



OUR HMOOB AMERICAN PAJ NTAUB TEAM

# WEAVING THE PAJ NTAUB FOR FUTURE HMOOB STUDENTS:

A compiled collection of advice



The Paj Ntaub Research Team is a collective of HMoob American student activists and scholars at the Center for Research on College-Workforce Transitions (CCWT) housed within the Wisconsin Center for Education Research (WCER) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (UW-Madison). The student activists represent the HMoob American Studies Committee who make up a student-led initiative focusing on establishing a HMoob American studies program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

This report intends to share the knowledge and advice of current and former HMoob students who attended the University of Wisconsin-Madison. With their responses, the Paj Ntaub research team gleaned out advice that these participants wished to pass along to current and future HMoob students. Through many of our interviews, participants shared advice on subjects that they themselves wished they had received during their time at UW-Madison. These responses came from 36 current students 31 former students with a total of 71 individuals and encompassed ideas around lack of familiarity with campus, making career decisions, experiences tied specifically to multidimensional identities, and stereotypes associated with attending UW-Madison. Students come to college with different experiences, goals, and expectations and this may lead to contradicting advice. In this memo, we understand and want to shed light on these experiences by giving the space for each and every type of advice.

Through our participants' responses we found that many of these individuals shared advice in these 14 categories:

- Take advantage of opportunities
- Engage in social justice work
- Find support systems
- Find mentors and different kinds of mentorship
- Explore different social spaces
- Love yourself
- Explore your HMoob identity
- Find your passions, your potential career, and interests)
- Keep pushing through for the outcome despite the struggle
- Normalize having thoughts of leaving
- Understand things may not go exactly as you had planned
- Build relationships with previous and future HMoob students
- Put yourself first
- Recognize that it may be the system that is contributing to your struggle

## Take advantage of opportunities

College presents numerous opportunities to learn about oneself and one's future career. Our participants share that to truly take advantage of college, students should take risks and work beyond their comfort zone. To avoid missed opportunities, examples to futures students include, but are not limited to, looking for their own advisors, going out to meet people on their own, and taking advantage of everything offered in college to the fullest.

“I hope that people can learn from me that it's important to advocate for yourself and when you need help it's okay to ask for help and it's okay to make mistakes because those are opportunities to learn and to grow.... it's okay to be uncomfortable because that's going to happen a lot, especially when you're in college and especially when you're in spaces with people who don't look like you or who don't share the same experiences with you.”

## Engage in social justice work

College is typically a period where students can critically look at the world through new found knowledge. Our participants shared that students should be critical of their surroundings and advocate for social injustices. Although students themselves have struggles, students can use their education and privileges to extend their advocacy efforts into the greater community. Examples include making an effort to learn about your own community, advocating for better opportunities, contributing to advocacy movements, and educating others about social inequality.

“I would hope that they would feel passionate about social justice work and in learning about more than just our HMoob community, but how our HMoob community reflects back on its relationships with other communities, like the Black community or like the Latino community.... life has a way of working those things out.”

## Find support systems

Having a stable support system throughout your college experience can go a long way in helping you achieve your goals. Our participants expressed that being surrounded by individuals who supported them on their endeavors helped them to succeed in college. These support systems can provide you with resources and open you up to great relationships. Support systems include community building, family members, friends, mentors, advisors, and more.

“The biggest thing that I always push for people to learn from my experience is you have to find a village, you know? Going to higher education can be very isolating, it can be very lonely. No matter where you are in your part of your journey, you know? Whether you’re 18 years old and you’re starting, or you’re 25 years and you’re starting, or 40 and you have a family, or, you know, you’re 50 and you’re single and you just had a midlife crisis and you’re going back. Like, you got to find that village. Because nobody does it alone.”

## Find mentors and different kinds of mentorship

Many of our participants mentioned the incredible value of having a mentor within their life. As relatively experienced in their fields and life, these mentors provided them with guidance and support as they struggled to navigate their everyday life. Mentors help students explore potential career paths, provide advice as students navigate college, and can extend to friendship. The bond allows students themselves to carry the knowledge and to act as mentors for future students. Mentorship appears in many forms beyond the conventional view of what a mentor is.

“Because I didn’t do everything on my own. I didn’t know what I was doing half the time. I reached out to people, they reached out to me, they mentored me. They checked in on me, you know? They rooted for me. When I was lost, and I wanted to give up, like they made sure I didn’t. They were my friends, or my siblings, my parents, you know. There were other students, other professors. They checked in on me. ... Because no one can do this alone. It is very lonely. And it’s okay to ask for help. It’s okay to not know. So, I’ll say that will be what I want people to really learn from what I’ve gone through. I thought that I could do it all on my own. And whoosh, was I wrong.”



## Explore different social spaces

Finding and exploring space to belong and feel comfortable in while attending college has allowed for students to find community and feel safe on a relatively large campus like UW-Madison. Our participants expressed that these spaces were vital to their own college experience and provided them with a sense of comfort, developed a sense of belonging, and helped them engage in the greater campus community. Their advice to current and future students is to find a space that makes you feel valued and understood. For some of these students, their social space of comfort included organizations, fraternities and sororities, student support programs, and academic spaces.

