway to college. Taking into consideration the influence of culture and

family on the college process allows for a better understanding of the college pathway for Hmong students.

Utilizing a qualitative approach, this study found participants faced challenges balancing the two distinct cultures– Hmong and American. The two cultures created complexities for participants, as the Hmong culture was more collective compared to the American culture, which was more individualistic. This caused tensions for participants, especially when their individual goals and ambitions did not match up with their families. When there was a miss match, this created tensions for participants as they tried to figure out which pathway to take. Recent research has just begun to explore the impact of culture on college participation and has been able to offer a more in-depth understanding on how culture influences college matriculation.

Consistent with college choice research, results indicate a gendered experience existed among participants which influenced the college process differently for male and female students (Chhuon, Kryatzia, et al., 2010; Shah, 2007; Michael J. Smith & Fleming, 2006; Strayhorn, 2010). Specifically, Hmong male students were less likely to indicate their parents recommended and directed them to attend a college near home. Whereas, all Hmong female students indicated distance from home was a concern among parents and they were encouraged to go to college but live at home. Distance from home was a point of strain for female participants. Female participants either wanted to be close to home to demonstrate their strong family values or preferred distance to gain some independence from their families. Interestingly, female students who decided to attend a college to gain some distance from their families reported feeling overwhelmed by guilt for not being home to tend to family responsibilities. This demonstrates the constant struggle students' encounter, as they balance the continual tension of balancing their dual identities as Hmong Americans.

Participants did not directly allude to the pressure and responsibility they had on their shoulders, but through their narratives, there was a consistent theme among participants--- they struggled with balancing their own dreams with those of their families. In listening to participants, it was apparent this struggle was a result of the changing viewpoints participants had about culture in comparison to their parents. They were often in conflict. It created stress and anxiety for these participants. Participants' who identified similar goals and ambitions as those reflected by their parents and families saw this as a method to make their families proud. Students were unsure who to appease when their parents had different perspectives, themselves or their parents.

Research on low-income students and college often focuses on how their inadequate resources impact their ability to navigate the college process (McDonough, 1997). Instead, this study focused on how these students persisted while encountering barriers. Most of these students came from families with little formal education. However, these students choose to go to college with the hope of giving back to their families. Participants believed that their college education would help provide a pathway for their families to obtain a more stable future because they would secure a job that would allow them to provide for their families. Participants' hoped that pursuing a college education would afford their present and future families with a better life. Many participants referred to a college education as providing 'a way out' of the struggles their families endured. A college education was a symbol of hope that participants and their families aspired for because they believed it would result in successful future for them and their families. This is similar to a recent study by Kim and Gasman (2011) on Asian American college choice which found to this as 'determination' – defined as, “a determination to succeed academically

because they understood the hardships their immigrant parents endured” (p. 717) and “felt the need and responsibility to pay their parents back for everything they provided” (p. 718).

Participants were hesitant to identify barriers to their college process because they did not see them as such. They referred to their hardships as learning experiences, which required them to be persistent and determined to overcome and learn from their adversities. Hamrick and Stage (2004) summarize the impact of having limited educational and personal resources as, “students and their families are left largely alone to deal with the difficult task of converting expectations and dreams into the kind of resilient motivation and goal-directedness that can overcome barriers to achievement (p. 165)”. It is this resiliency that provides students and their families with the momentum and fortitude to move forward, even when the path to college is full of uncertainty.



## **Chapter 5. The Role and Influence of Social Capital: Relationships Matter**

In this chapter, I discuss themes as they relate to the role and influence social capital has on the pathway to college for Hmong American college students. Social capital operates through networks via trust in the structure of obligations and expectations, information channels, and social norms. Social capital illustrates the influence networks have on the college process because they provide trusted information channels by which students acquire college knowledge.

This chapter identifies the types of influential social capital, which assisted these Hmong students on their pathway to college. The focus on social capital allows for understanding the power and influence support systems, information, networks, and relationships have on the college choice process (Becker, 1993; Bourdieu, 1986, 1990; Coleman, 1988). Social capital in the form of networks operates through information channels, which provide guidance to students. Additionally, this form of social capital allows students to feel supported in their decision to go to college. These relationships help shape an individual's social network, influencing the type of access students will have to persons with college knowledge (Bryan et al., 2011; M. Ceja, 2006; Engberg & Wolniak, 2010; Kao & Rutherford, 2007; O'Connor et al., 2010; Oseguera, 2011; Park, 2011; Tierney & Venegas, 2006). Emergent themes from the study indicates three types of social capital helped shape and influence the path to college: Role models, Mentors, and Gatekeepers. Each of these types of social capital provided unique networks and reflected unique methods of knowledge accumulation while lending guidance to students regarding the college process.

## **Role Models and Mentors: Sources of Influence and Motivation**

A review of students' narratives revealed role models were a source of influence and motivation for participants. Role models served as the first point of social capital for participants because they inspired participants to consider and pursue college. For this dissertation, role models are defined as persons looked up to because their behavior, example, or successes are a source of influence or motivation. Participants referenced two types of role models: *family role models* and *professional role models*. While each type of role model provided similar support, they were utilized for different purposes, which will be discussed in the coming paragraphs.

### **Family Role Models**

Family role models were from the immediate family network and represented personal values participants wanted to exude in their lives. They spoke of the influence their families had on their pathways to college and indicated their families were role models. Unlike mainstream role models, family role models reflected a more personal inspiration. Participants looked to family role models for their personal values. These values included: working hard, overcoming hardships, and perseverance. Yer, a 5<sup>th</sup> year pharmacy major opened up about why her parents were role models to her and how they influenced her.

I look up to my parents because you know, they came here with like nothing and they like you know, they worked really hard to raised us and a stuff, to make sure that we get what we need. So you know, they are both (Mom and Dad) role models for me to keep you know, to my heart. I appreciate my parents because they help me understand that I need to work hard to make sure that I make it in life because my parents, they had nothing. Her parents' dedication to provide for her family was the reason she saw them as role models. Her parents' work ethic was a point of inspiration for her to work hard in school. As her

immediate network, her parents provided her with values she believed was important for her to replicate. These values then reminded her of why she should invest in an education.

Furthermore, family was a source of encouragement, which motivated participants to pursue their educational and professional dreams. Family was the fundamental motive for their college aspirations and often assisted in giving new perspectives. Yer stated,

When I am tired of studying or stressed out, I take a break, you know, take a nap or go out for a few hours... but then I remember my parents, you know, all they have done for me and my family and I can't not study. You know, they have worked so hard to support me and get me here, and they have been through so much...so I go back and study, cause my parents, they have done so much for me.

Her parents' experiences often helped put perspective on her life. This allowed Yer to remain focused on doing her best. While her parents were role models to her, they also served as the foundation of her motivation for a higher education. Together, her parents were a source of empowerment and support, which nudged her to continue to press forward with her education, even during times of procrastination and stress.

While most participants referred to their families as role models, there were limitations. With only 14% of the Hmong American community having earned a bachelor's degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010), it was common for participants' immediate family and community members to have little experience with college. This limitation did not allow participants to gain family insight and guidance about the college experience<sup>22</sup>. Mai, a third year nursing student elaborated on her father's limitations as her role model,

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<sup>22</sup> This is limited to participants whose parents have no college education.

I guess my main role model or mentors are my family, my dad you know cause he's very, he's someone who I look up to. He knows what's best for us kids and not only that [but] I look up to anybody who is very helpful to me or who have that highly educated level because they make me want to be successful...and usually the family members who are you know highly educated, I'm always looking up to people like that (highly educated) cause that makes me motivated and it makes me wanna strive even better [for more].

Mai's reflection illustrates how participants often had more than one role model. She considered her father a role model but understood his limitations, hence she looked for additional role model(s) to fill the void since her father did not have an education. She wanted to find a role model who could provide her with knowledge and guidance about higher education. Her father's effectiveness as a role model was hampered by his lack of a higher education and experience with the college process. This made it difficult for her father to provide college guidance to her. Therefore, she searched for and identified other role models who could provide her with advice and guidance on her pathway to higher education. Mai's recognition of her father's inability to provide her with college knowledge demonstrates the limitations of her immediate network. It did not consist of individuals who had the knowledge and experience to share with her and provide guidance on how to achieve her educational and professional endeavors. This influenced Mai to look into expanding her network outside her family to gain access to persons/networks with college knowledge.

### **Professional Role Models**

Professional role models were college-educated individuals who had careers and lifestyles participants hoped to achieve. Professional role models were very important to participants because they often reflected the educational and professional trajectories they

aspired to achieve. Participants recognized the limitations of their immediate family network and looked for additional sources that could provide them with college knowledge. They identified key persons to expand their networks who could provide helpful information about college.

Professional role models allowed participants to visualize the benefits of getting a higher education. These individuals became persons they looked up to. There were two types of professional role models: direct and indirect role models. *Direct role models* were hands on individuals who provided students with guidance and information. *Indirect role models* were individuals who participants did not have personal relationships with, but they identified them as influential persons even though they did not provide them with guidance. Regardless of the type of relationships participants had with professional role models, direct or indirect, role models had similar impacts on participants. They inspired, encouraged, and often provided moral support to participants while they navigated the college pathway.

For all respondents, professional role models were other Hmong community members who had successfully gone to college. Participants with connections to Hmong individuals currently enrolled in college or who completed college were able to see the possibilities and the benefits of a college education. This was critical and powerful for participants because it influenced their aspirations for a college education. Mary a 4<sup>th</sup> year student majoring in Advertising, discussed her aunt's influence on her path to college,

I look up to my aunt, you know, she lives in a big house and she is successful. She basically is successful because she went to college, you know, she was the first of my dad's brothers and sisters to go to college and she made it. So now, I see her, my whole family sees her as a role model, because she comes from the same background, you know

as refugees and she made it. I see her and I know, if I go to college, like, I can become like her, you know, maybe.

Mary's aunt was an indirect role model because she had limited interactions with her since she lives in a different state. However, Mary's reflection indicates how her aunt's experience, being from a similar background, inspired her to go to college because she wanted to be successful like her aunt. Furthermore, her aunt's experience and success impressed on her family the benefits of a college education and the need to go to college. While her aunt did not provide her with college guidance, her aunt's experience and success as a college graduate made her a role model for Mary and her family.

Hmong role models are important to students because they help illustrate that college is obtainable and allow the Hmong community to see college as a option for their children. Nancy a third year, nursing student also spoke about the importance of having Hmong role models. She said,

I don't hear a lot of Hmong people going to college. So if, there is some sort of way you could do, maybe just open up, I don't know. I just don't think they [other Hmong students] would consider college, [unless] they saw other Hmong students going to college too. I guess we just have to show them a group of Hmong students who are going to school and then, uhm like maybe it will get them to want to go too.

Nancy's statement demonstrates the importance of having successful Hmong college students more visible to younger Hmong students. She points to the impact that the presence of Hmong college students alone can have in motivating younger Hmong students to want to go to college. Nancy's comment highlighted the belief that few Hmong students choose to go to college. This perception drove the belief that college is too difficult to achieve because Hmong students did

not see or hear of Hmong students going to college. The lack of a Hmong college student presence made college appear to be unachievable and unobtainable. Therefore, the presence of a Hmong role model who had gone to college, allowed participants to see college as achievable

A few participants were fortunate to have relationships with their professional role models, which provided them with access to information and guidance about the college process. In these instances, their role models served as mentors because they were hands on guides to the college process. Chris a third year student majoring in Asian Studies indicated,

I look up to my older cousin...I think, she went and taught in Korea for English and she's been traveling the world and like that's really awesome. I'd like to do that too. And right now, she's in Minnesota for graduate school. And I don't really remember what she's doing but something to do with like college or something. But yeah, she's a great role model. She's accomplished so many things and she's like...she's like a great person. She's been really supportive too.

Chris's statement reflects how her cousin's educational and professional achievements motivated and inspired her to go to college. Furthermore, Chris's cousin was an active role model in her life and was very supportive and hands on with her about the college process. For example, she told Chris to contact her if she "any problems or questions or stuff like that". This close knit relationship between Chris and her role model is an example of direct role models. She had access to direct guidance within her network. This provided Chris with an advantage that allowed her to gain keen insight from an individual who had already been successful in the college process.

Participants reiterated the important function Hmong role models had on their lives and saw it was important to have more Hmong mentors to inspire, motivate, and provide support for

younger Hmong students as they pursue their educational and professional careers. Yer, a 5<sup>th</sup> year pharmacy major spoke about the importance of having more Hmong role models and why she believed they are critical to the success of the community.

I believe successful [Hmong] people, people who are doctors or lawyers or you know teachers, people who got any type of degree, [need] to go and you know talk to Hmong students in high school, you know. So like give them hope that they can also be successful if they try, you know. I just, because I remember like even in [name of home town] growing up, like yes we have a bilingual teachers but you know, all they tell us is like they're there to teach us how to speak English and write in English, you know. Like they're not there to tell us, 'oh if you do this and this and if you try hard, you can become like this', you know? I only met a few [Hmong] people who are like doctors. I know of a few Hmong pharmacists and I just feel like if they go and reach out to the young [Hmong] people, it'll probably help. Especially [Hmong] women. I think many successful [Hmong] women out there [they can] tell women that they can become something.

Her reflection reinforces the important functions Hmong role models have on inspiring and encouraging students to go to college. Hmong mentors/role models help motivate and give hope to Hmong students to aspire for educational success. More importantly, Hmong role models are critical to illustrate college is obtainable. Yer also points to the lack of Hmong mentors and role models available to provide guidance to younger Hmong students. Furthermore, she points to the lack of female role models for female Hmong students. She was adamant that more female Hmong role models are needed. Yer's reflection highlighted the critical need for mentoring in the community to show that college and success was obtainable especially for Hmong girls.



Participants' narratives reinforced the important influence role models have on students' pathways to college. In summary, role models influence and motivate participants to aspire for a college education. They serve two purposes. Role models provide participants with a perspective of the values they would like to live their lives by and they inspire and motivate participants to aspire for success, mainly through a college education. Respondents recognize the important function role models had on their pathway to college and identify them as a mechanism that can positively impact the lives of future Hmong students. Furthermore, participants identify a need for more Hmong role models in the community to encourage Hmong high school students to pursue college. Hmong role models are important because the Hmong community is very connected which is a characteristic of their close knit clan based system. Simply put, role models are important because respondents feel, "like it's just you know somebody who has your back then and gives you the motivation to like keep on moving", says Anna a third year biology major.

### **Mentors: Guide to College Knowledge**

A second form of social capital identified in student narratives was mentors. Mentors are individuals who provided guidance about the college process to participants. They provide participants with necessary information on how to go to college. A key distinction between mentors and role models was they were strictly utilized to find answers about the college process. While role models provide inspiration and motivation, participants depended on mentors to find answers to their questions. Mentors guided participants as they navigated the complex college process by sharing their experience with the college process. Participants identified two forms of mentors - internal and external mentors. The type of mentors utilized by participants

was dependent on whether or not the student came from a family with college educated members.

**Internal mentors.** Participants with access to immediate family members with a college education, or who were currently enrolled in college, were able to gain keen insight and guidance about the college process. Participants who were the first in their families to go to college, often did not have an internal mentor as a guide. Internal mentors were predominately parents and older siblings who shared their college knowledge with participants. For example, mentors provided participants with a sense of relief as they were able to talk to other persons about their hopes, dreams, and concerns. The opportunity to have open discussions with another individual allowed participants to process their experience in a manner that was not possible without the aid of someone who had gone through the college process.

While most participants have distinct role models and mentors, approximately 10% of participants had role models who are also their mentors. This was specifically applicable for participants whose parents had some college education or who were college graduates. For these participants, they were able to rely on their parents for some college knowledge and guidance on how to navigate the college process. This was the case for Autumn whose mom is a college graduate and was able to provide guidance on applying for financial aid. Autumn a first year student majoring in Biology, was the first of her siblings to go to college. She indicated,

I didn't even know how to sign up for [financial aid]. I was like... I know I need to get it done but then I didn't even know about it. And like my mom was just like, "You sign up for financial aid yet?" She was used to it already because she signed up for financial aid...So, yeah, my mom knew about it already so she was always like, "We have to sign up for that." And I'm like, "Oh, when do we sign up?" And then I got stressed out

because I didn't know when we had to sign up and there was a deadline and stuff and I was like worried and I was like, 'I need this money!' and my mom helped me apply for financial aid.

