

HMONG STUDENTS AT UW-STOUT: FACTORS INFLUENCING
ATTENDANCE AND RETENTION IN A POST SECONDARY INSTITUTION

By

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ABSTRACT

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Hmong Students at UW-Stout: Factors Influencing Acceptance and Retention at a
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The Hmong are among a plethora of immigrating people who have left a land of solitary oppression to come to the United States for freedom and further opportunity. Although steeped in tradition, they left a land that persecuted them after the Vietnam War. It has been a difficult struggle for this people to settle into a culture so different and demanding in comparison to the traditions of their homeland. Now in America, they must adjust to a culture with a fluctuating economy and a society which values individual attainment. As do many immigrants that settle in the United States, the Hmong in general, value education, and understand that this is the key to their survival and success in the United States. The purpose of this study was to look at Hmong college students, currently enrolled at the University of Wisconsin-Stout in Menomonie, Wisconsin, to help determine factors that aided them in attending this post-secondary institution. Through the choice of an e-mailed or postal mail out survey, it specifically examined

their experiences, secondary trends, programs which encouraged them to continue with college, support of family members and clans, effects of Wisconsin Works, a welfare reform program which began in 1997 and other factors that may have helped students choose UW-Stout as their college of choice. Furthermore, it will examine supportive factors that have aided Hmong students in succeeding and completing a post-secondary degree at UW-Stout.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The Hmong people have lived a life of upheaval, confusion, and worry as they strive to find a place of peace and refuge in the US. They relocated to the US after severe political upheaval in Laos and the promise of a new beginning in the United States. Since their resettlement, they have struggled to find the support of well-meaning sponsors, educators, and social workers in an attempt to find their way in American Society. However, there have been some major cultural differences both in American culture and Hmong culture that have been overlooked. The ignorance of both cultures and how they differ has caused confusion for many.

The Hmong trace their origins to central Asia from where they migrated to South Central China over 4,000 years ago. In the late 18th and 19th centuries, they began moving to the highlands of what are now Myanmar (Burma), Thailand, Vietnam, and Laos. In the 19th and 20th centuries, Hmong history has been affected by various factors, and the reasons for Hmong relocation to the United States began with specific political events in Laos and Vietnam (Thrower-Timm, 1994).

In 1954, the French protectorate in Indo-China ended after 61 years, and Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia were recognized as independent states by the Geneva Accords. However, a huge struggle ensued between the Royal Lao government, who was aligned with the French and supported by the US,

and the Hmong and Pathet Lao who were communists, aligned with the Viet Minh in North Vietnam. Between 1955 and 1975, Hmong lands were occupied by the Pathet Lao or passed between the Pathet Lao and the Royal Lao.

When the United States increased secret military operations in the 1960's, the Hmong living in villages in the northern highlands of Laos were recruited to support these operations. The Hmong were seen as skilled people who had knowledgeable skills about the mountains and valleys of this region. They were also a loyal people who had fought with the French in Indochina during WWII in opposition to the Japanese invasion and occupation (Dirks, 2000). At this stage, the US feared that Vietnam would become a communistic government and would set a precedent for other countries in the Indochina region to also fall to communism. Because of this fear, the US government acted and solicited the support of local Hmong men.

Under the leadership of General Vang Pao, apart from defending democracy in Laos, the Hmong militaries were given three responsibilities: 1) to blockade North Vietnamese convoys along the Ho Chi Minh Trail (a major travel route in the region); 2) to rescue American pilots shot down over North Vietnam; 3) to protect the radar system located on the Pathee Plateau in central Sam Neua, a province in northeastern Laos (Podeschi & Xiong, 1992). In exchange, they were promised that the United States would protect them in the future, regardless of the outcome of the war.

After the US military began pulling out from Vietnam in 1974, the Pathet Lao gained control of Laos and began a bloody campaign to exterminate the Hmong, in retribution for their support of both the Royal Lao and the United States. The jungles were sprayed with deadly chemicals called “yellow rain”, and the Pathet Lao bombed Hmong villages, murdered residents of all ages, and deported some people to “reeducation camps”, or places where the Hmong were forced into adapting the lifestyles and beliefs of communism (Hamilton-Merritt, 1993). The Hmong had no other alternative but to flee for their lives. Some reports state that as few as one third of Hmong refugees succeeded in their escape (Thrower-Timm, 1994).

Of those escaping, the refugees could be divided into three main groups. The first were the soldiers and anti-Communist leaders (and their families), who had worked closely with the CIA and fled Vietnam immediately following the war in 1975. The second group was the soldiers and military personnel that had more limited education. They fled during 1977 and 1978. The last group was the farmers and civilians who fled between 1978 and 1981. Those who were not flown directly out of Laos, Vietnam, or Thailand were forced to find refuge in Thailand and were relocated to refugee camps to await relocation to other countries. Many of these refugees had to cross the Mekong River to get there, and once again, many didn’t make it. Processing time for immigration in these camps usually

lasted for three to four years, and there are still some Hmong people remaining there after 27 years.

