Five Factors Influencing the Academic Experiences and Career Trajectories of HMoob American Students at UW-Madison

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Abstract
This qualitative study is a student-led Community Based Participatory Action Research (CBPAR) project, conducted in collaboration among professional researchers from the Center for Research on College-Workforce Transitions (CCWT) and student activists from the HMoob American Studies Committee (HMASC), to explore the college experiences of HMoob American students at UW-Madison.

We found five salient factors that influence the academic experiences and career trajectories of HMoob American undergraduate students at UW-Madison: Gatekeeping, Advising, Support Network, Cultural and Family Expectations, and Campus and Academic Cultures.

Gatekeeping
- Gatekeeping is the bureaucratic mechanism involved in applying for various programs and schools. Many Hmoob American students were redirected away from these programs based on this institutional vetting process.
- Rebecca, a current student, was accepted to the nursing program after her third try, which extended her time-to-degree from four to six years.

“i think for me not getting accepted the first time, i was really sad and it made me think like ‘oh maybe i’m not meant to be a nurse.’ And then i think my second time i just didn’t put enough effort into it because...i lacked confidence in myself...but i think not getting accepted twice in a row actually opened my eyes.”

Cultural and Family Expectations
- Cultural and family values, expectations, and messages communicated to students about education and careers seemed to influence student experiences and goals.
- Ellie, a current student, describes the difficulty in balancing gender expectations at home and at school for Hmoob men and women.

“It’s very interesting, because usually in Hmong culture, i feel like they want the women to stay home and to clean and stuff, but for my family, it was like no, like, you better -- you better be able to do both ... if i were a boy, i would just have to... go to school -- and be a hard worker, take care of my family, mow the lawn... like you better be able to balance both without struggling, basically.”

Advising
- Academic advising was central to HMoob American undergraduate experiences. Some students described their relationship with their advisor as one of the factors that helped them persist toward their goals. Others described encounters with advisors as directing them away from their academic and career goals, or for influencing them to stop out of college.
- Austin, an Alumni, was “put into CALS” after he was not accepted into the Engineering College:

“I feel like i didn’t know what kind of goals i should be setting. i think that’s where my academic advisor failed to help me... [my advisor] just told me, ‘yeah, there’s a lot of jobs out there that you can apply for. just look around.’ ... i got switched to a different advisor my last semester.”

Support Networks
- Academic and support programs, student organizations, and co-ethnic peer groups often provided support and resources to enable students to persist through social and academic obstacles.
- Hli, an Alumni, “found supportive environment at the PEOPLE Program:

“...throughout my entire undergrad, i leaned on the PEOPLE Program a lot...just going to see my advisor was the number one thing that kept me floating here...until this day, i still keep in touch with my advisor...i’m super grateful that he was just here and he’s also Hmong.”

Methods and Data
- The team recruited and interviewed a sample of current and former Hmoob American students (n = 63) about their education and career experiences. We also conducted 14 observations and participant observations on campus.
- Participants are majority first-generation college status and nearly all involved in college support programs, which reflects the background of the population of Hmoob Americans on campus. Fifty-eight percent of the sample identified as female.
- The interviews were transcribed, and preliminary coding and analytical memoing were conducted for this analysis.

Conceptual Influences
This study draws on Asian Critical Race Theory, Critical Geography, Critical Whiteness Studies in Higher Education, and Leadership in Higher Education

Findings
- Culture and family values, expectations, and messages communicated to students about education and careers seemed to influence student experiences and goals.
- Ellie, a current student, describes the difficulty in balancing gender expectations at home and at school for Hmoob men and women.

“It’s very interesting, because usually in Hmong culture, i feel like they want the women to stay home and to clean and stuff, but for my family, it was like no, like, you better -- you better be able to do both ... if i were a boy, i would just have to... go to school -- and be a hard worker, take care of my family, mow the lawn... like you better be able to balance both without struggling, basically.”

Take Home Points
- In this poster, we document how these factors play a role in students’ discipline and program choices, sense of belonging on campus, job market preparation, and general educational “success.”
- We argue that our evidence problematizes individualized decision-making models of educational choice that ignore these important sociocultural and institutional factors which ultimately have significant consequences on students’ fields of study and future life trajectories.