Autumn benefited from her mom's previous experience with financial aid. This provided her with the privilege to learn from her mother and she had the resources to take advantage of accumulated knowledge. As the first of her siblings to go to college, she was now also able to provide guidance to her siblings. She stated, "I'm lucky I had my mom cause she helped me so much and like, without her, I would of, hmmm...not know what to do and now I can, like help my brothers and sisters when they go to college too, you know." This demonstrates the important influence and role having a social network with individuals with college knowledge is to the process.

Older siblings are also influential mentors to participants because they are able to share their accumulated college knowledge. This impact was highlighted among more than 25% of all respondents who had older siblings who had gone through the college process. This was an important resource for participants, as they were able to rely their family for college knowledge. This was not an option for participants who were the first in their families to go to college. For example, Kao a fourth year speech pathology student, reflected on the impact her sister had on her college process,

I had, ah, three older sisters so ah, the transition from high school to college wasn't so hard cause they helped a lot with explaining like, uhmm like, registering for financial aid, applying for school. And then, cause my older sisters were apart of a program called Talent Search where you just had to maintain a certain GPA, and they would pay for your SAT, your SAT fees, your ACT fees, your application fees, and they would help search

for scholarships and stuff. So my sisters really helped lead the way to college by telling me to get involved with this program. So the transition to college wasn't too hard for me, fortunately.

This reflection points to the valuable information Kao received from her older sisters. They provided details on what to do and what to expect in college. Additionally, her sisters' were involved and participated in the local student support program, Federal TRIO program Talent Search, and she was encouraged her to participate in the same program. This allowed her to have access to similar college knowledge that her sisters received that was not readily accessible in the home. The accumulation of college knowledge gained by her sisters was shared with Kao and provided her with college information that allowed her to move forward more easily.

Furthermore, older siblings are able to provide helpful perspective on the college process and offer guidance and advice, which take into account students' specific experiences and backgrounds. Macy a 5<sup>th</sup> year Asian Studies major, reflected on how her two older sisters provided her with guidance during her college process,

[My sisters] talked about what the process of applying, you know, taking your ACT and your SAT. If you get [to college], how many courses you should be taking, what to look out, things to get involved in, the majors that they're thinking about majoring and what they want to do and then they would ask me, "You know, what are you passionate about? What do you want to do? What do you see yourself after high school?" you know. And so, they would be a guide behind me saying, "You need to take your ACT. You need to register for your ACT or your SAT, and these are some options that you could look at if you don't want to go to our community college," you know. So, just kind of...they

already made all mistakes and kind of paved, you know, a path for me of some kind and just getting there and walking you through it, you know.

Macy does not identify her sisters as role models. She identified them as a helpful resource because they provided her with a personal guide to the college process. This personal guide was valuable because it was not a perspective Macy could get elsewhere. She was provided the opportunity to learn from her sisters' experiences. With her sisters coming from similar backgrounds, their experience was more relatable to Macy. Hence, she looked up to them because they were able to provide personalized college advice, something her high school teachers and counselors were not able to.

**External mentors.** First generation college students utilized external mentors who were college-educated to provide guidance about the college pathway. These participants mostly depended on their high schools for information. Specifically, participants referred to the assistance they received in regards to the specifics of college applications since their families did not have the knowledge to help them apply. While families were helpful in encouraging college, participants relied on mentors to provide them with the necessary 'need to know' information on how to get into college. Gounou a 5<sup>th</sup> year Advertising major stated,

Well my family always emphasized [college] and then, once we got to high school, they helped even more with how to choose [where to apply] and where to look. And uhm, what different schools had to offer. So my parents really pushed us but then, our high school, uhm, really guided us with the specifics with the ACTs and financial aid and uhm, how to apply and how to check and how to cancel applications if you choose not to go there. So the thought of college was already there but everything else, on how to actually get there, [my] school really helped out.

Gounou's statement reinforces how families instill an early desire for college but also demonstrates how families are sometimes unable to provide guidance on how to get there. As the first in her family to go to college, she did not have access to an internal mentor or a role model. This was the difference between role models and mentors. Mentors provided specific tangible knowledge and advice to participants. Role models did not always serve in that capacity. This demonstrates the important role different types of social capital had on the college process. As mentors, Gounou's high school advisors played a vital role in providing her with the details she needed to understand the specifics of *how to* go to college. As the first in her family to go to college, she was unable to get assistance at home and had to rely on external persons to assist her. For example, her statement reflects the critical role high schools can play in providing students with college information that aids in their college pathway.

Interestingly enough, mentors were not only the keepers of information. They also provided validation to participants that they were college material through motivation and encouragement. This motivation and encouragement was distinctly different from what they received from their families and role models. Mentors who provided validation to participants were mostly teachers and counselors. These mentors helped provide validation to participants via assurance to respondents that they were college material and they would be successful. Autumn's reflection demonstrated the importance validation had on her college pathway, she stated,

My chemistry teacher, because he was like the best because he always...he always knew my potential and he always like gave me like advice and he'll be like, "Oh, I know you'll make it." And it's because he knew I was smart enough because he was like, he was like, "I know you can do this", he could see my potential and he was like, "I know you're

gonna make it far. This helped me a lot you know, because he believed in me and it got me to believe in me too.

While Autumn had support and guidance from her mother, she indicated how influential it was to have validation from her teacher because it helped to confirm that she would be successful in college. Autumn's further elaborated that her teacher's confidence was important to her because he went to college and was in a good position to judge her potential. While her mother was college educated, Autumn valued her teacher's appraisal because it was an external affirmation that she had the skillset to do well in college. Participants needed the support of their families and the support of high schools to provide assurance to them that they were prepared for college.

Meredith also indicated the influence and importance of receiving encouragement and support from her high school counselor who provided her with validation and guidance. This helped alleviate her concerns about college. Meredith stated,

It was like, I was able to actually talk to [my counselor] about like how I felt about school but then also how to like make it through high school and then continue on to college.

So, yeah, I'm really thankful for her because I feel like she's one of the people that really like pushed me to like to go to college because I told her like I don't know if I can make it to [the state university], like I don't know if I'm gonna have money." You can do it, you know, like just take out loans, like a lot of students do." And it's like, "Okay." And like if it wasn't for her, I feel like I probably would have ended up at [the local community college] or not gone at all. But like she encouraged me a lot because I express that, you know, like originally stressed about all that stuff. So, she helped me a lot with that and just told me I will be ok.

Her teacher's confidence provided her with the assurance that she would be okay in college. This validation allowed her to not settle for a 'lesser' institution because it provided her with the certainty that she would be successful. It also confirmed that Hmong students had concerns about their ability to go to college. With the assistance of high school teachers and counselors participants could feel assured that they could go to college and be successful.

While the majority of participants had parents who encouraged and supported their college aspirations, one participant in particular had a very different experience. Kong a third year student majoring in Media Arts and a first generation college student, felt his parents had not been supportive of his plans to go to college. However, since his peers were all planning to go to college, Kong also made plans to go to college. In this instance, Kong's friends and their parents became his mentors. He stated,

Many of my friends from school are like, 'Oh, we're going here and we're going there and this school is good for this or my parents drove us out in here to go check out this campus and it turns out it's good for that.' So again, I got a lot of my information from friends and like my friends' parents would tell me a lot of stuff too.... Like, 'Oh, if you're interested in this, go to this and if you don't know what you want to do, my one friend his name is [friends name], his parents told me like, 'If you don't know what you want to do, you should try going to community college first for a couple of semesters so you take a bunch of general classes and then you transfer out and you can plan out like what you want, what you like to do.

Kong's friends and their families' were able to provide him with a different perspective about college and this got him excited about college. His peers can be considered as his *fictive kin*, what Tierney and Venegas (2006) define as, peers who play a social support role that helps



create a culture of success. His fictive kin, vis a vis his peers, enabled him to think about college and be considered as college eligible in ways he did not believe he was before. The ‘lack of support’ he received from his family led him to rely on the support of non-family members to provide information and guidance on his path to college. It is important to acknowledge Kong’s family had limited knowledge about the college process. They were not able to provide him with the information he needed and received from others. Since Kong saw how involved his friends’ parents were in their college preparation processes, he felt his parents were not supportive of his plans to go to college. Nevertheless, he decided to go to college, regardless of the fact that he felt he had not received support from his parents.

In summary, mentors provide participants with access to knowledge that was not available to them otherwise. Mentors varied from family to high school staff. They provided participants with more personalized guidance and advice on how to prepare for college and what to expect. Mentors provided ‘learned lessons’ to participants so they did not make the same mistakes. Participants also had mentors who were high school teachers and counselors who were able to provide participants with validation that they were ready for college. Validation was instrumental for participants, because it afforded them with the additional encouragement and reinforcement that they would be successful in college. This validation was important because it demonstrated how critical high school counselors and teachers were to the college process. They influenced students to believe in themselves and motivated them to consider college as an option they could pursue. Without this validation, students were uncertain about whether they would be able to make it in college since most participants did not have parents with a college education. Therefore, the relationships respondents had with mentors was important because it was where

participants gained access to critical information about the college process, something most participants' parents and families did not have.

### **Gate Keepers: Agents of Opportunity**

The third form of social capital identified by participants was Gatekeepers. With the majority of participants from families with limited college knowledge (76.5% are first generation), 30% of participants (n=10) had Gatekeepers who provided 'critical' information, which specifically eased concerns about college costs. Gatekeepers were non-family individuals who provided important pieces of information. At times, gatekeepers shared information to participants serendipitously. Students were able to obtain this knowledge simply by having relationships with the 'right' person who had the 'right' kinds of information/capital. In all instances, the information shared transformed the college process for participants and altered the process by easing concerns for individuals.

For many participants, high school counselors were gatekeepers because they informed participants of their eligibility for specific incentives which participants were unaware of. This information was critical for participants. Lee, a 4<sup>th</sup> year student majoring in Biomedical Sciences, was the first in her family to go to college. She indicated how her high school counselor reached out to her during her senior year and helped her with her college process. She said,

[My counselor] was really nice. Although I didn't get to see her that much [in high school] because she didn't do a lot [for me] but the waivers was really helpful because I didn't know there's such a thing and she called [me and my family] up and she was the one who offered it. She offered to have the [application fee] waivers done for all my applications...Back then it was all about money so. I would say the waivers were the biggest help because, you know, I wasn't, I wasn't making that much money so, it was

kind of a good relief because I have four colleges I want to apply to, each are like, forty, fifty bucks, and that's like two hundred out of my pocket and it's stress. If I was to have to pay all that out of my pocket, I don't think I would've applied to all four. I think I would've applied to at least one or maybe two.

Lee's experience demonstrates how having her counselor reach out to her with information on the college application fee waiver opened a new opportunity for her. She did not have much interaction with her counselor in school hence her counselor was not a navigator or a role model. However, with this information, Lee was able to gain access to a resource that allowed her to apply to more than one college, without the fear of cost. Without waivers, her college choice process would have been very different. She would have applied to fewer schools, limiting her choice. While she did not have a close relationship with her counselor, the counselor was able to change the breadth of her college process and afforded her the benefits of choices she did not know or believe she had.

Unlike Lee, Macy met with her high school counselor frequently. She had grown up in a small rural town and after the passing of both her parents at a young age, her older brother and sisters raised her. With the support of her siblings, she decided to be the first to go to college but she had concerns about how she would afford college. Since Macy's immediate family network did not have the college knowledge to provide her, she made an effort to get to know people who could help her through the process. Macy's gatekeeper was her family's social worker who eventually became her high school counselor. Through this relationship, her high school counselor provided a lot of support for Macy, especially when it came to concerns about college costs. Macy stated,

[My high school counselor] helped me a lot. I think it's because she knew my situation, cause she was my family's social worker for a while. So she knew my history you know. So in high school, I knew I wanted to go to college so I asked her about it and she told me that I should go too. She was so helpful cause, she always gave me great advice. So when I decided I wanted to go to college, I was trying to find out how I can pay for college because I was scared. I don't know how I was gonna pay for it. When I asked [name of counselor] she told me to give her a week and she was going to see if she can get some more information for me. When I came in a week later, she told me about this presidential scholarship and how she thought I should apply for it. I didn't know anything about it, but she helped me and told me that with my grades, that I had a good chance of getting it. So I decided, I'm gonna try to get it and I got it.

With the assistance of her counselor, Macy applied for a prestigious scholarship at a local college which was given to only one student a year. With the encouragement and support of her counselor, she applied and received the scholarship. Macy was concerned about costs. She stated, "I think if I didn't get the presidential scholarship, I think I would have still went [to college]. I mean I was scared, I don't know how I was gonna pay for it but ...I was gonna figure out how I was gonna pay for it". While she had concerns about college costs, Macy always knew she was going to college. She was fortunate to have a gatekeeper assist her and provide her with information to decrease her concerns about the cost of college.

Another type of gatekeeper came from early college awareness programs situated in communities and schools. These programs provided participants with access to support services which pointed them to resources to assist them in the college process. Only two participants (6% of the sample) were involved in these programs. For them, these program served as gatekeepers

because they provided participants with a support network that ‘nudged’ them in directions that often resulted in positive benefits. An example of this was April who participated in a community service program where she had a supervisor who often spoke to her about college. This supervisor was a gatekeeper because he pointed her to a local scholarship program only available to students in her community. April indicated,

Mr. [supervisor name] who was with [community service program name] was very helpful. He hires the peer educators, you know, most of us were seniors that year and like even though I wasn't one of his peer educators, he knew my family since I was involved in the program before. He knew me well and I told him that I was not sure I could afford to go to college. So, then, like he found [me and the peer educators] these scholarships for us. He recommended us and then we got that scholarship and then my other scholarship I got was the [city name] scholarship. If it wasn't for Mr. [supervisor's name] I would not have known about the scholarship and I would have probably gone to a different college. Cause you know, college is expensive.

Through the referral and recommendations from her supervisor, April applied and received a 4-year tuition and fees scholarship to any in state college of her choice. This alleviated her major concerns about costs. Without this gatekeeper, April would have not known about the scholarship. April was fortunate to have this gatekeeper because she received information which opened options and transformed her experience with the college process while easing her concerns about costs.

Kou, a first year pharmacy student, was the first in his family to go to college and reported a similar experience. Like April, Kou's counselor and supervisor recommended that he submit an essay for scholarships to help pay for college since Kou was very concerned about

college costs. While he was apprehensive, with the support of his counselor and supervisor, Kou decided to submit scholarship essays. He stated,

They (high school counselor and supervisor) were very helpful. My counselor, he gave me a suggestion to do my [name of high school] scholarship. My counselor told me, if I write an essay and since I already have good grades, I'm going to get like a decent [scholarship] amount. So I submitted an essay and I was awarded \$1,500 for my [name of high school] scholarship. Then, my boss, he suggested I should do like the [name] scholarship essay. That was about \$10,000 for four years. So after I received the first scholarship I decided to give this one a try and I received it too...Having [this] type of support is helpful and just drives you to like, get that scholarship and go to college.

Kou was a little hesitant to apply for these scholarships even though he needed the money. With the support and 'nudges' of his counselor and supervisor, he decided to apply. As gatekeepers, not only did they provide him with information that was helpful, they 'nudged' him to submit an essay to potentially receive the benefits of the scholarship. After successfully receiving the first scholarship, Kou gained confidence to submit another essay for another scholarship opportunity.

While only 20% of participants indicated they had a gatekeeper, it was apparent gatekeepers made a deep and lasting impact on the college process. They introduced and opened access to opportunities, which were unseen. Gatekeepers not only believed in participants' talent and ability to do well, but they shared key pieces of information which eased concerns about college costs. This made the college process less stressful for students and in turn, their families. Gatekeepers essentially changed and transformed the process for participants, because they shared their own capital (eg. knowledge) with participants. By having a gatekeeper, participants were able to gain access to knowledge and information a majority of other participants were not

provided with. In all instances where participants had a gatekeeper, they became scholarship recipients. This demonstrates that while role models and mentors provide guidance to participants, individuals who had access to gatekeepers went to college with fewer concerns about college costs.

This form of capital is not covered in the social capital literature, as these agents of opportunity had no obligation to the student, yet they assisted in sharing information which transformed students' experiences. Social capital was critical, but it did not only operate functionally like both Coleman (1988) and Bourdieu (1986) suggested. Many participants experienced kind individuals who had no obligation to students but choose to be an information channel for them. This demonstrates the limitations of both Coleman (1988) and Bourdieu's (1986) concept and illustrates the complex and nuanced relationships that can assist students in accumulating college knowledge. This is similar to St. John, Hu, and Fisher's (2010) use of the concept of academic capital formation to focus on the ways interventions, in this case Gatekeepers can help students and their families gain college knowledge. Further, engagement in supportive networks helped students and their families gain access to colleges and universities, consistent with analysis of Twenty-first Century Scholars by Hossler, Schmit, and Vesper (1997). Through gatekeepers, students were able to acquire and form the academic capital necessary to successfully navigate the college process.