The Hmong were dispersed to other countries and 75% of them chose to relocate in France, Canada, or the US. By the year 1983, some 61,000 Hmong immigrants had come to the United States and had settled in a number of different states (Hutchinson, 1997). Hutchinson (1997) goes on to point out that by the mid 1980's, Wisconsin had surpassed Minnesota as having the second largest Hmong population in the United States- only second to California. Because the Hmong highly value family and their clan structure, many Hmong have relocated to be nearer to their families. As of 1997, there were nearly 40, 000 Hmong living in the state of Wisconsin (Hutchinson, 1997). They are dispersed throughout Wisconsin, but are more heavily populated in the cities of Appleton, Eau Claire, Green Bay, La Crosse, Milwaukee, Sheboygan, and Wausau.

Although employment and education trends are becoming more highly valued for the Hmong population, there are still a number of barriers the Hmong people face. The students are seen as "at risk" students because Hmong families are often large and make little money leaving them in impoverished conditions, there are significant language barriers- especially for many Hmong parents, and the cultural demands of the Hmong cultures make it difficult for students to transition between Hmong and American cultures. Despite these barriers, Hmong graduates continue to increase and

more Hmong students than ever are enrolling in colleges. In the fall of 1996, Hutchinson (1997) reported 248 Hmong students enrolled at the undergraduate level at University of Wisconsin schools. This is over a 100% increase of the 119 students enrolled just six years prior. More recent trends show that numbers continue to increase. At the University of Wisconsin-Stout there are currently 57 students enrolled at that institution alone (S. Vang, personal communication, March 2002).

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this research was to examine the personal history of Hmong college students currently enrolled at the University of Wisconsin-Stout in Menomonie, Wisconsin, to help determine factors that aided them in attending this post-secondary institution. Through a mail out survey in the spring of 2002, it specifically examined their experiences, secondary trends, programs which encouraged them to continue with college, support of family members and clans, and other factors that have helped students choose UW-Stout as their college of choice. Furthermore, it examined supportive factors that have aided Hmong students in succeeding and finishing out a post-secondary degree at UW-Stout.

Objectives

The objectives of this study were to determine the following:

- 1) Gender, age, marital status and number of dependents at the present time

- 2) Fluency in the Hmong language (spoken, read, and written)
- 3) Employment status at present time
- 4) Number of semesters attending and current grade level at UW-Stout
- 5) Reasons for choosing UW-Stout (list of answers as well as write-in section)
- 6) Intent to complete current degree at UW-Stout (and if not, what are credits being used for)
- 7) Current Status of Citizenship
- 8) Current Grade Point Average at UW-Stout
- 9) Factors contributing to grades
- 10) Factors/organizations which allow students to feel included in the collegiate atmosphere at UW-Stout
- 11) Factors/organizations which have aided in the success of the student at UW-Stout
- 12) Ways student may feel that the University could better serve Hmong students
- 13) Time(s) the student might have felt discriminated against or unappreciated by UW-Stout
- 14) Times the student may have felt supported or acknowledged by UW-Stout

15) Overall satisfaction with different services provided at UW-Stout
(based on a Likert scale)

Definition of terms

For clarity in the understanding of this research, certain terms will be defined further. Definitions were gathered from a number of the resources utilized in the research of this paper. Definitions are as follows:

At Risk Student: A student who deals with barriers including economic strife, delinquency, cultural differences, or language barriers.

Clan: The large extended family belonging to a common ancestor, all clan members have the same last name.

Disadvantaged student: A student from a socially, economically, or culturally deprived background.

First Generation College Student: A student who is the first generation in his or her family to either enter or enroll in a post-secondary education degree.

Hmong: A closely-knit ethnic hill tribe from Laos originating from China in the eighteenth century and settling in Southeast Asia. Hmong can also be used interchangeably with the spelling Mong, but for the purposes of this paper and because it was most commonly found in literature, the author will use the spelling Hmong.

Ho Chi Minh Trail: A major political travel route in South Vietnam

Immigrant: A person who chooses to leave their country to settle permanently in another.

Mekong River: The River that separates Laos and Thailand

Paj ntaub: (Pronounced “pahn dow”) are Hmong story cloths, which have embroidered figures to represent the traditions of the past

Pathet Lao: The communist forces that took over Laos

Refugee: A person who flees from another country for refuge from invasion, oppression, or persecution.

Refugee Camp: The camps in Thailand where the Hmong and other refugees were housed until placement was made in other countries.

Royal Lao Government: The government in Laos who was aligned with the French and supported by the US.

Southeast Asian Refugee: A person from Cambodia, Laos, or Vietnam who was admitted to the United States after 12/31/75.

Assumptions

There are several assumptions that are apparent in this research. The researcher assumed the respondents were honest in the answers they gave regarding the questionnaire. The researcher also assumed that this study would supply helpful information for both the university and the Hmong students looking at attending UW-Stout. It can possibly aid in retention and admittance of Hmong students to the University of Wisconsin-Stout.

