



The Center for College-Workforce Transitions (CCWT) at the Wisconsin Center for Education Research announces the launch of a pair of studies to examine the experiences and obstacles to college success for first- and second-generation HMoob Americans in Wisconsin and for refugees resettling in the state.

## Study 1: Our HMoob American College Paj Ntaub

“Our HMoob American College Paj Ntaub” is a qualitative research project conducted in partnership with a student organization at UW-Madison called the Hmong American Studies Committee (HASC) that examines the sociocultural and institutional factors impacting the college experiences of HMoob<sup>1</sup> American students. The term “Paj Ntaub,” or story cloth, is a narrative pictographic representation in fabric of the experiences of the HMoob people, which often address their history during the U.S. wars in Southeast Asia and as refugees. We call our study “Our HMoob American College Paj Ntaub” because this study presents the stories of the lives of HMoob American college students.



and bias experienced by HMoob Americans in the state. This scholarship has documented the racial and ethnic discrimination experienced by HMoob American students in both K-12 and higher education settings and reinforces the need for more research on the educational experiences of this growing population.

Our research group has come together to conduct a qualitative, community-based participatory action research (CBPAR) project aimed at investigating these issues from the viewpoint of HMoob American students at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. CBPAR is a term used to refer to a partnership approach to research that typically involves engagement between academic researchers and community actors with the aim of gaining a more grounded understanding of a given phenomenon through shared, collaborative decision-making that positions community members as researchers rather than research subjects. Our study uses interviews and observations with HMoob American college students as well as artifact data from around the University of Wisconsin-Madison campus and classrooms to better understand the college experiences of HMoob American students through their voices and lived experiences.



Wisconsin’s HMoob population of almost 50,000 has consistently grown since HMoob refugees were originally resettled to the state following the Vietnam War. Wisconsin currently ranks third behind California and Minnesota of the states with the highest HMoob population. While educational attainment and poverty rates for HMoob in Wisconsin have significantly improved in the past 30 years, they still fall behind that of the state average.<sup>1</sup> In addition to these disparities in educational attainment, scholars<sup>ii</sup> have also investigated racial prejudice

**Deliverables.** Deliverables of this study will include a report delivered to the UW-Madison administration with policy recommendations to improve the educational experiences of their HMoob students, opportunities to connect HMoob faculty, students, and their allies through a hosted conference, scholarly articles to be shared with the academic community, and popular articles and reports to be shared with the general public. Another indirect outcome of the project that we would like to highlight is that the seven HMoob American student-researchers involved in this project will receive in-depth and extended research mentoring, and will design and implement an innovative research project that will result in professional presentations and publications.

# Study 2: Documenting the experiences of refugee resettlement and college-workforce transitions in Wisconsin

In coordination with the “Paj Ntaub,” CCWT also announces a new project by Senior Researcher Matthew Wolfgram and UW-Madison Undergraduate Research Assistant Isabella Vang to **Document the Experiences of Refugee Resettlement and College-Workforce Transitions in Wisconsin**. The study is an ethnographic inquiry that investigates the pathways and obstacles refugees face accessing and succeeding in college and transitioning to the post-college workforce.

Research and policy on the refugee resettlement process in the U.S. focuses almost exclusively on emergency resettlement services and basic services aimed at ensuring refugees’ transition to stable employment, including English learning and employment skills training for adults, and access to K-12 public education for youth. In consequence, while there is a robust research on refugee employability and K-12 education in the U.S.,<sup>ii</sup> there is a lack of basic research on refugee college access and retention, even though many refugees work toward the goal of accessing college and some eventually succeed. More research is needed on the pathways and experiences of refugees who access and succeed at college and transition to the professional workforce, and on the obstacles that impede this process.

The proposed research will be the first of its kind to document the policy and sociocultural contexts of the resettlement-college-workforce transition process, and to document ethnographically how refugees manage and experience this process. Stage 1 of the project, which is

ongoing, is to interview, observe, and collect documents about the work of a sample of refugee resettlement providers, higher education educators and administrators, and refugee community leaders, to document the supports, processes, and obstacles of the resettlement-college-workforce transition process. This research will also involve conducting initial interviews and recruiting a sample of refugees (N=12-15) who are working to access college or who are enrolled in college or are transitioning to the workforce. Stage 2 of the project, launching in January 2019, will ethnographically track students’ experiences with this process through repeated interviews and observations over the course of the subsequent year as they work toward or are enroll in college in Wisconsin.

**Deliverables.** In addition to scholarly publications, deliverables of this study will include two reports delivered to refugee resettlement professionals and educators and administrators who support refugees’ college attainment in the state and nationally. The first report will be based primarily on the interviews and observations with resettlement providers and educators (Stage 1), and will focus policy recommendations on how to support pathways and remove obstacles involved in the transition from resettlement to college. The second report will be based primarily on the ethnographic tracking of refugee college students (Stage 2), and will focus on policy recommendations on how to support pathways and remove obstacles for students while in college and in their transition to the workforce.

<sup>i</sup> We use the term “HMoob” rather than the anglicized term “Hmong” in order to reclaim the term that defines this ethnicity. We use the spelling –oob rather than –ong to signify the tonal pronunciation of the word and use both a capital “H” (as the White Hmoob) and a capital “M” (as the Green Moob) in order to incorporate both peoples.

<sup>ii</sup> Applied Population Laboratory and University of Wisconsin Extension. (2015). *Hmong in Wisconsin: A statistical overview*. Retrieved from [https://counties.uwex.edu/washington/files/2010/07/hmong\\_chartbook\\_2010.pdf](https://counties.uwex.edu/washington/files/2010/07/hmong_chartbook_2010.pdf).

<sup>iii</sup> DePouw, C. (2012). When culture implies deficit: Placing race at the center of Hmong American education. *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 15(2), 223-239; Lee, S. (2009). *Unraveling the “model minority” stereotype: Listening to Asian American youth*. New York: Teachers College Press; Xiong, Y.S (2012). Hmong Americans’ educational attainment: Recent changes and remaining challenges.” *Hmong Studies Journal* 13(2),1-18.

<sup>iv</sup> McBrien, J. L. (2005). Educational needs and barriers for refugee students in the United States: A review of the literature. *Review of Educational Research*, 75(3), 329-364.