### **Discussion**

Findings from this study make an important contribution to the discussion and the comprehension of *how* Hmong college students developed the capacity to navigate the complex college process. Participants received support and guidance from several types of social agents that provided them with the motivation and necessary information to overcome the anxiety

regarding college attendance. Access to social capital through trusted sources, specifically through their family and community networks provided participants with a pathway to successfully navigate the college process. These findings support Tierney and Venegas's (2006) study, which found that relationships youth build with their families, communities, neighborhoods, and peers have the potential to play a significant role in enabling students to succeed in school. Their study focused specifically on the impact of peers who operate as fictive kin to students and become a social support network, which helps to create a culture of success. They suggest that fictive kin groups enable some students to think about college and be considered as college eligible in ways that other students are not.

The findings in this chapter provide support for the conceptual framework (Figure 6) by recognizing the role of community, via social capital, on the college process. With support and encouragement from their community, students were able to accumulate the proper knowledge about college. Regardless of where college knowledge was acquired from, it was apparent from participants' narratives that having access to 'trusted' persons with college knowledge was extremely beneficial. The support they received from family members, community mentors, and school personnel who believed in their college potential allowed participants to see themselves as college students. Something unique to this community is the important role Hmong mentors and role models are to students, especially as they are looked to for shared experiences. This is not surprising given the Hmong culture of being connected that has a foundation rooted in family and community.

Similar to earlier research, this study found social capital was important because it motivated and encouraged participants to see their own ability to go to college and be successful (Bryan et al., 2011; Perez & McDonough, 2008; Zhou & Kim, 2006). While each type of social



capital - Role Model, Mentors, and Gate Keepers - had different types of influence on the process, they each provided support for participants' on their journey to college. All three types of social capital provided the same message--- "Go to college. We support you". These sources of support allowed participants to feel they were qualified and capable of going to college. Stephanie succinctly summarized the importance of having social networks that support and provide guidance as, "it motivates me to keep continuing because there are people who are behind you helping you instead of like, pulling you down." In summary, these relationships and support networks help respondents understand and realize they are capable of going to and graduating from college.

## **Chapter 6. “It was a swing in the Dark”: The Role of Cultural Capital on the College Process**

This chapter examines the role of cultural capital on the college process of Hmong students. Findings in this study illustrate the important role cultural capital has on students’ college pathway. Cultural capital is defined as the accumulation and transmission knowledge from one ‘generation’ to the next (Bourdieu, 1986). Cultural capital is more than information on how to go to college. It also includes access to resources that provide students with the ability to successfully prepare for and navigate the college process. Cultural capital, in essence, provides individuals with the necessary resources to prepare for college. Student narratives illustrate the differences in cultural capital specifically vary by parental education level and confirms family capital impacts the students’ college process.

First, this chapter examines the role of cultural capital in Hmong American students’ college choice process and the differences in this process for first-generation vs. second-generation college students. Next, I discuss the major barriers faced by participants, most notably their concerns about college expenses, and examine their influence on the college process. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how participants overcame the barriers they faced during the college transition process and how these findings further extend our understanding about the college process of Hmong students.

### **Cultural Capital: Role of Parental College Capital**

Most students in this study were the first in their family to go to college and experienced a vastly different college experience than to their second-generation college student peers. As first-generation college students, there was little to no accumulation of college capital shared among parents and their children. Therefore, the majority of participants had to navigate the college choice process with little family knowledge. Students were accumulating college knowledge and resources that did not exist in their families'. Therefore, during the process majority of participants relied on non-family members for information and guidance. Kong, a first generation college student, recognized that college was the norm for his peers and he aspired for college too. He shared what he learned from visiting his friend's house in high school.

At my friend's house, his parents would talk to him about taking his ACTs and they asked me if I took mine yet. I had no idea what it was and they explained to me that I needed to take it, the ACT test you know, if I wanted to go to college. I mean, my parents never said anything to me, so I didn't know. If Scott's parents had not asked me and told me about it, I wouldn't know about it too. Talking to them got me interested in college because they told me how important college was to my future, you know. I guess I would hear, you know people at school talk about college but I never really considered it. So you know, they really helped me think about college, you know more seriously.

These conversations are a good example of one of the ways Kong's friends and their families influenced him to go to college. Having friends who had plans to go to college provided Kong with an environment where college was talked about regularly. Being surrounded by discussions about college, gave Kong the opportunity to consider the option seriously. Additionally, his conversations with his peers and their families allowed Kong to accumulate college knowledge

that he did not have access to at home. While Kong knew of and heard about college, he did not understand why he should go and how to get there. By being around college going peers, Kong was able to learn and have access to information that allowed him to make plans for a college education.

Similar to Kong, Jane, a first year student majoring in Pre-medicine also relied on obtaining information from individuals outside her family. She stated,

I was lucky I had help from my high school and friends. I know others, like my cousins who were not so lucky and it's like, unfair because they could be going to college too. But they didn't know. Actually, I didn't know too. I didn't know what to do. You know what the steps were, when to apply for college and how. I didn't know if I had everything. I just did what I thought I was suppose to, because that's what my high school and friends did. So, I am very lucky. I kind of followed their lead. But you know, it shouldn't be, like, you shouldn't just be lucky to go to college, like me, you know.

Jane recognized how fortunate she was to receive assistance during the college process from friends and at her high school. In contrast, her cousins did not have the same help and did not go to college. She felt 'lucky' to have made it to college because she was surrounded with peers who had plans for going to college and was able to 'follow their lead'. In addition, her high school provided assistance to make sure she and her peers were successful. However, even though Jane had some assistance, she remained unsure of whether she was taking the right steps. This uncertainty was consistent among all first generation college students in this study. Even if they had assistance from peers, teachers, or counselors, they did not have the family college capital to draw from and were hesitant to believe they were taking the necessary steps to get to college.

In contrast, participants who were able to rely on their parents for guidance and support were more confident than first generation peers, when preparing for college. Anna, a third year student majoring in Health Sciences, is one of the few participants who had parents with graduate degrees. She discussed how her parents assisted her during her college process,

Since my parents went through the [college] process, they were able to help me with my financial aid and my applications. Like, I had no idea what I needed to fill out on my FAFSA. My parents basically filled it out for me and they already knew I would be taking out loans. My parents helped me almost every step of the way, I mean, I had to do the work but they always checked on me to see if I did my work, like finished my applications and stuff. They always made sure I was doing what I needed to.

Unlike most participants, Anna's parents were able to share their knowledge about college to guide her process. While Anna understood she was responsible for doing the work, she had the additional assistance of having parents who would check in with her to ensure she completed certain tasks. Having parents who understood the college process provided Anna with an advantage over other students. She had confidence that she was completing all the necessary items to go to college. She did not have to know what the next steps in the process were because her parents did. She did not have to depend on others because she could count on her parents to know and remind her of what she had to do.

The advantages of having parents with a college education also afforded participants with the confidence and flexibility to explore what college had to offer. While the majority of participants were encouraged to pursue careers in the medical field, second generation college students were encouraged to explore. Mary, a fourth year Creative Advertising major spoke about her parent's support of her exploration of careers.

Whenever I am interested doing something or go on looking for new major, my parents they are like, “okay yeah, we’ll help you out no matter what, as long as it is for school”. So my parents, I don’t have the traditional Hmong family you know. My parents, they don’t tell me what to do. They are supportive of me, no matter what, as long as I go to school you know.

An important statement from Mary highlights the difference in her experience compared to majority of students in this study. She stated, “I don’t have the traditional Hmong family” which indicates her awareness that her family does not operate the way she sees other Hmong families. For example, Mary was not encouraged to pursue any specific major. Instead her parents told her they would support her as long as she stayed in school, regardless of major. Their encouragement provided Mary with a sense of support that many first generation students did not feel (see chapter 4) and it allowed her the ability to explore majors and careers with confidence because she knew her parents would stand by her.

Anna and Mary’s experiences offer a stark contrast, to the majority of the students in this study who were the first in their families to go to college. The results of this study confirm the influence of parental capital, measured by parental education, on the college process of Hmong students. Kong, Jane, Anna and Mary’s narratives demonstrate how family college knowledge can impact the educational experiences of participants. For example, Anna was able to benefit from her family’s cultural capital, since both her parents had gone to college and Mary was able to feel supported during her college process, as she explored college majors. Whereas, Kong and Jane came from families with no college experience, therefore they had to rely on others for the information and support Anna and Mary received at home. The transmission of college knowledge from Anna’s parents to her illustrates the clear advantage she had over Kong and

Jane who relied on accumulating college information from individuals outside the home. While Kong and Jane were able to acquire college information, they remained hesitant and uncertain that they had taken all the necessary steps.

### **Pay it Forward: Returning to the community**

As college students, participants in the study recognized they had a unique perspective. They successfully made it through the college process and understood the pathway was difficult because they did not have access to individuals at home who could provide knowledge and guidance about college. Understanding their experience, participants wanted to share their experiences and knowledge about college to encourage and motivate more Hmong students to go to college. Kao, a 4th year student majoring in Speech Pathology was determined and hopeful to make a difference in the Hmong community. She spoke about her motivations for giving back to the Hmong community and stated,

My parents were such advocates of education for me and I feel I should be as big of an advocate to the Hmong community, in terms of promoting the pursuit of higher education. And like, being the president of [student organization] at [institution], we just have to be. I always encourage members to do your best in college, because even if you are doing this for yourself, you are setting an example for the community. We are showing the community that this is something we can do. Just because we are first generation Hmong people, does not mean we can't do our best right now. We [don't] have to wait another generation to you know, get good jobs and to get educated. So it starts with us, so I am really passionate about pursuing higher education.

Kao's belief in a college education stemmed from her parents and she hoped to provide the same kind of motivation and support to other Hmong students. She hoped her example, as a college

student and future college graduate, could influence others to pursue college too. She wanted to pay it forward by returning to her community and assisting with helping others with their college process. Kao's comments highlight how the presence of Hmong college students sets an example to the community, especially to other Hmong students, because it demonstrates college is achievable. With two older siblings in college, Kao had the benefit of following in their path and she hoped to provide the same kind of support and guidance to other Hmong students who may not have access to the type of support system she had.

Participants felt a sense of responsibility to help the Hmong community since there are so few Hmong students who continue on to college. They want to make a positive difference. Participants were concerned and wanted to invest in the progress of the Hmong community by encouraging college going. Therefore, many participants were conscious about being actively involved in the community to encourage more students to consider college. Pa, a second year accounting student, reflected on why she wanted to make a difference in the Hmong community,

I look around and not too many Hmong kids continue on to a higher education. And I feel like, because there's not many of us, I feel like sometimes we can be looked down upon and I think that, if a generation is gone, the more of us that get a higher degree and we are more educated, that could be the support that we can get. I think just seeing how much that, our people have gone through, it just encouraged me to work harder. And even though I'm not going to be a doctor or a lawyer, I'm going to do what I want to do, which is accounting and once I accomplish that, I want to come back and encourage the youth to continue on too. Because I feel like, if we, if we just you know, don't go to college and we just work, we are not going to get anywhere.



Pa acknowledged the few Hmong students in college and saw it as a major concern that impeded other Hmong students from seeing college as an option. She felt it was important to encourage more students to go to college because she would like the community to achieve upward mobility and she believes that education was the path they should take. Both Kao and Pa spoke about the need to make a difference with the current generation of Hmong students, to help the Hmong community gain traction toward improving Hmong student representation in college. They each viewed their positions as Hmong college students, as a means of influencing and motivating other Hmong students to think about and plan to go to college.

With so few Hmong college students in the community, participants saw their status as college students as a source of pride, because they had *'made it'* and wanted to encourage more students to go to college too. Jane remarked,

It doesn't need to be this way. That is why I go back, I go back home to my high school and my family to share with them how I got to college. You know, cause if I made it, they can to. It shouldn't be this hard you know. They can do it, if they could just see, someone like them, you know, made it, they would, they could believe that they can go too, you know. With the right information and seeing students like them make it, I believe more students will go to college.

Jane recognized the lack of exposure and knowledge about college in the Hmong community was a major hurdle for students. She believes going back to her community will encourage other Hmong youth to aspire for college because they could relate to her. The desire to return to her community was a way for her to share the knowledge she had acquired about the college process. Her hope is to remove the barrier for students who do not have access to support persons.

Participants recognized they were now role models for younger students in the community, the way they once viewed other Hmong college students when they were in high school. Their newly acquired status as college students was something participants spoke of as a source of pride. Ger, a third year student majoring in Dental Hygiene stated,

I understand how hard it can be for students, you know. In high school, you are still so young and like, you don't really think about your future so much. I mean, you think about your future but you don't know where to start. I remember how hard it was and I remember how I looked up the Hmong college students. And now, I can provide my perspective, you know, my opinion with Hmong youth cause they, they aren't getting it sometimes. Like, our parents don't understand us and the schools, they don't too. So, as a college student, I can be like a role model, uhm...I mean a mentor to them, kind of like how I looked up to Hmong college students, to make sure they are thinking about their future you know, like help them go to college like me, maybe, if they want to.

Similar to Jane, Ger recognized how she could relate to younger students and get them to understand the importance of a college education. She pointed to the need to provide a perspective students could relate to because she understood their experience. The similar and often shared experiences allowed them to be relevant to Hmong youth.

Participants were pioneers in their families and communities by demonstrating that college was achievable. Andy, a first year student majoring in Pharmacology, spoke about being a pioneer in his family. He hoped he would pave a pathway for others like him, he stated,

Like, I'm Hmong [clan name] and it's not... yeah, there's quite a few Hmong [clan name] in [state], but none of us Hmong [clan name] in our direct, family has gone [to college]. Like, none of the guys have gotten like a college degree yet. So [my parents

are] telling me, “[Respondent’s name], you must be the first Hmong [clan name] guy to get a degree. You must represent Hmong [clan name] in [State], Hmong [clan name] everywhere else. For Hmongs in general.” So you know, I like that and I will aim, I will strive for that. I will get my degree and I would do all that, you know because I want to show my family that guys can go to college and get a degree too.

While his older sisters went to college, he was pioneering a college pathway for Hmong males in his clan to follow. Andy strived to be the first male in his family to attend and graduate from college. He wanted to show his family that Hmong males could obtain a college degree too. As a pioneer for his male counterparts, he is becoming a role model in his family and community by demonstrating that college is achievable. As a pioneer, he carves a path to college for other Hmong male students, especially in his clan and family, to make college less threatening and inspire others to follow because he has already made it to college.

Findings demonstrate that while the majority of parents supported and encouraged students to go to college, students’ experiences varied by parental education level, not parental earned income. While Lareau (1987) found middle-class parents having a greater advantage over working-class parents, in terms of availability of resources and cultural capital to assist their children in school, this study found differences were attributed to parental education. While for many students higher parental education also resulted in higher income levels, students did not refer to the advantage of being from middle income families. They referred to the benefits of having college-educated parents as having the most impact on their college choice process, because they were able to rely on their parents for support and advice.

First generation college students reported more uncertainty about the process, even though they had access to college information from outside sources. While students reported

their parents having high expectations of them, parents were unable to and did not provide important structural resources for students. Students had to rely on getting information from their teachers and schools. Second generation college students on the other hand, had less concerns about the college process and relied on their parents to guide them through the process. These findings help illustrate how cultural capital influences the pathway to college. Specifically, it illustrates the advantages of parental college capital, which provided them with assurance that they were doing the ‘right’ things. First generation college students did not have the same confidence.

The process of planning to go to college and enrolling in college had transformed their cultural capital. This accumulated knowledge influenced and impacted their educational and future trajectories. The experience of going to college in itself changed and altered their life’s course and the future of their families. This demonstrates how critical the decision to go to college was on respondents, their families, and their futures. In sum, it altered their life histories to reflecting hope and possibility that was once only dreamed about. Respondents are now experience the success associated with making it to college. This was something most students were the first in their families to accomplish.

Interestingly enough, only first generation college students referred to sharing accumulated college knowledge with their community to encourage more Hmong students to go to college. First generation college students wanted to transform and change the college process for other students because they recognized the most stressful part of the college process for them was getting information and feeling confident they had taken all the necessary steps to get to college. This finding is similar to St. John, Hu, and Fisher’s (2010) expansion of academic success beyond degree attainment and employment to include “a commitment to cross-

generational uplift, to enable subsequent generations to have the opportunity to achieve academic and career success” (p. 171). First generation participants in this study wanted to ensure more students receive proper guidance about the college process and receive support from someone who understood their experiences. Similar to participants wanting to give back to their families, paying it forward was discussed as a method for participants to offer information, guidance, and support about the college experience to others outside their immediate family (see chapter 4, for discussion on give back). However, second-generation participants did not experience the same challenges as first generation college students and could not relate. It is possible that second-generation college students did not experience a need to give back to their communities because they did not have the same struggles and challenges.