“I think UW-Madison is welcoming if you’re able to find a community, but if you stumble upon here and think, ‘Okay, you know what, I’m going to be welcomed here,’ I don’t think that’s definitely going to work out for you. Because UW-Madison is still predominantly white, so I don’t think it’s somewhere I can like walk in anywhere and feel comfortable, because you know there are definitely times where I joined student orgs and then I realized no one really understood me here, and then I just don’t go back to that specific student org, you know? So, I think it’s like a lot of building your own community that you’ll feel comfortable.”

## Love yourself

Participants were very aware of their backgrounds and how that intertwined with their struggles in college. They wanted to share that, no matter what, future students should love all parts of themselves despite the pressure to conform to societal norms of the conventional undergraduate. Every college student's experience is different and everyone comes with a different background. Our participants shared that students should not have to conform and they should give themselves the space to accept and learn to love themselves during college.

“Yeah. I hope that people can learn to be outspoken and I hope that they can learn that it's okay to break cultural and societal norms and to explore their identity. And I hope they know that they are more intelligent and resilient than they think they are...”

## Explore your HMoob identity

As HMoob students at UW Madison, college presents a unique opportunity for us to explore our HMoob identity through courses, organizations, and through our fellow HMoob students. Through our data, participants shared that there was a general lack of access to HMoob curriculum prior to college beyond one or two conversations. Participants share that future students should take full advantage of these opportunities in college to further their exploration of their HMoob identities. Everyone comes with different levels of community-based understanding, language ability, and involvement in the community. With that, there is always room for further exploration and college provides an alternative to learning than our home lives. This allows HMoob students the opportunity to develop their own understanding and expression of their HMoob identity beyond what is deemed as the conventional definitions.

“I would really like anybody to know that it’s never too late to learn or to really appreciate or fall in love with your culture. I was socialized, raised, in an all-white community so I really didn’t appreciate or really love my culture. I never hated the HMoob culture, but there was a period of my life where I never loved it

either and that was just because I wasn't exposed to it; it wasn't in my life. It wasn't until moving back to Minnesota and then coming to Madison and experiencing for years here that I've come to truly appreciate and love my culture and love the people. I love everything about it, the good and the bad. So, I think that's the thing that I would want people to learn, that it's never too late. And your circumstances shouldn't be something that stops you because, you know, I was a HMoob kid who grew up in an all-white community, but that didn't stop me from like learning about my culture."

## Find your passions, your potential career, and interests

Many of our participants shared that students should make the effort to find their own path in life. By finding their own path in life, previous students mean using the time in college to find and explore interests or a career that fulfills their passions. Many of the participants shared that they felt restricted by the expectations put on them by their family members and peers to explore conventional career paths. They shared that current students should be open to explore new career fields, make their own career decisions, go with what their own wishes are despite the opinion of others, or go against the status quo. College offers the time and space to explore one's interests academically, socially, and as it pertains to future plan making without external pressures. Many of the students shared that they had many regrets with going for what others wanted for them instead of going their own path.

“Well, I hope people learn that it is important to love what you do. I would say that, and to not let anyone stop you from doing what you love, especially if it's to make an impact on other people, because I feel like many times, especially like with my experience being here at this university, there'll be like many times you might want to give up. .... Keep pushing through, because life isn't easy, but you just got to do what you got to do sometimes.”

## **Keep pushing through for the outcome despite the struggle**

Many participants had expressed that they experienced numerous difficulties throughout college. This ranged from struggling academically, navigating personal problems as well as campus problems, and even balancing between life at home and the college life. To get through college, they shared that perseverance really allowed them to push through those struggles and succeed. To pursue what they were passionate about they channeled feelings of self-determination and persistence to continuously fight against the odds to make it to their desired goal. They wanted to share to future students that, yes, college is a struggle, but you are not alone and if you persevere through it, you can make it.

“Once you get into a job, you’re going to learn that college didn’t teach you everything and that you need to learn things on your own quick and fast. Nobody is going to hold your hand, unless you have a good boss. But nobody is going to hold your hand. And so like, you know, you’re going to have to learn and you’re going to have to push.”

## Normalize having thoughts of leaving

Struggles and difficulty navigating college and life always arise for students who are surrounded by unfamiliar territory and unfamiliar peers. The pressure of college becomes suffocating and can make you consider dropping out of school. College is not for everyone and it doesn't necessarily account for what it means to be successful. It is okay and students need to know that they are not the only one with thoughts of dropping out. Although it can be difficult decision to process, students shouldn't feel ashamed of their thoughts to stop out or actually stopping out.

