

# COMMUNITY EQUITY RESEARCH CENTER

## Community Learning ~ PAR ~ Grassroots Action

### **Educational, Cultural, and Family Experiences that Influence College Aspirations of Second-Generation Hmong Men**

*By Kou Her*

#### **Background**

The Hmong have been in the US since the late 1970's; yet, most Americans are uninformed of the Hmong's history of supporting the US during the Vietnam War. As a result, their contributions, history, and struggles have been overlooked in mainstream society, history books, and educational settings. This study examines the educational, cultural, and family responsibilities and expectations that influence the aspirations of the second generation Hmong men. Hmong men are not entering college at a rate that is comparable to Hmong women. Educational information about the Hmong is limited since K-12 institutions and colleges do not collect or report specifically about them.

#### **Research Design**

This study used a qualitative approach using narrative inquiry that focuses on four Hmong men in Merced County who are attending four-year universities. Data is collected through two separate interviews with each participant using semi-structured questions and artifact solicitation. The data is then analyzed through Atlas.ti for common themes. The theoretical frameworks used to guide this study are community cultural wealth, acculturation, and assimilation.

#### **Results**

Four themes emerged from the data analysis, which revealed the participants' educational experiences that were influenced by their teachers, counselors, families, and peers, and cultural practices.

#### ***Theme 1: Family Struggles Fuel the Participants' Aspiration***

The participants' parents were first-generation refugees who lived an agrarian lifestyle in Laos. When they immigrated to America, they had no resources and no understanding of the American culture or language. Thus, they struggled with adjusting to life in America. They lack comprehension of English so looking for a job was difficult. When they found one, it was low paying and usually had odd hours or longer commutes. However, these financial and language struggles fueled the participants' aspiration to pursue higher education

so they can help themselves and their families to escape the financial situation.

#### ***Theme 2: Sibling Roles and Mothers are Sources of Strength***

As the oldest son in their respective families, the participants spoke about how their roles differ from other siblings. They felt pressure to be role models for younger siblings, both with roles at home and in school. They had to set the bar high with academic achievements and family responsibilities as their actions affect other siblings. Outside of birth order, the participants point out to their mothers as their main source of inspiration. While both parents supported the participant's education, mothers provided encouragement, nurturing, emotional support, and understanding of the participants' lives. Fathers tend to be more traditional in their parenting style, which participants viewed as controlling and lecturing.

#### ***Theme 3: Ethnic Identity Influences Educational Experiences***

Ethnic identity is important to the participants. Yet, they felt invisible in educational settings as the media and literature in schools do not contain information about the Hmong. There are no formal opportunities to learn about Hmong history or culture. They get tired of being asked, "Who or what is Hmong? Where are you from?" Because they value their ethnic backgrounds, they point to good teachers as those who are not just exceptional at teaching but understand students' ethnic backgrounds and nurture their diverse needs.

#### ***Theme 4: Preserving Hmong Culture and Ethnic Identity***

As children of refugees, these second-generation Hmong men identified as both Hmong and American. They valued their cultural identity and want to continue practicing their cultural traditions and Hmong language. However, Hmong culture activities are time-consuming and frequent as some events can last 24-hours straight for multiple days. Thus, participants had difficulty fulfilling both their families and cultural expectations while also meeting school responsibilities. They are bicultural and want to have

the best of both cultures but navigating the responsibilities of each world was challenging.

### **Findings**

Three of the four participants were inspired by teachers who took extra steps to learn about their ethnic background. These teachers recognized student's cultural wealth and inspired them to be better and pursue higher education. Participants mentioned that they want to try harder in classes and in school when they know that teachers care about them. One of the participants took a Hmong language course, in which he learned not only about his language, but his culture. This really helped him to be proud of his cultural heritage and inspired him to strive for higher education.

Another finding was the important role that mothers played in the educational process. Hmong culture is traditionally patriarchal and patrilineal, so the assumption was that the fathers would play a crucial part in the participants' educational and family roles. Yet, every participant mentioned the inspiration that their mothers provided through their emotional encouragement and support. The moms varied in educational background, age, and socioeconomic status; yet, they all showed the same level of unconditional love and support that fueled the participants' determination and motivation to succeed in school. The mothers' influence was so strong that one participant even carried a picture of his mother in wallet as a reminder of her encouragement and sacrifice.

The last finding is that participants who spent too much time on cultural activities had a difficult time

with educational responsibilities. One participant spent too much time on many weekends with cultural activities, and this had a detrimental effect on his education as he ended up failing his first year. Since then, he has learned to better balance since, and during the time of the interview, he graduated from a four-year university. All understand the importance of maintaining their Hmong identity while at the same time understanding that they also need to adhere to American values and culture to be successful.

### **Implications**

My first recommendation to administrators and school boards is to collect academic data by Hmong ethnicity, not just the general Asian American or Southeast Asian as is commonly used in local school districts. Data to collect in schools would include demographic information like age, grade, ethnicity, gender, attendance, discipline, state test scores, course enrollments, and graduation rate. This type of data would allow all stakeholders to understand the needs of the Hmong students, so that equitable interventions can be developed to address these issues.

Another recommendation is to follow Assembly Bill 78 and incorporate the Hmong's role in the Vietnam War curriculum in districts where a Hmong community exists. Currently, US History books have limited information on the Hmong's role in the Vietnam War. Thus, adding Hmong speakers, videos, and other materials would provide a more accurate historical account of the effects of war, including escaping persecution, survival in the jungle, the refugee camps, and relocation. Such action would allow students and staff to learn about the Hmong's role in the war and to allow Hmong students to learn about their history.