#### **Hurdles: “It was like a swing in the dark”**

This section will address the two major barriers participants in this study identified as creating the most anxiety and stress for them during the college process. Chapter 4 detailed the critical influence family has on inspiring and motivating the majority of participants to pursue a college education. While students in the study stated their parents valued a college education, their parents’ limited knowledge about the college process created hurdles for students because they did not have access at home to the resources to assist them in the college process. It is important to note that students in the study did not identify any barriers when asked directly. However, when they discussed their college process it was clear they experienced hurdles, which often were the result of not having supportive persons to lean on. Additionally, participants often had a lot of questions along the college pathway, which lead them to doubt they were taking the right steps.

## **Isolating process**

A review of student narratives indicated the majority of participants did not have the necessary college knowledge available to them and often were left to navigate the process alone. Hmong families do not have college knowledge since formal schooling was not readily accessible in Laos or Thailand. Therefore, unless parents received a college education in the United States, it was unlikely they received one in Thailand or Laos. Hence, knowledge about college or a formal education was limited. While the majority of students' families encouraged college going, their parents were unable to directly provide the necessary information, resources, and guidance on how to get there. Students, with limited knowledge, had to navigate the college process unaccompanied by a strong support person, which heightened their feelings of isolation during the college process.

Participants often reflected on how isolating it was for them to go through the college process. Even among the few participants that had parents or older siblings with college knowledge, all students indicated they felt alone. For many participants, as the first in their families to go to college, their feelings of isolation came from not having a person to depend on for guidance. While most parents were the source of participants' motivation to go to college, parents who did not have a college education were unable to provide them with college advice or knowledge. This left participants relying on others for information and guidance. Kim, a third year student majoring in Speech Language Pathology spoke about her parent's involvement,

My parents are, it just seems like they are the old fashion kind, really traditional so it seems like they don't, they tell you to go to college but they won't go with me to like search colleges, I did that on my own. And then if I was like, this is the college I want to go, then they will be like, "ok, that sounds like a good school", "no that doesn't sound

like a good school”. I mean, they want me to do well but they don’t know how to help me. It’s kind of up to me, you know to figure it out.

While her parents encouraged her to value education, her parents were unable to assist in her college process because they did not have the resources to share with her. They gave her their opinions about different colleges based on their impressions of each school but they were not able to provide her with concrete advice to help her with the process. Moreover, her parents were mostly concerned with how far schools were from home because they did not want her to move. Therefore, Kim took her parent’s opinions lightly because their intentions were less about academics and more about their comfort level with her not living at home.

Participants understood their position as first generation college students and recognized they had to rely on themselves to get the necessary information they needed to go to college. Similar to Kim, Meredith did not have family she could rely on to help her with the college process and had to find resources to assist her. While her sister was enrolled at the local community college, her sister did not offer much guidance to Meredith since she wanted to attend a four-year college. When asked about her family’s involvement in her college process Meredith stated,

Not involved at all. It was more...because like my mom didn't understand like the process at all. She just kind of thought of that you apply and that was it. But she didn't know that you had to do all that, I mean, I had to explain...I had to explain stuff to her but it wasn't like as detailed as it was explained to me. It was just kind of like a quick summary of like what I was doing and then that was it because then, she was just like, “Okay, I don't understand. Just do whatever you think is right,” and I'm like, “Okay.”

So, I would just have to like do like a quick summary of what I was doing and then just go do it by myself.

While her mother wanted to understand what Meredith was doing, her mother was unable to comprehend the complexities of the process and often let Meredith make the decisions for herself. She knew she did not want to go to the local community college like her sister. Therefore, she took initiative and asked her counselors and teachers for help. She had to do it herself because her family did not have the college capital to share with her. This left Meredith feeling alone because she did not have anyone in her family she could turn to for advice.

Being from families that did not have college knowledge forced students to carve their own path. They had to learn to be advocates for themselves and trust that they would be successful. For many participants in this study, they had to make their own decisions and often learned from their own mistakes. Kong reflected back on how confused he was about financial aid when he was applying for college. He stated,

I was actually really super confused about financial aid and like everybody says it's money that the government gives you but when you look at all the papers, it's just like, 'What is this? How does this apply?' And I don't know what the other stuff means...I guess I was just more scary than it was hard because like you're just like so intimidated by like, 'Oh, I don't know what any of this stuff is. I don't know how to do this. I don't know my parent's information and am I independent or am I dependent? Or what is all these stuff?' And I guess like after you finally start doing it, it gets a lot easier and like, 'Oh, okay, this is what that is. Oh, this isn't that scary but if you really don't know, it's just – all these different terms and all these different like rules and stuff, it's just kind of scary...It's pretty confusing because I had no idea what I was doing. I was like, why is



there a money charge to this and like, 'How do I get my transcripts?' And like I just filled out a bunch of stuff. I just – it was like a swing in the dark.

Kong's narrative illustrates the many complexities of the college process and the challenges of trying to comprehend a completely different language in order to be successful. Kong's metaphor of 'a swing in the dark' is an accurate assessment of how most participants felt – uncertain. The majority of participants felt unsure about whether or not they were doing the right things to prepare for and enroll in college. Participants went about the process trying to learn and accumulate enough information to help them jump over the hurdle of not having college knowledge in the family. However, they moved forward in the process hoping everything would eventually work out.

Participants spoke about having access to people who assisted them in their college process (see chapter 5). However, they were not aware of how to fully take advantage of resources. For example, participants did not always know the 'right' questions to ask and when they realized what questions to ask, it was often too late. April talked about how her high school counselors encouraged everyone to apply for financial aid but it was never clear to her, how financial aid worked. April stated,

They'll say like at school, [the counselors would] be like, apply for financial aid but I didn't really know what it was...like, I knew it was like government money and such. I just didn't ask them like how do I get it. I mean like yeah, you apply for it but like I don't know what questions to ask them. I kind of just sort of guessed I understood what I was doing but I don't, I even don't know now really, you now. It's just really confusing. But I guess I did it right because I got financial aid but I can't explain to someone else how I did it.

While her counselors told her to apply for financial aid, April did not understand how applying would get her financial aid. What is more striking is that April did not feel confident asking for help because she did not know what questions to ask. The financial aid process is so complex that even after enrolling in college, the process still is unclear to April. Additionally, the ‘guessing’ method was a common practice used by participants, as they guessed they understood something and simply hoped it would work out.

Going through the process without a strong support person by their side offering guidance, made students in this study question if they were on the right track. This led students to feel like they were navigating the college process in isolation, even if they had access to persons who could be a resource for college knowledge. Simply put, students felt they had to figure it out themselves and while they were persistent in being their own advocates, they also felt like they were taking a ‘swing in the dark’.

### **Concerns About College Expenses**

College expenses and affordability was a major concern for respondents and their families. This is not surprising, as college expenses is a concern for families across the U.S. and has been well documented in research (Paulsen & St. John, 2002; St. John, Paulsen, & Carter, 2005; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000b; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999). However, instead of students weighing costs and benefits as suggested by economists, many participants struggled with comprehending how to finance their education on their own. This was a challenge for participants given the complexities of the financial aid process and their lack of college knowledge. Therefore, many participants did not have all the relevant information available to them to understand how they would afford a college education. This meant students and their families made decisions about college, often with an incomplete picture.

Majority of first generation students came from families earning less than \$50,000<sup>23</sup> and they were very concerned about college costs. Similarly in St John's (2003) *Refinancing the College Dream*, he found a strong link between family finances, financial aid, and college enrollment. Meaning families and students were concerned about college costs and their ability to pay. The majority of these students indicated they were recipients of a Pell grant, indicating their eligibility to participate in low-income federal financial aid programs. As low-income students, without access to family capital on applying to college and financial aid, they were stressed. Participants from low-income families discussed how college costs were often the most stressful part of the college process. Yea a fifth year, pre-pharmacy major student explained why college costs was such a big a concern,

We haven't been here in the US for that long. So most of our parents are not educated so they're working in like dead end jobs that pay them minimum too, you know, less than \$10.00 an hour. And with that like they don't have the funds to help [Hmong students] get to college. Without the funds and without the knowledge on how to get funds for college, people don't go.

Her narrative described how college expenses impacts students' decisions to go to college. She attributes the Hmong community's low education attainment rates and low socio-economic status to their lack of knowledge on how to obtain financial support for a college education. Without knowledge of financial resources and college knowledge, families and the community are left believing a college education is not within reach because it is too expensive.

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<sup>23</sup> The U.S. Census Bureau poverty threshold in 2013 for a family of 5 was \$29,398 a year. Approximately 80% of Pell grant recipients have a family income at or below 150% of the poverty line, which is equal to \$44,097. Therefore, I will refer to students from family income levels of \$50,000 or less as low-income students.

College costs was so concerning to participants that many investigated non-college options, which could assist in making college more affordable. Participants understood they could not expect their families to pay for their college education because their families would not be able to afford it. One participant in this study chose to enter the military after high school, to ensure he would be able to go to college because he knew his parents could not support him. Kong stated,

The military is pretty good. I mean, the main reason why I went was because I was pretty sure my parents aren't gonna help me pay for school just because I've seen like how many people like rely solely on their parents and I'm just like, 'Oh, my parents aren't, they aren't financially set so I'm not gonna bother them'. I'm just gonna – if I want to make it, I got to like, do this on my own.' And I don't know how else to pay for school so I'm just gonna go to the army.

Kong knew he wanted to go to college but understood the limitation of his family's resources. After he discovered the cost of his dream school, an art academy in Florida, was too expensive he looked into other options. He specifically looked for options that would provide him an opportunity to go to college without being concerned about costs or his parents needing to contribute financially. Interestingly enough, while Kong had access to college information from his peers and their families, he did not know about federal financial aid in high school. He believed the G.I. Bill was the only form of financial aid available to him. This illustrates how his access to college knowledge was limited. Since he did not have access to college knowledge at home, he made a decision to pursue other options, with an incomplete understanding of the financial options available to him.

To address concerns about college, participants had to take initiative to identify what they needed to do to afford a college education. For example, Meredith was very concerned about how she would afford a college education and took steps to ensure she understood what she could do to get money for college. She stated,

I just talked to my guidance counselor a lot about it. And then, I'm like occasionally, I went to talk the office of financial aid and then like, there was just like, "Well, you come from a low-income family, right?" And I'm like, "Yeah." There was like a possibility that you're gonna get a lot of grants and like those grants are really gonna help you through school. So, just make sure that you take advantage of that and do it like every year because it's gonna really be to your advantage." And like that's when I stopped worrying about it as much because I realized that like, "Yeah I do have to take out loans but compared to most people I know, like the loans that I do have to take out [IB]" So, then, that's how I kind of adjusted and I kind of stopped worrying about it as much.

Meredith was persistent and utilized the resources available to her to accumulate information on how to fund her education. Her persistence provided her with assurance from her guidance counselor that she would receive sufficient financial aid and would be able to afford a college education. Since Meredith was navigating the college process by herself, she knew she would have to find answers to her most pressing concerns or risk not going to college. Not going to college was not an option for her, so she learned to be her own advocate and did not stop asking questions and seeking answers until she received confirmation that she could afford a college education.

This finding on college costs, support St. John, Hu, and Fisher's (2010) concept of academic capital formation and illustrate how students contend with financial challenges during

the college process. Low-income students are particularly vulnerable to college costs because they are not in a position to pay for a college education. In addition to personal concerns about college costs, students also had specific concerns about student loans.

**Student Loans: Investment or Debt Accumulation.** Participants were particularly concerned about accumulating debt in order to obtain a college education. Coupled with trying to understand how to afford a college education, the additional anxiety of accumulating debt was overwhelming to participants and their families. Most students in this study were from low-income families. Navigating the college process required students and their families develop an ability to overcome personal concerns about college costs, which included living costs. Coming from families with little to no history with formal education, participants and their families' struggled with comprehending the need for student loans and rationalizing the accumulation of debt for a college education. Interestingly, there were two participant perspectives about student loans. Some saw it as an investment, others as debt accumulation. This varied by parental education level and family income level.

Low-income students were more likely to cite concerns about college costs and the accumulation of debt in order to go to college. Being from low-income families made it difficult for students and their families to justify the need to take out an educational loan, even though they believed an education was a worthy investment. The concept of accumulating debt was overwhelming and concerning for these students. For Shoua and Pakou, they feared educational loans because of their oldest sister's poor borrowing decisions, which escalated their concerns. Pakou explains how she decided to attend the local community college first,

I didn't want to be like my sister you know. She has a lot of debt and I don't want that.

So I decided to go to [NAME] community college because it was cheaper and I can transfer my classes to a [four year] college later.

Their oldest sister chose to attend a college four hours away from home, took out a lot of student loans and also incurred a large credit card balance. This made them very sensitive to college costs and very nervous about borrowing any money for college. To ensure they did not replicate their sister's experience, they both decided to go to the local community college and live at home. The decision to attend community college allowed them to decrease their out of pocket expenses because they did not have rent, utilities, or food expenses. This provided them with the option to obtain a college education with the least amount of cost incurred. While Pakou seemed content with her decision to stay local, Shoua offered a different perspective about her choice. She stated,

I wanted to go to [name of school] but my parents told me I couldn't because I would have to take loans. They are worried that I would do what my sister did and take out a lot of loans. So I had to go to the community college or my parents would be upset with me. But I wouldn't, you know, I am not my sister. So you know, my sister kind of ruined it for all of us.

Shoua's reflection illustrates how her family's concern about debt influenced her decision to not attend her first choice college. Her parents were very conscious about college costs and encouraged their younger children to stay local. Even though Shoua believed she would not make her sister's mistakes, she unwillingly stayed local to appease her parents.

Similarly, Alexis a 2<sup>nd</sup> year accounting student was influenced by her older siblings college debt accumulation while in college. She stated,

I've always struggled with is, you know, applying for these scholarships that people are telling me but also like researching for any other scholarships that will help me now because I definitely don't want to be in debt. My sisters are in debt, you know, for going to college. And so, that's something that I'm constantly struggling with trying to avoid. Her fear of debt encouraged her to look for options to assist in funding her college education. Like Shoua and Pakou, Alexis did not want to accumulate debt for a college degree but she took the initiative to find other options available to her to help finance her education. Alexis was very proactive in searching and applying for numerous scholarships. Being proactive resulted in Alexis securing enough scholarship and grant aid that she did not have to take out any student loans, like her sisters did.

While all participants' were concerned with student loans, many participants in the study came to terms with the need to borrow money to go to college. Student loans were seen as a necessity to gain a college education. Andy, the youngest in his family to go to college shared how he struggled with student loan debt. He stated,

I asked everyone but it really, it didn't help. They couldn't solve, they couldn't tell me why my loan was so high and my other grants were just so low. And then, yeah, I was freaking out about that for weeks. And then, I got to a point where I thought about it, and I was like, you know, it's a loan. I'll pay back if I work hard. I got into that mentality. So then, I went to up my parents, I approached them and I was like, "Don't worry about it. I got it under control. If you support me, then I will pay it back in like 10 years or whatever.

While Andy was concerned about how many student loans he was offered, he had the additional task of convincing his parents that taking out students loans was a good choice. He recognized



that he would need to take out loans in order to cover his college expenses because his grant aid would not cover his full cost of attendance. For Andy, the benefits of his college degree outweighed his hesitation to accept the loans he was offered. Once he explained his rationale for taking out loans, he received his parent's support with one piece of advice, "only borrow what you need. It's not free money".

For participants with at least one college educated parent who came from families that were much better off (family income of \$50,000 or more), student loans were perceived as an investment in their future. In essence, the benefits of a college education outweighed the costs. For these participants, while they were concerned about debt, they did not let it influence their college process. Pa, a second year accounting major stated,

I knew I would have to take out loans to go to college. Almost everyone I know takes out a loan, so I wasn't too worried about it, you know. It's an investment in my future and I believe in myself, so I'm don't let it bother me too much you know. I mean, I don't want to take out a lot of loans, but I will take out what I need you know.

The difference in approaches towards student loans resulted in different outcomes. For example, Pa attended her first choice institution and borrowed what she needed for her college expenses. She recognized taking out college loans was a part of the process and was careful to only take out what she needed. In contrast, Shoua unwillingly choose to attend a local community college instead of going to her first choice college so she would not have to take out loans to pay for college. Shoua did not want to accumulate debt to obtain a degree, therefore opting to forgo the opportunity to attend her college of choice.