"I honestly wish that if anyone is struggling like academically, know that like it's not your fault. You're not stupid. You're not lazy. You're not a failure. There's so many things, qualities about you that are so important, maybe that major isn't for you. Probably like try something else. Definitely talk to a lot of advisors. Try to figure out what you want to do with your life... it's sad to see that like there's actually a lot of like people that do drop out and -- out of college, and you never hear about their stories. And I wish that there was better retention, too, because I feel with my situation, it could have easily been fixed. Whatever happened to me shouldn't

have happened. It could have been different, and I hope that it just doesn't happen to other people because it's really -- I don't know how to explain it... I wish people would be more self-aware of when things happen like this to them so they could call it out. I feel like I should have been able to talk to my advisors and feel comfortable about it and call it out like right then and there, like especially my professors, when I figured out that their course was geared towards beating people out, but at the same time, I felt like I didn't have a voice. I wish that I was able to not break down so much that I was afraid to talk about it and ashamed about it, so yeah, because what sucks is that only I am the person who know what happened to me, and not many people know. So, I think that's the scariest thing -- that I let it only affect myself, let only myself know what happened to me, but not be able to seek help or help others learn about it so it."



## **Understand things may not go exactly as you had planned**

Life as well as college can be confusing and unpredictable. Participants shared that it is important to understand things may not be in your control and you are not at fault. Outcomes may differ from your initial plans and goals; however, you shouldn't attribute the problems to yourself. Sometimes, that is how it was meant to be. Changing majors, career goals, or even perspectives can still end up well despite it looking bleak at the moment.

“I don't know. I think -- yeah. Well, I don't know. I feel like the -- yeah. I think sometimes, like, things -- you may make certain plans and they don't go according to plan. But -- you know -- I think where you end up is always -- can also be more organic and it's okay to be open to that process. I think it's very important to find colleagues that you can confide into, who can practice critical allyship with you in these spaces where it may feel very—”

## **Build relationships with previous and future HMoob students**

Many of the participants interviewed described how they felt a lack of support from previous HMoob students and wanted to prevent this cycle from carrying on to future HMoob students. Therefore, they want to encourage HMoob students to not only reach out to former HMoob students in their respective fields, but to also carry the knowledge they have to the students that come after them. Often times students have to pave their own paths and navigate their own barriers, but they expressed that these paths and barriers could be prevented through the assistance of another HMoob student within and outside of their respective field. Through this work, students can learn from other HMoob students in all fields and walks of life.

“I wish there was someone who was similar to me, like a HMoob student or just I don’t know. A person of color, a minority who went to med school or who’s gone through the route and to come back and tell me ‘Oh yeah you know these are my mistakes, I recommend this’ ... I don’t know, just advise me, to give me some advice because the lack of guidance was really tough for me... And I mean there are definitely parts of the struggle that obviously were my own, but there were parts that I look back and if I had the

help I probably didn't need to spend a year not doing what I was supposed to be doing, or figuring out how to get in med school, or I don't know. So, not having someone who knew kind of like, I guess having to pave your own route is, it's difficult."

## **Put yourself first**

Understand and listen to your body for what you need to stay mentally, physically, and emotionally stable. Put those needs first and know that it is okay to be kind to yourself and forgive yourself while holding yourself accountable for your needs. College is hard, let alone your personal life, it's okay to put your needs above everything else so you can succeed and be your best self.

"There's a lot to learn from my experience. I feel like I went through a very hard time here at UW-Madison, mentally, physically. And so, for those students who you know, are doing like mental health, and their situation's -- conflicting situations, I feel like I do have a lot of you know, experiences and know that it's okay to reach out for guidance to be healthier and to be better."

## **Recognize it may be the system that is contributing to your struggles**

Our participants describe that there were many struggles that they themselves caused. However, there were many struggles that were caused by the university and the system. College wasn't created for students of color with complex cultural identities and histories. Future students should recognize that they are competing within a system that judges them on their merit and the experiences of predominantly white students. Students shouldn't feel at ashamed or at fault if things are not going their way because the system may be placing them at a disadvantage.

“I just hope that what people can learn from my experience is that there is just so much pressure in our society for us as human beings to be at certain way... And I hate these systems that are put in place to serve like the majority of the population here in the United States and working in the world of education. It just really opened my eyes to what systematic-- what systems contributed to the struggles I had. And also, what systems contributed to my growth. With the systems that are in place, in a perfect world, I wish we

could tear it all down and rebuild it all up to accommodate to all the different individuals that exist here in this world but we're not in a perfect world. I really wish and hope that from my experience people who are at the top, who make these decisions that influence and impact everybody can be open to being willing to provide the kind of supports that everyone needs in order to be successful.”

# CONCLUSION

By sharing these perspectives of their UW-Madison experience, current and former students were able to put those experiences into narratives that will help pave the way for future HMoob American students. Through this project the Paj Ntaub research team was able to categorize these pieces of advice into fourteen topic areas.

The Paj Ntaub team chose to share these compiled pieces of advice through a booklet with the intention of building solidarity through shared lived experiences and cultivating a path for future HMoob students.

For more information, students can reach out to the Paj Ntaub team to get more information about our report: Matthew Wolfgram at [mwolfgram@wisc.edu](mailto:mwolfgram@wisc.edu) or Bailey Smolarek at [bsmolarek@wisc.edu](mailto:bsmolarek@wisc.edu)

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The mission of The Center for Research on College-Workforce Transitions (CCWT) is to conduct and support research, critical policy analysis, and public dialogue on student experiences with the transition from college to the workforce in order to inform policies, programs, and practices that promote academic and career success for all learners.

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