Students perspectives about student loans influenced how they approached the college process. Students who viewed student loans as only debt accumulation were more hesitant to

take out loans and chose to attend more affordable colleges to minimize expenses. A majority of students hesitant about loans, came from lower income families (\$50,000 or less) and were first generation college students. In comparison, those who saw student loans as an investment in their future were more ‘comfortable’ taking out loans and often went to the college of their choice. This meant, students from higher income families were more empowered to choose an institution based on fit and not solely on cost. These students came from homes where at least one parent had a college education. It is clear, parental education and family income influenced the perspectives students had about college costs.

**Choice.** College costs were a major concern to students and their families. This often resulted in students being encouraged to attend the more affordable college, instead of the ideal college which offered their major and fit. Some participants’ concerns about costs was related to the sticker price of an institution – the printed cost of attendance. For these participants, they choose to attend a community college, before even applying for aid or scholarships, because it seemed more affordable option. For example, Hlee explained how she decided to attend a community college before transferring to a four-year college. She indicated,

I told my teachers I was going to a community college and they asked me, ‘well, where are you going to transfer afterwards?’ I’m like, see that’s, I don’t know. That’s why I’m going to a community college and they’re like, well, you know, like, Midwestern State University is really good, you know, you did really well in the ACT, maybe you should go to Midwestern State University. I’m like, but I don’t want to, like, I guess, I’m not saying waste your money... the cost for classes will be lower at a community college, you know, like, my siblings, my older siblings were all like, at a community college, you can get the same amount of, I guess, of knowledge that you get at a university if you take

the same course at the community college, but you'll get it at a lower price so you might as well just go to a community college first. So I was like, oh okay, you know, so, that, I guess like, my parents encouraged me to go to [a four year] college but my older siblings were the ones who encouraged me to go to a community college, if I didn't know what to do, so yeah. So, when people asked me about going to a community college, I'm just, yeah I just said. 'I really want to start out, like, just, I'm not saying easily, but like, I just want to like, know how it feels to be a college student first, you know, before I actually like, go off to like a bigger university'.

While Hlee's parents encouraged her to go to a four-year institution, she decided to take the advice of her siblings and go to a community college first because she did not know what career she wanted. The community college offered her an opportunity to explore possible careers without the paying the costs of a four-year college, which was important to her. She did not want to feel like she was wasting money. After three years at the community college, Hlee enrolled at a four-year college. In retrospect, she indicated she should have attended the four-year college instead of the two-year college because transfer students do not qualify for scholarships and grants. This forced Hlee to take out more loans at the four-year college which was the major issue she was trying to avoid in the first place.

Other participants selected colleges based on their assessment of how much it would cost them to attend a college. After weighing their options, participants often selected the option that would result in accumulating little to no debt. This often meant they would stay local and live at home. Ger stated,

I guess for my lifestyle it was difficult for me to like go to a big school so I decided to commute because it's definitely because of the cost like my parents, we couldn't afford it

and so I went to [the local community college] to save on cost and partly it was closer so it's easier for my dad to like take me to school you know, yeah. And in part at that time I was like working and then going to school at the same time and I thought I could manage all work and school so it was--- and I decided to go there because I was close to work and I was close to home then my parents can help me with you know going to school and stuffs like that.

She stayed local because it allowed her to rely on her family for assistance. For example, her parents would drop her off and pick her up from college, which allowed her to not have to take on transportation costs since her family only had one car. Ger transferred to the local four-year college after being enrolled at the local community college for three years. Choosing to stay local, she was able to work and save enough money to purchase a car so she did not have to rely on her parents anymore for her transportation needs.

College expenses influenced students' college choice by narrowing the choice to the institution which offered the best financial aid package. Lee, a fourth year Biology major discussed how she decided against attending her first choice college and selected her current college. Lee stated,

So I based [my choice] on [which colleges] accepted me and how much financial aid I would be getting because it was going to be hard, so I don't, tuition- wise, paying for tuition wise, I don't ask my parents. It's all out of my pocket and out of financial aid...Because I wanted to get away from the family but it was really expensive and tuition was really high and I didn't get as much financial aid there so I decide to come here and live at home.

Lee wanted to go to a college four hours away but after receiving her financial aid award letter, she did not receive sufficient financial aid, including loans to cover her cost of attendance.

Therefore, she decided to live at home because it was the more affordable option. While Lee was not concerned with taking out student loans, her school of choice was much too expensive for her and she could not afford to attend.

Similarly, Tou made his decision based on his financial aid award. He was very concerned about college costs. His college decision was based on how much he would have to contribute to his college education. Tou explains how he decided which college to attend. He stated,

Well I knew that, like I already knew the colleges I was going to apply to...I applied to all [four] of them. I did accepted to all of them but you know and then after I got you know the FAFSA, not the FAFSA, the paper that tells me how much is gonna cost, I'm like 'oh okay, oh, well that's nice' and then I saw Wayne State, I'm like oh it's pretty cheap, and I look at it and I was like hey, and I thought about it and hey my [financial aid] can pay for all of the tuition if I was full time student you know 12 credit it's the minimum. So I'm like oh ok, they can pay it cover all that for me right and then look to everything else and it couldn't. So I'm like you know I'm choosing Midwest State, but not only that I always thought of Midwest State, it was always gonna be like either Midwestern University or Midwest State, I'll review them so that kinda help me a little bit too lower to pick my choice out.

While he had options, his choice was a practical decision based on how much of his tuition was covered by his financial aid. His concerns about college costs made him very sensitive to how much his family would have to assist him. Hence, he ultimately chose the institution where his

financial aid would cover the greatest portion of his tuition because he did not want his parents to have to pay for any portion of his college education.

Other participants were less concerned about college expenses and more focused on selecting a college they believed would provide them with a great overall college education.

Michelle, a second year student explained her college choice process,

Yeah I think despite the program that I got in at [Midwest State] was cheaper, I chose to come here. When I came here [to Midwestern University] on just the campus like on visit day, I think I just really liked the community. I really liked the campus in itself and so it really sold me to like come here. The buildings had so much history and the people, there was a community here that I really liked. So I came here, even though it was a little more expensive. I just liked it better.

While Michelle was conscious of college expenses, she did not let it impact her decision to attend the college she felt would be a better fit for her. Some participants were more conscious of making decisions that reflected their idea of what they wanted from a college education. While the more affordable college also had a program she was interested in, Michelle opted for the college that she liked.

The college choice process of most students in the study was influenced by their concerns about college costs. Specifically, students were uncertain how they would afford a college education and searched for ways they could acquire funds to pay for college. With the changing landscape of higher education affordability, loans have become the option available for most families to pay for a college education, which resulted in two perspectives from students. Some students concerned with debt accumulation chose to attend institutions based on how much debt

they would accrue. Whereas, other students saw loans as a investment in their future. Each perspective resulted in different student choices.

### **Self-awareness: Developing Agency**

As college students, participants in this study reflect a distinctive subset of students from the Hmong community. With low high school graduation and bachelor's degree attainment rates, students in this study reflect a marginal group of students. Therefore, the experiences of these students only shed light on how they made it to college. Results demonstrate the important role family had on the college process by instilling early aspirations for college. While family has an important role, students were pioneers and navigated the college process in isolation because most of their families were not be able to provide them with guidance.

As pioneers, students had to develop the confidence to move forward in the college process even though they were often uncertain. While many felt alone and isolated during the process, students took initiative to find answers to ensure they would be successful. They were their own advocates in the college process, pushing forward with hopes that they were taking the right steps. Participants understood that they had to be resourceful and independent in order to be successful. For example, Chris spoke about how she found answers to her questions,

I was kind of scared because, you know, my parents can't really help me because they didn't know anything about college. So, but then again, I guess I was more independent. So, I just pretty much went on all these websites, researched everything, pretty much called them, asked them what I needed, and that kind of stuff. So, I pretty much...it's mostly web work and then, I think that the college fairs, I'd go and then I'll ask like the representatives about like how the campus is like what programs. So, everything, I pretty much researched on my own.

As the first in her family to go to college, Chris did not let her lack of family college knowledge inhibit her from finding the appropriate resources to assist her, even if she had to do it on her own. Students became aware that they would have to navigate the process alone. They utilized resources on the web, at their high school, and at college fairs. While student were 'on their own', they did not let this hinder them from going to college. They took initiative and gather the necessary information in order to achieve their goal of going to college.

Taking initiative also resulted in participants recognizing the need for them to choose their own path. Some choose paths that diverged from what their families wanted them to do. Participants who did not see eye to eye with their parents' perspective on their major or college choice, were sometimes forced to make a decision between being true to their parent's authority or respecting their own interests and motivations. This was an area of contention for participants as they often were challenged with balancing their responsibilities to their families with their own hopes for themselves (see chapter 4).

For many participants, taking initiative, the college process provided them an opportunity to define themselves in the midst of balancing their families and their own needs. Kim a third year student majoring in Health professions stated,

I always waited for my parent to help me decide what I should do because I value their opinion you know. But going through the college process myself, I saw that my parents aren't able to, you know provide me with help on everything, cause they don't know everything. I mean, they do but I realized I was making decisions for myself, my future you know, and I didn't have to do everything the way they wanted me to anymore. Cause you know, I can do it myself but uhm, you know, I want my parents to be happy with me



you know. But I can't just do things to make them happy all the time, cause it's not fair to me too. You know what I mean, it's like, going to college it helps us both.

During the college process, participants recognized they had to make their own decisions about their future. While their families remained important to them, they understood they needed to make decisions that would be mutually beneficial. For example, Kim choose to attend a college her parents did not approve of. While she understood they wanted her near home, she choose to enroll at a college two hours from home to provide her with the opportunity to become independent from her family. She stated, "College has given me the opportunity to be myself. Like I have freedom to do what I want and I don't have my parents watching over me and telling me when I need to be home."

The college choice decision was an area of contention for most female participants because parents wanted them to stay local, due to traditional family values. It took strong personal will for participants to make the decision to attend a college away from home, against the advice and opinions of their families. Joua, a first year student attends one of the most competitive institutions in the region and reflected how she made her decision. She stated,

I wanted to go to the best college I could get into. So I applied to a few colleges but I wanted to attend University of the Midwest because it is a great school. That's what my teachers talk about and when I look at the rankings you know, it's one of the top schools. So I really hoped I would get accepted, I didn't know if I would. So when I did [get accepted], it was easy for me to decide where I wanted to go.

Joua always knew she wanted to attend a selective institution. While her family encouraged her to consider smaller, less competitive, and more affordable colleges, she aimed for the best possible institution. The institution she applied to required more work than the smaller less

competitive school, which resulted in a lot of time and energy to secure a spot. However, her persistence and strong will went unnoticed as her family did not understand or recognize the difference between her selective institution and the local community college. She stated,

“My parents are still upset that I chose to come here, because it is more expensive than the college near home, you know. Like a lot more. But I decided, this is the best choice for me and I came here. I do not regret the decision to come here and I think my parents will eventually understand why I choose to come. Well, I hope they do.”

In this instance, Jousa made the decision that was best for her, knowing full well her parents would disapprove. While they are unhappy with her decision, she was hopeful they would come around to realizing she made the decision she believed was in her and her family’s best interest because she attended a college that offered her an excellent education.

As a result of being the first in their families to pioneer a path to a college education, participants were placed in a position where they had to take initiative and trust in their ability to make the right decisions along the way. This was a change in roles and responsibilities for students, as they were used to depending on their families to make decisions for them.

### **Discussion**

The results of this study illustrate the role of cultural capital on the college process and the importance of persistence for first generation college students. Students who had parents with a college education were afforded the advantage of having college knowledge in the household. In contrast, first generation college students were unable to depend on their parents for information and had to rely on external people to provide information and guidance. The difference in outcomes between first and second-generation college students was striking. First generation students moved along the college process constantly uncertain that they were taking

the appropriate steps. In comparison, second generation college students had parents checking in on their progress and passing along important information to them. The results further confirm the important role parental capital has on the college process (Coleman, 1988; Hamrick & Stage, 2004; McDonough, 1997; Teranzini & Pascarella, 1991).

First generation college students recognized the uphill challenge they had by not having access to family college knowledge. This recognition made many first generation students adamant on returning to the community to share their accumulated college knowledge with other students like them who do not have access to college knowledge in the home. First generation college students took it as a personal agenda to ‘pay it forward’ by doing what they could to encourage more Hmong students in the community to go to college. In addition, as college students they were now role models in the community and had the opportunity to share their unique experiences with other students who could relate to them. Participants believed if other students saw them in college, they would be see college as obtainable.

The college process was challenging for students in the study because they often felt they were navigating the process alone and were concerned with how they would afford a college education. These two major concerns affected the majority of students’ college choices, as they attended the institution that offered the most ‘free’ aid. Unlike college choice literature, which indicates students will carefully weight the costs of each option available to them, participants were weighing strictly how much debt they would accrue. The majority of participants were concerned about taking out students loans to pay for their college because they saw student loans as unnecessary debt accumulation. Other participants saw student loans as an investment in their future and often choose to attend their first choice college. Student’s perception of student loans lead them to base their decision solely on the sticker price, the loans offered, or the out of pocket

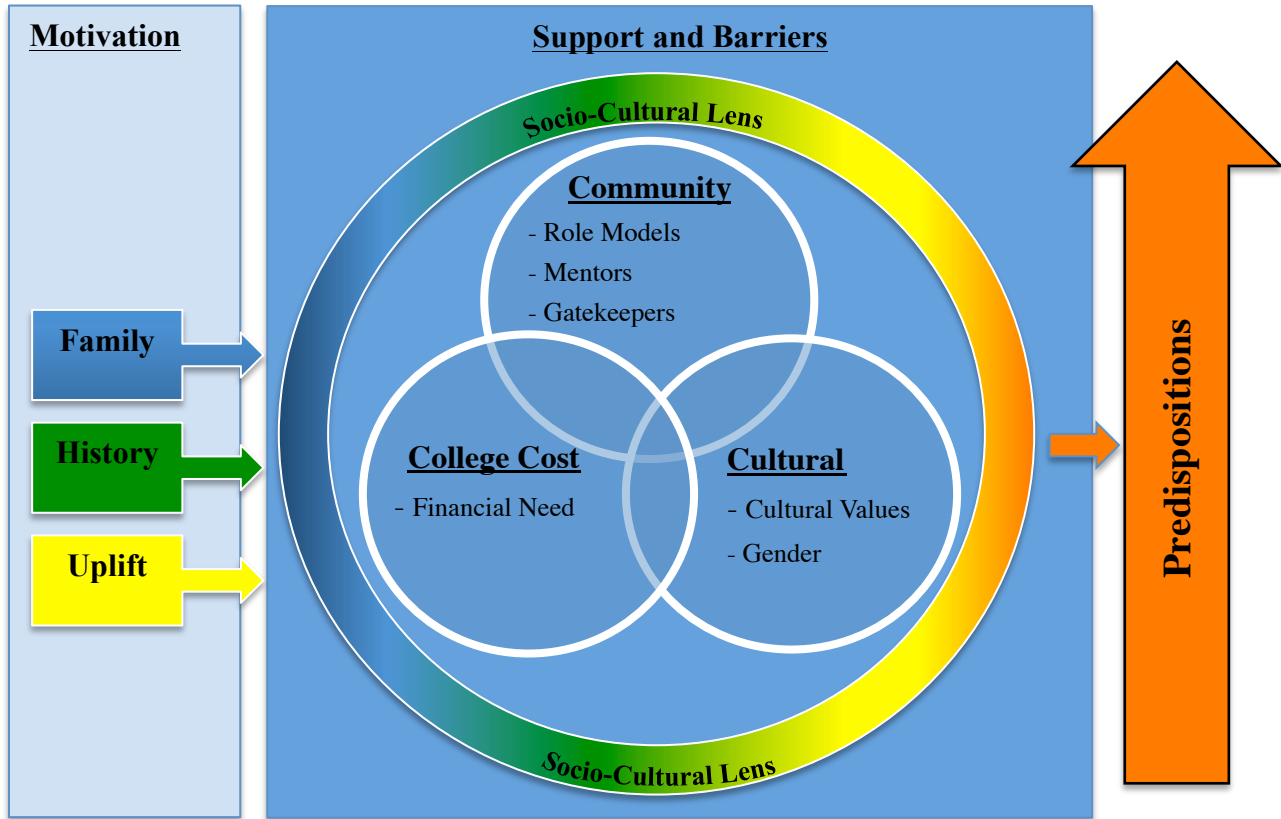
costs. For many, college costs inhibited students from attending their institution of choice because they were fearful of accumulating debt.

Lastly, as pioneers, participants in this study offer a unique perspective on how they made it to college. Their experiences illustrate the complex challenges they had along the college process, especially as they navigated an unclear pathway, developed the initiative to find answers, and learned to become comfortable making decisions that were in their best interests even if it was not supported by their families. With families at the center of the Hmong culture, students were mostly concerned with how to keep their families happy and supportive, especially if they wanted to pursue a career or enroll in a college their parents disagreed with. As pioneers, participants learned to balance their goals with the goals of their families. Participants tried to chose the options that would satisfy both sides, which often resulted in their family's happiness. Other participants, however, put their interests ahead of their families and moved forward hoping they would gain their parents support. As pioneers, participants are navigating a path that has not been taken, full of firsts –which forced them to decide who to make happy first, their family or themselves.

## **Chapter 7. Conclusion and Implications**

The purpose of this study was to examine the educational decision process of Hmong college students to understand the motivational factors that influenced their decisions to go to college, inclusive of the barriers they may face when it came to accumulating the information necessary to be successful during the college process. For this study, I focused on the predisposition stage of college choice, defined as individual and organizational characteristics which influence an individual's decision to go to college (Hossler & Gallager, 1987). With this definition, I focused on identifying key experiences, exploring how students developed the aspiration to go to college and sustained their commitment towards a college education. Accordingly, I analyzed interviews from 34 Hmong college students using a phenomenological qualitative approach to learn about their path to college. I examined how Hmong students made the decision to go to college and identified the factors which prompted their commitment. However, since my participants were already in college, my findings are a result of them recalling what factors influenced their decision to go to college. In this chapter, I summarize and highlight findings from this study, examine the findings in relation to the conceptual framework (see Figure 6) presented in chapter 3, present a new framework which is an evolution of the initial conceptual framework, and discuss implications for practice and research.

**Figure 7. Hmong College Student Predisposition Process**



**Family Matters in Promoting College Aspirations**

This study focused on students’ decision to enroll in a four-year college. Therefore, the results of this study only reflect the experiences of students who successfully went to college. Recognizing this limitation, I focused on understanding the predispositions of these students to understand how they developed the aspirations to go to and prepared for college.

**Family Values Created Educational Aspirations**

Findings from this study revealed family was a critical factor that prompted students to develop an early commitment for a college education. Given their commitment to a college education, it was important to understand where their aspirations stemmed from. This was similar to findings from previous studies, which indicated students often cited their families as the major reason they aspired for a college education (Aldous, 2006; Freeman, 2005; Gofen,

2009; Knight, Norton, Bentley, & Dixon, 2004; S. Lee & Hawkins, 2008; Lor, 2008; Wong, Wong, & Obeng, 2011). The majority of the students in this study had no doubt they would go to college and aspired for it because they were always told college was not an option – it was expected. Specifically, college choice literature found family characteristics such as parental education, parental support, and parental engagement are influential predictors of student achievement and attainment.

Participants highlighted how parents were their primary motivators because they instilled an early commitment towards education. This was exemplified in family conversations where college was the focus and the center of discussions at home. This led the way to instilling college as a social norm in the family, even among first generation college students, as college was seen as the *only* next step after high school. Students came from families that valued a college education and in turn, it inspired and encouraged students to aspire for a college education.

College was especially valued among participants and their families because it was an opportunity not afforded to their families when they lived in Laos. After migrating, students and their families saw education as a vehicle for social and economic mobility. Findings illustrate students, regardless of gender, were very conscious of the role a college education would have on their career options and their family's financial future. However, it is important to also note that while participants spoke about their families influence on their educational aspirations, many participants had siblings who did not aspire for college and went straight to work after high school. This demonstrates the limitation of family values alone on college aspirations, as not all siblings of participants went to college. Therefore, while family values are influential in participants' educational aspirations, they did not ensure all students went to college. Additionally, it is important to highlight a gender difference on family influence: females

participants were often the first in their families to go to college whereas male participants were often the ones following their older siblings lead, usually a sister. Therefore, without a lead, male participants were more likely to be pioneer for males in their family, on the path to go to college.

### **Uplift: Commitment to a Higher Education**

Findings illustrate education was seen as the primary method to achieving financial success. Similar to Sue and Okazaki (1990), participants identified education as the most secure way to getting out of poverty and obtaining a successful career. Students often referred to education as *the way out* of their current financial circumstances and achieve the American Dream. Participants were very sensitive to their family's history and background as refugees and often referred to how it motivated them to push harder to be able to make their families and communities proud of them. Students went to college with the hope of giving back to their families and their community. The theme of give back through uplift was very prominent among participants. Student's educational aspirations and achievements were a method to show gratitude to their families and communities because they could inspire more students to go to college.

The pattern of uplift found in this study is also evident in the historical African American tradition, where children are supported to do better than their parents (Siddle Walker, 1996, Murtadha & Watts, 2005). In *Breaking the Access Barrier* (St. John, Hu, & Fisher, 2010), researchers found two patterns within families and communities which either reinforced uplift or constrained it. These were: *replicating patterns* which reinforce the maintenance of their current class status by pursuing work after high school or *transforming patterns*, which supported uplift in social status by pursuing a post-secondary education. For this study, the majority of students reported having families with transforming patterns that supported and encouraged college



going. In addition, students were committed to continuing the legacy of transforming patterns by giving back to their families and their communities.

Students referred to the need to repay their parents for the support they received because ‘they have done enough’ for them. Education was seen as the predominant method to show gratitude to their parents and families. Students recognized their parents had placed so much hope on them to bring the family upward mobility and they did not want to disappoint them. Student referred to “making parents proud” which aligns with the cultural explanations of Asian American achievement. This exemplified how cultural values surrounding ‘saving face’ and ‘pride’ was influential in encouraging educational aspirations among Hmong students by instilling a commitment to ‘repaying’ their parents. Interestingly, while male and female participants spoke about ‘making parents proud’, male participants specifically were the only ones to refer to ‘saving face’. Male participants were concerned about how their actions would impact their family’s reputation and was focused on making sure they protected their family’s ‘face’ or image. This may reflect deeper gender roles among participants, which were not explored in this study.

### **Cultural Complexities**

Analyses of students’ education pathways revealed the cultural challenges they experienced. Specifically, Hmong American students identified the complexities they experienced as they tried to balance the Hmong and Americans aspects of their experiences in the classrooms and at home. These roles were often at odds with each other because their Hmong identities were situated in family and community. In contrast, their American identities were more focused on the individual, which emerged from their individual experiences in education and connectivity to the broader community. These dual identities often created tensions where

participants had to decide between appealing their American or Hmong identities. This put them in a difficult position as they tried to find balance between two identities and perspectives. This is consistent with earlier research which found immigrant children experienced dual identities which complicated the educational experiences of students because of their uniqueness of their identities (Carter, 2005, 2006; S. J. Lee, 2002; Ngo, 2008; Stritikus, 2007; Warikoo, 2009; Zhou, 2001). Specifically, Lee (2002) found Hmong students experienced a striking imbalance between their home identity and their school identities. This caused students to feel like they had two separate identities which often created confusion and anxiety for them.

The cultural complexities students experienced are exemplified through two situations: selection of college based on their major/career choice and gendered differences in college choice. The first situation occurred when students were selecting a college major, which influenced which college they would apply and attend. Students referred to parents wanting them to pursue a specific majors, often related to the medical or engineering field. Parental knowledge about majors was limited and often linked to their understanding of financially stable careers, which would result in a lucrative job after college. Whenever there was a mismatch, meaning the student and their families did not agree on the college major, students reported feeling forced to make a choice between picking the major they wanted (individual) or their parents wishes (family/community). Roughly half of the sample reporting having different ideas about their college major and the career they wanted to pursue compared to their parents. This placed students in an uncomfortable position because they did not want to disappoint their parents. In contrast, students who did not have a mismatch did not identify feeling ‘forced’ because they pursued a major and attended an institution their parents approved of. These students were more likely to report it was important to make their parents proud. This is an important distinction,

because this provides insight into students' thought process. Students without a mismatch perceived their decision about a college major as a family decision, whereas students with a mismatch felt guilty considering their individual wants over their family.

In addition, there was a gendered difference in major selection, with males reporting pursuing majors and careers mostly aligned with their parents compared to female participants. Female participants were more likely to choose a major which reflected their own interests, whereas male participants' interests mostly matched up to their parents. Female students were more likely to be the first in their families to go to college and it is plausible that as pioneers they were also more willing to push the boundaries with their parents. In comparison, male students may be less willing to test the waters, as they were often less likely to be the first in their families (though usually was the first male) to go to college and wanted to appease their families.

There was gender and college choice. Most of the female participants in this study were often told to choose the institution closest to home. They were encouraged to do so specifically because parents did not want their daughters to move outside of the home. This was a culturally situated value, stemming from the Hmong tradition of daughters living at home with their families until marriage. This cultural value exerted a lot of pressure because they did not want to disappoint their parents and they had many family responsibilities in their homes that they felt obligated to fulfill. Some decided to stay at home, while others overcame this barrier and moved away to attend college. While they valued parental approval of their college choices, it was not necessary for all female students. Female students who chose to attend non-local colleges made their decision to move out because they wanted to gain some independence from their families. Living with their families, females reported feeling unable to fully commit themselves to their education because they had family obligations. While they made the decision

to focus on their individual developmental needs, female students were concerned and felt guilty they would not be contributing to their family responsibilities by moving out. This illustrates the cultural complexities of gender and college choice, which female students identified as a common way of life – in a constant struggle to find balance.

Cultural complexities demonstrate the unique and nuanced experiences Hmong students undergo as they move along the college process. Hmong cultural values are centered around the collective, which specifically centers on the family, this is in direct conflict with the American individualistic culture. Therefore, participants had a difficult time balancing the goals of their families with their own and often had to make decisions they hoped would appease both identities. These cultural complexities were specifically prevalent in students' narratives surrounding college majors and college choice. In addition, these cultural complexities also brought light to the gender differences experiences by students as they moved along the college pathway.

### **Relationships Matter: Providing Support and Knowledge**

Research has demonstrated the influence of social capital on the college process because they provide networks of relationships, which provide students with trustworthy college knowledge (Bryan, Moore-Thomas, Day-Vines, & Holcomb-McCoy, 2011; Ceja, 2006; Engberg & Wolniak, 2010; Kao & Rutherford, 2007; O'Connor, Hammack, & Scott, 2010; Oseguera, 2011; Park, 2011). Similarly, this study found social capital was instrumental in supporting and encouraging students college aspirations, often by being a resource and validating that they were college material. Specifically, this study uncovered three forms of social capital which shaped and influenced Hmong students' pathway to college. These were: **Role Models, Mentors, and**

**Gatekeepers.** Each form provided support and guidance to students and offered them unique networks and opportunities as they navigated the college process.

### **Role Models**

Participants identified role models as an influential source which motivated them to go to college. There were two types of role models identified by participants: family and professional who served two distinct purposes. Family role models reflected their immediate family network and often were a source of personal inspiration among students. Family role models inspired students specifically by being demonstrating persistence to overcoming their hardships as refugees. This reminded them of the importance of pursuing their educational and professional dreams. While family role models were important at inspiring students, the majority had limited influence on students due to their lack of experience with education. Specifically, participants referred to their family's inability to provide and share college knowledge with them. Therefore, they looked for additional role models to support their educational endeavors, specifically through the use of professional role models.

Professional role models were individuals with careers and lifestyles students hoped to achieve. The professional role models had a college education and reflected the educational and professional career trajectories students hoped to achieve. Due to the limitations of their current family network, the majority of participants' recognized they needed to expand their network to include individuals who could provide helpful information and guidance on college.

Interestingly, all identified professional role models were from the Hmong community. Some were family, while others were not, but all had obtained a college education. Hmong professional role models were critically important because they allowed participants to see college as

obtainable. This was important, as participants referred to the community's perception that few among students go to college because entry into college was too difficult to attain.

Of the professional role models, two types were identified: direct and indirect role models. Participants' had close relationships with their direct role models and were able to depend on them for guidance and information. These relationships allowed students to have access to a guide, who provided personalized information about the college process. These participants had a clear advantage because they were able to learn from experiences, which was not accessible to others. In comparison, students did not have relationships with indirect role models. While each type of professional role models had a different relationship, they both inspired and encouraged participants to continue with their educational aspirations.

### **Mentors**

A second type of relationship found to be influential on a student's path to college was mentors. Mentors were individuals who provided trustworthy guidance and information about the college process. While there is some overlap between mentors and role models, mentors was strictly used as a resource from participants to answer questions. Unlike role models, mentors were not all looked up to by participants, as only 10% of role models were also identified as mentors. Mentors were identified as a reliable and trusted resource to assist in guiding their college process when they were uncertain about next steps. There were two types of mentors: internal and external mentor.

Internal mentors were immediate family members, parents or a sibling, who was either currently enrolled in college or was a college graduate. They provided participants with a person to discuss their hopes, dreams, and concerns with, about their college and their career aspirations. The opportunity to have frank and open discussions with someone who understood them,

allowed them to process their experience more thoroughly. This was most prevalent for participants' with siblings in college, as their siblings were able to provide perspectives they could relate to, taking into account similar experiences and backgrounds. Siblings were considered personal guides to the college process, because they provided an opportunity for participants to learn from their mistakes which took into account their cultural and familial complexities. This allowed students to have access to information that was not accessible from their teachers or counselors.

This study found first generation students were unable to have the advantages of having internal mentors and relied on external mentors for assistance. Most first generation students received encouragement from their families, however their families' were unable to provide guidance on how to navigate the college pathway. External mentors identified high school teachers, counselors, and peers. These mentors provided specific tangible knowledge and advice to participants such as the necessary checklist items needed to go to college. First generation college student depended on high schools to be a centralized resource to guide and validate their ability to be successful in college. Unlike internal mentors, external mentors were seen as persons who could validate their college readiness through providing assurance they were college material. For participants, the validation they received from their teachers and counselors allowed participants to gain confidence, which alleviated their concerns that they may not be college material.

### **Gatekeepers**

First generation college students also identified a third form of social capital which had a major influence on their pathway to college: Gatekeepers. Gatekeepers were non-family members who provided 'critical' information to students which specifically eased students

concerns about college expenses. Gatekeepers were a form of serendipitous social capital because they existed only for individuals who happened to have a relationship with the ‘right’ persons who had the ‘right’ kind of capital to share with participants. It was a fundamentally different form of social capital because the information shared altered and transformed the participants’ college process because it alleviated their concerns about how they would afford a college education.

Gatekeepers were identified as high school counselors and college preparation programs that informed students of programs and services to assist in their college pathway. Examples included application fee waivers and scholarship opportunities, students were unaware was available to them. The information shared by Gatekeepers allowed students to take advantage of resources and opened doors students did not know were there. Gatekeepers are unlike role models and mentors because their role specifically focused on addressing students concerns about college costs. This assisted in alleviating students stress and concerns and had a deep and lasting impact on them. The information they received changed and transformed the college process, this was unique to students who had gatekeepers.

### **Cultural Capital Matters**

Findings from this study revealed students’ persistence and resiliency to overcome barriers, especially for first generation college students, created stress and tension for students during the college choice process. Specifically, this study examined and found a difference on how first-generation and second-generation college students experience their college process. This was due in large part to the differences in cultural capital, defined as the accumulation of knowledge and the transmission of that knowledge from one ‘generation’ to the next (Bourdieu, 1986). Cultural capital is more than information on how to go to college, but also includes access



to resources that provide students with the ability to successfully prepare for and navigate the college process. In recent years, there have been increasing attempts to addressing and understanding the cultural and contextual differences of students (Boun, 2013; K. Griffin, Pilar, McIntosh, A. Griffin, 2012; Chhuon et al., 2010).

### **Family Capital Matters**

Similar to earlier research on cultural capital, the experiences of first generation and second-generation college students varied significantly (Ellwood & Kane, 2000; Flint, 1992; Hossler & Stage, 1992; Kerchoff & Campbell, 1977; Kim, Rendon, & Valadez, 1998; Lareau, 1987; Portes & MacLeod, 1996; White & Glick, 2000). First generation college students, over 70% of this study's participants, had to navigate the college process with little to no college knowledge in the family. Therefore, first-generation college students did not have parental college knowledge to rely on. Many students accumulated their own college knowledge and depended on non-family to provide information and guidance. Furthermore, while first generation college students were able to acquire information about college, they remained hesitant and uncertain they were on the right path and had taken all the right steps for college.

In comparison, second generation college students were able to rely on their parents for guidance and support. They had a different form of cultural capital and habitus to rely on, which included the benefit of parental check-ins which helped ensure they completed necessary steps to enroll in college. In addition, their parents were more open and encouraged their students to explore college and the options available. Specifically, second-generation college students were encouraged and supported to explore college majors and career options to uncover the major and career, which would provide the best fit. In contrast, first-generation college students were

encouraged to pursue specific majors and careers. This illustrates how the difference in parental capital and family habitus influenced students' college experience and process.

### **Community Commitment**

The college experience provides students with opportunities to acquire information first hand. This allowed students the opportunity and privilege to give back to their communities and families. As college students, participants recognized the unique perspective they had to share with the Hmong community because they could provide knowledge and guidance about college, first hand. Participants understood they needed to return to the community to provide the same kinds of motivation and support they had received, to other Hmong students. They saw their identities and experiences as Hmong college students and future college graduates as an opportunity to return to their community and assist others with their college process. Participants recognized the influential factor their own role models, mentors, and gatekeepers had on their college pathway and they hoped to provide the same support and guidance to Hmong students who may not have access to support and knowledge.

Participants' sense of obligation and responsibility to return to the Hmong community was centered on the acknowledgment that few Hmong students continue on to college. Their focus on community uplift was focused on increasing the number of Hmong students who go to college because it would assist the community in achieving upward mobility. They saw their status as college students as a source of pride because they made it and wanted to help ensure other Hmong student would too. They identified themselves as role models and mentors for younger Hmong students and believed their experience, as Hmong college students would provide a perspective students could relate to. Interestingly, only first generation college students referred to giving back to the community as important compared to second-generation students.

It is plausible first generation students are more likely to identify and understand the obstacles of the college process because they experienced a similar experience. Whereas, second generation students had the benefit of having educated parents and did not have the same challenges, therefore they were unable to relate.

### **Resiliency: Overcoming Barriers**

A purpose of this study was to identify the impact of major barriers on the college experience of Hmong college students. The majority of participants did not have access to necessary college knowledge and often navigated the college process alone. This was partly due to their parents limited access to formal schooling in Laos, Thailand, and the United States. Hence, there was limited parental knowledge about college or formal schooling. This impacted students ability to obtain college information from parents and made students' dependent on acquiring this information from schools. Given the lack of parental college experiences, majority of students had to navigate the college process unaccompanied by a strong support person in the home, which heightened their isolation during the college process. Even among students who had parents or older siblings with college knowledge, students still indicated they felt alone during the college process.

First generation college students felt alone because they did not have someone to depend on for guidance. While parents and families were the source of their motivation, they had to rely on others for information and guidance, which heightened the isolation they experienced because their families were not actively engaged. Therefore, students had to rely on themselves and others to accumulate the necessary resources and information needed to go to college. Furthermore, students had to be persistent and take the initiative to find the necessary information to address their concerns and provide assistance. They had to learn from their own

mistakes and become advocates for themselves by trusting that they were on the right path.

While most participants had access to people who were able to provide support and guidance, the major concern students had was that they were often not aware what questions to ask to get the proper guidance. This led to students feeling apprehensive about the college process because they were not able to take full advantage of the resources available to them. Participants often referred to the college process as a guessing game because they were not confident they had all the information necessary to make a decision. While participants did not feel confident, they often made decisions and simply hoped they would work out.

To examine the role college costs had their college experience, I unpacked the different concerns students had about college expenses and the different approaches used to alleviate their concerns. Similar to earlier studies on college choice and access, this study found college expenses was *the* major concern that impacted the college process for students and their families. While students and their families identified a college education as essential for their future success, they did not understand how they would afford one. This created stress for students because they did not understand the financial aid process and for many were unable to depend on their families for guidance. Therefore participants had to take initiative to identify resources to assist them in affording a college education or else they risked not going to college at all. Once students explored their concerns about college costs, their anxiety was focused on student loans.

Two clear distinctions came up when students discussed their anxiety about student loans centered around loan debt. The distinctions were that educational loans is an investment in their future or they were seen as debt accumulation. These distinctions varied by a student's background, specifically family income and parental education. Low-income students in particular were more likely to discuss their apprehension on taking out a loan to pay for a college

education because they were nervous about accumulating loans. Individuals who came to terms with taking a loan to finance their education had similar perspectives as their second-generation college student peers. Second generation college students were less concerned with loans because they perceived loan debt as an investment in their future.

The two distinct approaches to student loans above impacted how students selected their choice of college. Students who remained concerned about accumulating loan debt for their college education chose more affordable institutions, while others opted to live at home to save money. Their concerns narrowed their college options to reflect institutions with the lowest out of pocket cost for students, which included not having to take out loans. In contrast, students who perceived educational loans as an investment in their future, was more focused on selecting institutions that offered a better overall college experience and was a good fit.

This study examined the experiences of Hmong college students, many were the pioneers in their family. As pioneers and the few Hmong students in their community to go to college, students had to develop the confidence to move forward in the college process even though they were often alone and uncertain. Therefore, they had to take initiative and become their own advocates. While students spoke of the many barriers, which caused stress and pressure on them, as pioneers they had to learn how to choose their own path. This resulted in students having to define who they were and what they wanted, in the midst of balancing their needs and their family responsibilities. While they wanted to make their parents proud, participants recognized they had to make their own decisions about their future and trust that they made the right decisions.

### **Synthesis: Framework for Understanding Hmong American Predispositions**

The findings from this study identify the college process of Hmong American students. After careful reflection of findings, I attempted to illustrate the relationship among the themes discovered in a way that would exemplify the college process of Hmong college students, with an emphasis on their predispositions. To achieve this, I constructed a framework of the process discovered in this study and is presented in Figure 7 above. To construct the framework, I revisited the conceptual framework for this study, which accounted for the theoretical foundation of college choice and the literature on Asian American college choice. The initial conceptual framework was presented in chapter 3 (see Figure 6). The framework presented in this chapter is an evolution of Figure 6, which accounted for the findings in this study and attempts to illustrate the predisposition process for Hmong American students.

The results in this study indicate students' predisposition towards college occurred as a two stage process. First, the left side of the figure represents the three social factors identified as motivational factors which influenced Hmong students aspirations for a college education. These were: family, history, and uplift. Specifically, these factors were instrumental in encouraging and inspiring students to aspire for a college education because they wanted to break the cycle associated with not having a college education. Motivational factors are reflected as three separate arrows to illustrate how students' initial aspirations are formed from their families, history, and commitment to uplift. Therefore, students are initially predisposed to have aspirations for a college education because they come from family environments which encouraged them to pursue a college education. Participants also demonstrated a commitment to uplift. Students understood their parents wanted more opportunity for them and they wanted to achieve social mobility not only for themselves but also for their families. This creates a social

norm and commitment among participants to invest in a higher education because they are taught to value the benefits of a higher education. While family was instrumental in creating supportive environments for college, students also identified their family histories and community background as a reason why they were committed to getting a higher education. Coming from communities with limited access to a college education, it was seen as an opportunity they wanted to take advantage of. Furthermore, this fostered a dedication among participants to pursue a college education as a mechanism for them to give back to their families and communities through uplift.

Once students developed the motivation to pursue a college education, their aspirations were strengthened if they had supportive community and cultural factors to assist in providing guidance and knowledge about the college process. Students also had to get come to terms with their understandings and fears of college costs and family finances, which were directly impacted by their family financial need. These three factors impact the experiences of students through cultural, college cost, and community influences, which impact their college predisposition. Cultural factors include areas such as cultural values and gender which impacted students predispositions, both positively and negatively. For example, while family helped create an environment valuing a college education, the study found Hmong students were also challenged by their cultural values and identities, to find a balance between their own hopes with those of their parents. The complexities of culture was heightened in the narratives of female students, especially when it came to selecting an institution not near home. Community factors include having access to resources such as role models, mentors, and gatekeepers. These factors allowed students to understand the necessary steps needed go to college and are also sources of support and validation for students. However for students who did not have access to one of these forms

of community support, they were less likely to feel they had the proper information to successfully navigate the college process. College cost specifically relate to factors such as students' financial need and ability to afford college. This impacts students' college outlook, given that the majority of students reported college costs were a major concern. These three factors influence participants' perspectives and often either supported or inhibited their college predispositions. For example, students who had greater financial need was most likely to be sensitive and concerned about taking out a student loans. Additionally, the middle section of figure 7 these three areas (Community, College Costs, and Cultural) are reflected as overlapping and interconnected circles because they do not operate separately or in isolation from one another. Instead, students had barriers and support in all three areas which influenced their development of predispositions.

Furthermore, an important finding in this study was the significant role culture and the their family/community history had on the college process of Hmong students. Student narratives illustrated the unique influence their culture, history, and current social standing in the U.S. have on their educational experiences. Specifically it either supported students' educational endeavors or created complexities for students when their decisions did not align with their families or communities. The role of culture, family/community history, and current social standing includes factors such as: cultural values, community traditions, political history, family/community needs, and family financial standing. These factors impact the development of predispositions, the college process, and the college transitions of Hmong students by creating supportive and encouraging environments or barriers for students. For this reason, a socio-cultural lens is illustrated through the use of a colorful circle surrounding the three interlocking circles (i.e. Community, Cultural, and College Cost Factors), which support and create barriers for Hmong



students. While each socio-cultural lens varies by student, the lens is significant because every student's experience is filtered through this lens. Meaning, each student's development of predispositions will be influenced by their socio-cultural lens, which determine whether a student decides to go or not go to college. This helps exemplify the important role cultural and history has on student's development of college predispositions and the impact it has on the community, cultural, and college cost factors. Together, this framework demonstrates how Hmong students acquire the predispositions towards college specifically by developing aspirations for a college education, supporting those aspirations by being resourceful, which lead to increased college predispositions.

### **Limitations**

It is important to understand this study was limited to Hmong students who successfully made it to college. These students managed to navigate the educational process and enroll in college. This study is not representative of the experiences of Hmong students who wanted to go but did not go to college. This study does not reflect the challenges of Hmong students who did not go to college. Furthermore, the barriers identified among participants in this study barely scratch the surface, when it comes to understanding the challenges faced by Hmong youth in relation to college attendance. The challenge of recruiting male Hmong students proved to be extremely difficult and limits the generalizability of this study to Hmong males as well. While they were targeted during recruitment because they identified as an area of concern in the pilot study, it still resulted in low participation.

In addition, as a retrospective study, students provided me with reflections of their experiences. This was a limitation to this study because students may have a harder time remembering their experiences the further away they are from the college process (i.e. fourth and

fifth year students), as they may be more disconnected from their college experience, compared to students who recently completed their experiences. While this may be a limitation, the analysis of the data did not reveal any stark differences between student responses by academic year.

### **Implications for Practice**

Based on what I have learned about Hmong college predispositions, I offer suggestions for communities, high schools, and colleges working with Hmong students.

#### **1. Ethnic and Cultural Specific Training**

There is a need for specific training and awareness in high schools, colleges, and in the community to understand the ethnic and cultural specific issues, especially as it applies to access to a college education. It is very encouraging to see more recent research focused on addressing the cultural and contextual experiences of students (Harper & Nichols, 2008; Museus, Harper, & Nichols, 2010; St. John, Hu, & Fisher, 2010). These studies are illustrating the need to understand the importance of cultural differences and its impact on the college process and highlight the ever-changing needs of these students. While this study focused on Hmong American students, some of these findings provide a helpful perspective to understanding the needs of other Southeast Asian American Communities, such as: Cambodian, Laotian, Vietnamese, Mien, and the Karen communities.

Hmong students are faced with a very different set of issues that are not addressed in college choice literature. This ill prepares school officials, colleges, and communities to understand the needs of this unique population. For example, results indicate participants are often balancing their own hopes with those of their families and sometimes communities. This

creates an extreme amount of pressure on Hmong students as they decide how they can balance multiple and often times, competing priorities.

Furthermore, colleges and high schools need to understand how to address and support the needs of Hmong students. Most importantly, they need to understand that college is a family decision and often, Hmong students are not making a decision that is only for the individual student. College is a collective decision for the collective family benefit. Therefore, Hmong students face a very different set of circumstances that are often overlooked by school, teachers, college administrators, and society at large. It is vital for high schools and colleges to engage the community and families to understand the college process. This enables parents to have information that can be shared with their children and more importantly, allows them to engage in the process with their children. Participants often spoke about how their families encouraged them to go to college, but were not able to provide any concrete advice on how to get to college. Parents were unable to engage in the process because they did not understand the college process and was unable to participate in the process with their student. By providing inviting opportunities for families and their communities to be involved, students and their families can be engaged in the college process as a family instead of in isolation.

## **2. Importance of Mentoring and Role Models**

It is important to have more mentoring and role models more accessible for students. Participants often addressed the essential support and guidance they received from their role models, who were persons they often referred to when they had questions about college. There is a need in the Hmong community to create mentoring programs and services that will help support Hmong students who may not have access to college knowledge. These programs and services can also help provide information to parents and the community about the importance of

family support during the college process. Hmong role models are essential, as they are the bridge for Hmong students and their families. This can be seen in participants who had older siblings in college, they were able to rely on them as resources on the college process. Mentors and Role Models represent to students that college is obtainable and can assist students in thinking through their college process. In addition, they can advocate for students when helping families understand the challenges especially in times when Hmong students are trying to decide between their dreams and those of their parents and families.

### **3. Disaggregation of Data**

In the past three years there has been a national movement among the Asian Pacific Islander American community advocating for the disaggregation of data on Asian Pacific Islander Americans. This movement been led by The White House Initiative on Asian American Pacific Islanders (WHIAAPI), which was reestablished by President Obama on October 14<sup>th</sup>, 2009. The Asian American and Pacific Islander community is the fastest growing racial group in the country, growing over four times as rapidly as the general population. Despite their growth, they remain the most understudied racial group in the country. The diversity that exists under the umbrella of Asian Pacific Islander makes it difficult to understand and balance the many voices and experiences of this community. Therefore, it is critical for the disaggregation of data on Asian Pacific Islander Americans.

The disaggregation of data on Asian Americans would allow researchers and policy makers to have more accurate information on the educational attainment of the Asian American communities in the United States. This would assist in providing evidence to support better policies that reflect the needs of Asian American and Pacific Islander communities. Without the disaggregation of data, smaller ethnic communities within in the Asian American and Pacific

Islanders racial category will continue to have their experienced masked and misunderstood. As this study indicates, the needs of Hmong American students are complex and have been misunderstood. Without disaggregated data collection on Asian Americans, researchers and policymakers would not be able to have a clear understanding of the needs of the many communities lumped into the larger Asian American racial category.

#### **4. Address Financial Concerns Directly**

Consistent with current concerns, Hmong students indicate a concern about the affordability of college. This was a major barrier for Hmong students who were all concerned with how to pay for college. Fortunately for many students, they had support systems in place to help provide guidance on applying for financial aid and scholarships. For students who did not have support systems in place to provide this kind of information, they went about the process haphazardly, hoping for the best. This indicates that the discussion about affordability is a major concern and information about financial aid continues to be an area of concern. Students were not all well informed about the process and serendipitously figured out how to navigate the process, as Kong puts it, “I took a swing in the dark.”. This is concerning and highlights the need to continue to provide more information on how to disseminate more financial aid information so that all students and their families have access.

#### **Future Research**

There are a number of areas of further study into college predispositions that I would recommend based on what I have learned in my research. As I discussed in earlier in Chapter 6, I found and identified a gendered difference. Although I found some patterns between students, a limited male sample made it challenging to explore the gendered experience fully. Future studies could contribute to our understanding about the Hmong students’ college choice process by

specifically studying a more equal sample of male and female students. For example, future studies may focus on the examination of the college experience by gender. This is especially important given the cultural traditions of the community.

Another area deserving of future study is a longitudinal study following Hmong Americans in high school and following them a year after their high school graduation. This would provide data over time and be able to examine more closely the factors which inhibited students from going to college and encouraged students to go to college. While this study examined Hmong students who went to college, it is also very important to study and understand why other students choose not to go to college. This is a perspective missing from research and would provide important information to addressing the needs of this community.

Future research should look at Hmong college student development, especially as it pertains to their individual development in their community and in college. This study found students experienced several challenges balancing their numerous responsibilities to their families and to themselves. This often created stress for students as they were often unsure whom to please. For example, a future study may want to utilize a self-authorship lens to examine how Hmong students find balance and comfort in their new roles as a college student and for many, the family pioneer.

Lastly, it would be worthwhile to reframe the social capital framework in this study, especially as it pertains to the importance of mentoring to Hmong students, to incorporate Stanton-Salazar's (2011) social capital framework surrounding the importance of institutional agents. His framework specifically draws from empowerment theory in Critical Social Work, which provides a different lens to examine Hmong students' college process. Therefore, future

studies would benefit from reframing social capital to address how institutional agents empower individuals.

## Appendices

### Appendix A: Consent Form

**1. Title of the research project:** Hmong College Choice: A Qualitative Study

**2. Name of the researcher**

Malisa Lee

Doctoral Candidate

School of Education, University of Michigan

**3. Description of the research**

The aim of this study is to understand the college application/admissions process Hmong American college students went through and to understand their college experience/transition.

**4. Description of involvement**

You will participate in one individual interview and a follow-up interview.

**5. Length of participation**

Interviews will be conducted during the Fall 2011 and possible follow up interviews by phone.

**6. Risks and discomforts of participation**

The risks of participating in this study are minimal.

**7. Measures to be taken to minimize risks and discomforts**

In order to minimize the risks and discomforts associated with participation in this study, I will:

(1) review the procedures to ensure your confidentiality before each interview and (2) remind participants that they do not have to answer any question they do not feel comfortable with.

**8. Expected benefits to subjects or to others**

Some people may feel participation to be beneficial because it gives them a chance to talk about things that matter to them and to reflect on their experience as Hmong America.

**9. Confidentiality of records/data**

Only I will have access to the tapes and transcripts of the interviews. All information about you that is used will be anonymous. You will not be identified in any reports on this study or in any future study using this data. Records will be kept confidential to the extent provided by federal, state, and local law. However, the Institutional Review Board, or university and government officials responsible for monitoring this study may inspect these records.

**10. Availability of further information**

If significant new knowledge is obtained during the course of this research which may relate to your willingness to continue participation, you will be informed of this knowledge.

**11. Contact Information**

Malisa Lee (XXX-XXX-XXXX) or [xxxxxxxx@umich.edu](mailto:xxxxxxxx@umich.edu).





## **Appendix B: Protocol**

### **Updated Interview Guide: Hmong College Students**

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**Intro:** This study is on Hmong College Students, focusing on your path to college from high school. The interview will last about an hour, an hour and a half max. Do you have any questions for me before we start? If you have any questions during the interview, don't hesitate to ask.

#### **Background question**

1) Tell me a little about where you grew up and your experience there.

#### **Influence of Family and Significant others**

For this section, I will ask you a few questions about your family.

- 2) Tell me about your family's philosophy on education.
  - a) How did they express these views to you?
  - b) Considering what you said, would you say your parents are supportive of your educational goals?
    - i) How do they support you?
- 3) Tell me a little bit about your family structure. (size, where you fall, etc)
  - a) Who do you live with?
- 4) How is it being a daughter/son in your family?
  - a) Sister/brother?
- 5) How is it growing up Hmong American?
- 6) How close/connected do you feel you are to the Hmong community?
  - a) Involvement with Hmong community?
- 7) Who are your role models/mentors and why?
  - a) How has your mentor helped you?
  - b) Female role models?

#### **Influence of Structural and Academic Factors: High School**

This section I will focus on your high school experience, trying to understand the college culture.

- 8) Can you please describe your high school and your experience there?
- 9) Can you tell me, how 'well' did your high school prepared you for college?
  - a) Classes?
  - b) Teachers?
  - c) Counselors?
  - d) How could your high school prepared your better?
  - e) How were you encouraged or discouraged?

- 10) In High school, who do you talk to about your college plans?
- a) At school?
    - i) How helpful were your high school counselors? What did you talk about?
    - ii) Teachers?
  - b) Peers?
    - i) What were your friends plans after high school?
    - ii) Did most students in your high school go to college?
  - c) At home?
    - i) Parents? Siblings?
    - ii) Extended Family? Other females?
      - (1) Can you give me an example?
- 11) Were you involved in any programs during the summer or after school that prepared you for college?
- a) If yes, how did these programs prepare you?
  - b) If no, do you know of any programs?

**College Decision Process:**

The next few questions are now going to ask you about your college decision process—meaning the process you went through as you decided to go to college, including how you prepared, applied for college and financial aid, and decided which college to attend.

- 12) Can you tell me when and how you first learned about college?
- a) Family? Extended others?
- 13) Can you please describe to me WHY you choose to go to college?
- 14) Typically when students decide to go to college, they have some concerns and also some excitement. Did you have any concerns?
- a) How did you address these concerns?
    - i) Who did you talk to about these concerns?
  - b) What were you excited about?
- 15) Can you please walk me through your college process?
- a) College Searches?
    - i) What were you looking for in a college?
  - b) Applications?
    - i) How did you decide which colleges to apply to? What were you looking for?
  - c) Financial aid?
- 16) What role did/How involved was: your family in the college process?
- a) Where to apply?
  - b) Deciding where to go?
  - c) Deciding majors?
  - d) How supportive was your family?
  - e) What kinds of guidance did they provide you?

17) Where there any particular challenges you had with the college process?  
a) Where did you get help? Institutional/family/peers?

18) How did you ultimately decide which college to attend?  
a) What did you like about the school you attended?  
i) What was important? Why?  
b) What things turned you off to the other schools?

**Current College Experience:** MAYBE THINK ABOUT ELIMINATING THESE QUESTIONS, SINCE IT WAS ABOUT THE PRE-COLLEGE EXPERIENCE.  
The next few questions are going to ask about your current college experience.

19) Describe your college experience so far.  
a) What are you enjoying? Not enjoying?

20) Are you living on campus or away from home?  
i) If yes, how has your experience been living away from home?  
ii) If no, how has your experience been living at home?  
b) How has the college transition been for you??

21) What types of extracurricular activities are you engaged in?  
a) How did you become involved?

22) College is getting more expensive these days, how are you dealing with college expenses?  
a) Does your family contribute to your education?

23) What forms of financial aid are you receiving?

24) Can you tell me how you decided on your major? Or- what major(s) are you currently interested in?

25) What about your college experience has surprised you?  
a) Why?

26) How happy are you with your decision to attend \_\_\_\_\_?  
a) Would you recommend the college experience to others? Why/Why not?

**Future Plans:**

27) What are your plans after you graduate?

**Their thoughts?**

28) Current research shows that **less than 7%** of Hmong Americans over 25 have a bachelor's degree? Why do you think that is?  
a) What kinds of barriers are there for Hmong students?  
b) What, if anything, could be done to increase the Hmong college going rates?

29) If you had known in high school what you know now about college, would you do anything differently?

- a) Other decisions? Actions?
- b) What would you want your high school to do?
- c) What about your family/community?

30) Looking back, what one piece of advice would you have liked to have before going to college?

**Closing:**

31) Is there anything else you would like to add?

## Appendix C: Student Organization Email

Hello XXXXXX,

My name is Malisa Lee and I am a doctoral student in the Higher Education Program at the University of Michigan. I received your contact information from XXXXXXX, previous president of XXX's HASA.

I am currently in the dissertation stage of my program and was hoping I could get some assistance from you. I am interested in understanding college decision process of Hmong college students and their college experiences. I feel this is an important study to conduct because the experiences of Hmong students are lost due to the larger generalized Asian American success. Therefore, Hmong students and their communities are often overlooked. As a Hmong student myself, I have struggled with this for many years. My hope is that my study will address these dilemmas and also provide a literature base for researchers and practitioners to understand how to encourage and influence the success of Hmong students.

My inquiry and request of you is, would you be willing to grant me access to recruit from your organization? You can send an email to your members directly informing them of my study and have them contact me or with your help (providing emails), I can contact them directly. Which ever works best for you.

There are only two requirements to be apart of the study: (1) be Hmong and (2) be enrolled in a XXXXXX college. Participation in the study will not require much work on the student's behalf. To be apart of the study, participants in the study will be asked to be apart of two interviews and to fill out a quick demographic survey (over email or mail) before the first interview. I hope to complete the first interview this summer and the second in the fall.

I have attached the materials I would send to students in your organization for you to review. If you have any questions or comments for me, please feel free to contact me. Also, if you want more information from me, please let me know.

Thank you again for your time and consideration.

Malisa

## **Appendix D: Invitation to Participate**

### Invitation to Participate in Study

Dear student:

You are invited to participate in a research study examining the decision to go to college and the college experiences of Hmong College students. The study is being conducted for a dissertation in the Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education, at the University of Michigan School of Education.

All students who participate in this study will be a part of two interviews. The first interview will last one to one and a half hours, and the second will last at most one hour.

Participation in the study is completely voluntary, there is no compensation provided for participation.

Information provided during this study will be kept completely confidential.

Please see the attached consent form for a more detailed explanation of how your information will be kept private. We will discuss the consent form at the first interview, and you will have the opportunity to ask questions about it.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please complete the attached demographic form and the consent form and return them to:

**Malisa Lee**  
**Center for the Study of Higher and Post-Secondary Education**  
**XXX School of Education Building**  
**XXX E. University Ave**  
**Ann Arbor, MI XXXXX-XXXX**

If you have any questions about this study, you may e-mail me at xxxxxxx@umich.edu or call me at (XXX) XXX-XXXX.

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this study.

Sincerely,  
Malisa Lee  
Doctoral Candidate  
Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education  
University of Michigan School of Education

IRB Registration # 00000246

## **Appendix E: Recruitment Flyer**

### **Please consider participating in a study on Michigan Hmong College Students.**

The purpose of this study is to examine and understand the path to college for Hmong American college students and the experiences that influenced their decision to go to college.

Why this study is important: According to the 2000 census, less than 8% of the Hmong American community has a Bachelor's degree. With so few going to college, it is important to understand how to encourage more students to go to college.

How you can help: Take this opportunity to participate in an important study that will provide a lens into the college decision process for Hmong students.

Participants will receive a **\$10** gift card for sharing *your* story.

What's involved?

- 1 hour interview (at a time and place that is convenient for you)
- Fill out a short survey
- Possible follow up interview

If you have any questions or would like to participant, please contact me at [xxxxxxx@umich.edu](mailto:xxxxxxx@umich.edu) or XXX-XXX-XXXX.

**Thank you.**

Any and all information shared is confidential per the guidelines of the UMICH Institutional Review Board.



## Appendix F: Intake Survey

### Michigan Hmong College Student Study



Hello Michigan College Students!!

I am currently collecting data for my dissertation -- on Hmong College students and I NEED YOUR HELP!

What is the Study: I want to learn more about the experience of Michigan Hmong college students with a focus on (1) the decision to attend college and (2) the college experience.

Why is this study important?: According to the census, less than 8% of the Hmong American community has a Bachelor's degree. With so few going, it is important to understand how to encourage more students to go to college.

What's involved?: 1 hour of your time for an interview and a possible followup phone interview at a later time.

Participants will receive a \*\$10 Amazon Gift card\* for sharing your story. Please fill out this quick form to indicate your interest in being apart of this study and I will be in contact with you shortly.

Also, please consider taking part in this study and forwarding this information to other Michigan Hmong college students.

If you have any questions, please contact me. Thank you.

Malisa  
[malislee@umich.edu](mailto:malislee@umich.edu)

**\* Required**

**First and Last Name \***

**Are you a College Student in the State of Michigan? \***

- Yes  
 No

**What is your gender? \***

- Male  
 Female  
 Transgender

**What year are you currently in College? \***

- First Year  
 Second Year  
 Third Year  
 Fourth Year  
 Fifth Year  
 Sixth Year  
 Other:

**Are you a full-time student? \***

- Yes  
 No

**What college are you currently attending? \***

**What is your email address? \***

**Phone number where you can be reached \***


**What is your preferred method of being contacted? \***

- Phone
- Email

**Are you interested in being apart of this study? \***

- Yes
- No

## Appendix F: Online Student Demographics Survey



### Hmong College Students

Please fill out this short demographic questionnaire, possibly before your scheduled interview.  
\* Required

**Name (First Initial and Last Name) \***

**What is your racial/ethnic background? \***

**What is your gender? \***

- Male
- Female
- Transgender

**Family Income \***

- 25,000 and below
- 25,000 to 50,000
- 50,000 to 75,000
- 75,000 to 100,000
- 100,000 and above
- Other:

**Are you the first in your family to go to college? \***

- yes
- no

If you are not the first to go to college, please identify those in your family who went to college. If they received a college degree, please specify what degree and institution.

**What is your father's occupation? \***

**What is your father's highest educational level? \***

- Elementary School
- Junior High
- High School
- Some College
- Associates Degree
- Bachelor's Degree
- Master's Degree
- Doctorate, JD, MD
- Other:

**What is your mother's occupation? \***

**What is your mother's highest educational level? \***

- Elementary School
- Junior High
- High School
- Some College
- Associates Degree
- Bachelor's Degree
- Master's Degree
- Doctorate, JD, MD
- Option 9
- Other:

**How many siblings do you have? \***  
Gender and Age

**High School Name and City \***

**Did you enroll right into college after graduating from high school? \***

- Yes
- No

**What college are you currently attending? \***

**What year are you currently in college? \***

- First Year
- Second Year
- Third Year
- Fourth Year
- Fifth Year
- Sixth Year

Other:

**What colleges did you apply to? \***

**What is your major? (Please indicate if your major is different from your intended major) \***

Never submit passwords through Google Forms.

## Appendix H: Detailed Student Participant Information

|    | Pseudonym | M/F | Family SES  | First Generation College Student? | Year in College | College Major                               |
|----|-----------|-----|-------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------|---|
| 1  | Gounou    | F   |             | YES                               | 5th             | Advertising & Public Relations              |
| 2  | Sheng     | F   |             | No                                | 4th             | Clinical Exercise Science                   |
| 3  | Anna      | F   | 100k +      | No                                | 3rd             | Medical Technology                          |
| 4  | Kim       | F   |             | YES                               | 3rd             | Speech Language Pathology                   |
| 5  | Pa        | F   |             | YES                               | 2nd             | Accounting                                  |
| 6  | Amy       | F   | 50k to 75k  | YES                               | 2nd             | Business                                    |
| 7  | Nou       | F   | 50k to 75k  | no                                | 1st             | Pre-Medicine                                |
| 8  | Joua      | F   | 25k to 50k  | YES                               | 2nd             | Undecided                                   |
| 9  | Kao       | F   | Below 25k   | YES                               | 4th             | Speech Language Pathology                   |
| 10 | Nancy     | F   | Below 25k   | YES                               | 3rd             | Nursing                                     |
| 11 | Fong      | M   | Below 25k   | YES                               | 3rd             | Biology                                     |
| 12 | Lee       | F   | Below 25k   | YES                               | 4th             | Pre-BDTS                                    |
| 13 | Stephanie | F   | Below 25k   | YES                               | 4th             | Elementary Education                        |
| 14 | Mary      | F   | 75k to 100k | No                                | 4th             | Creative Advertising                        |
| 15 | Michelle  | F   | 100k+       | No                                | 2nd             | English                                     |
| 16 | Yer       | F   | 25k to 50k  | YES                               | 5th             | Pre-Health Professional – Pharmacy emphasis |
| 17 | Lisa      | F   |             | YES                               | 5TH             | Advertising & Hospitality/Tourism           |
| 18 | April     | F   | Below 25k   | No                                | 1st             | Human Development & Family Studies          |
| 19 | Autumn    | F   | 25k to 50k  | No                                | 1st             | Biochemistry/Premed                         |
| 20 | Meredith  | F   | Below 25k   | No                                | 5th             | English                                     |
| 21 | Andy      | M   | 50k to 75k  | YES                               | 1st             | Pre-Medicine                                |
| 22 | Jane      | F   | Don't know  | YES                               | 1st             | Pre-Medicine                                |
| 23 | Kia       | F   | 50k to 75k  | YES                               | 3rd             | Elementary Education                        |
| 24 | Ger       | F   |             | YES                               | 3rd             | Undeclared                                  |
| 25 | Mai       | F   |             | YES                               | 3rd             | Nursing                                     |
| 26 | Tou       | M   |             | YES                               | 2nd             | Pre-med                                     |
| 27 | Alexis    | F   | Below 25k   | YES                               | 2nd             | Accounting                                  |
| 28 | Chris     | F   | 75k to 100k | YES                               | 3rd             | Asian Studies                               |
| 29 | Macy      | F   | Below 25k   | YES                               | 5th             | Asian Studies                               |
| 30 | Kou       | M   | 25k to 50k  | YES                               | 1st             | Pharmacy                                    |
| 31 | PaKou     | F   | 25k to 50k  | YES                               |                 | Graphic Art                                 |
| 32 | Shoua     | F   | 25k to 50k  | YES                               |                 | Undeclared                                  |
| 33 | Hlee      | F   | Below 25k   | YES                               | 3rd             | Health Administration                       |
| 34 | Kong      | M   | 25k-50k     | YES                               | 3rd             | Media Arts and Technology                   |

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