Limitations

There are additional limitations that were seen by the researcher. Subjects were all attending a university in one geographical location. It is only a small representation of all the Hmong students attending University of Wisconsin schools. The results cannot be generalized because of the small sampling. Despite confidentiality, validity could also be questioned partly because Southeast Asian students are typically very polite in their responses and do not want to offend anyone. There is a possibility that the subjects were not honest in their answers for fear of offending the researcher or even the university with honest answers.

CHAPTER 2

Review of Literature

Introduction

The literature review investigates the challenges that exist for the Southeast Asian population, especially the Hmong, who continue their education beyond high school. Hmong students face many challenges in attending post-secondary schools, but the clash that occurs between Hmong and American culture often leaves students torn between two extremely different cultures (Hunter, 1994). Furthermore, adjustment to a different education system sometimes leaves Hmong families feeling frustrated and confused. Because of these differences, young Hmong people have had to make major adjustments in understanding, attitude, and lifestyle. With these changes, there has been fear that traditional Hmong culture will be lost. Through this investigation of literature, I looked exclusively at the challenges faced in history, culture, and education of the Hmong people. Furthermore, I examined the economic struggles that many Hmong college students face. Finally, I explored educational and professional outlooks for Hmong students as they press on toward educational survival in the United States.

A Brief History

Traditionally, the Hmong people have been noted for their will to survive. Because of persecution, the Hmong were not able to establish a

formal written language or a record of their history until more recently. Through Chinese documentation of Hmong origins, there are varying theories on the true place of origin for the Hmong people. Though varied, what literature does agree upon is that Hmong people have spent thousands of years in China living a life of oppression and turmoil (Thao, 1999). The Chinese discriminated fiercely toward the Hmong people and drove them out of China into the northern regions of Burma, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam. Like China, these countries were neither welcoming nor peaceful. They were facing internal turmoil themselves, and, as mentioned in chapter one, this led to a raging war between the Pathet Lao and the Royal Lao. After the US urged Hmong support and lost the war, the Hmong once again faced extermination and discrimination. Jane Hamilton-Merritt (1993) highlights first hand some of the bloodiest genocides ever as the Hmong fled to safety in Thailand. Even there, they faced starvation, cramped living quarters, and a tremendous wait for the United States to fulfill its promise of freedom.

Once in the United States, the Hmong people needed to make major adjustments. They came from a land where agriculture and family was valued. They basically worked the land in order to live, and now they needed to learn new skills in order to survive in a country where agriculture was not the chief means of sustenance.

Cultural Background

Traditionally, the Hmong lived in agricultural farming villages and practiced slash and burn cultivation. Homes had no central heating or indoor water facilities, and single wall construction was adequate in the mild climate. Shamans assisted in both folk medicine and religious rituals and ancestor worship was along clan lines. Hmong culture was historically an oral culture, but in the 1950's, missionaries gave the Hmong a written form (Thrower-Timm, 1994). Formal education was rare, and few Hmong villages even had schools. Reports indicate that one or two sons may have been selected to go to school in a neighboring village or even as far as a day's walk away where they boarded. Education of girls was not valued and few of them were given the opportunity to ever acquire such an accomplishment.

Marriages were often arranged, and being that the clans were patrilineal, the bride was taken to live with and care for the groom's family. A "bride price" was usually paid to the bride's parents as a promise for the girl being well treated in the marriage. Most marriages occurred for girls between 12 and 15 and for boys between 14 and 17. Children were seen as being possessions of their father, and in the case of his death to a brother or the clan. Children provided assistance with childrearing and household duties, and adults assisted the clan leaders and cared for the elderly within the clan.

In adjusting to the freedoms available in the United States, one can see why the transition into American culture was such a difficult one. Not

only did parents have to learn economic, political, and communicative survival skills, but they also fought hard not to lose their Hmong culture and traditions that they fought so long to keep. Their battle for survival would continue to forge on.

Cultural Values

In general, most Hmong values are similar to American values. They value their history and cultural traditions, as well as family and children. They see fidelity and loyalty a must in most relationships and are generally humble, responsible, honest and good citizens (Thrower-Timm, 1994). In addition, they value religion and the spiritual life, believe in hard work and view good education as a means to economic success in the United States.

However, Joan Thrower-Timm (1994) has found some remarkable differences in the cultural values among different Hmong age groups. Older Hmong people value the clan system much more and seek advice from clan leaders and the family as a whole in making decisions. The middle generation sees clan consultation as important, but not as important as the communication held between husbands and wives or possibly the husbands and fathers. The younger generation sees the clan system as inhibiting their personal freedoms. Because these differing perspectives exist, the traditional Hmong culture has seen some struggle and has had to view the possibility of change. Hmong parents have had to accept the fact that although traditional Hmong lifestyles revolved around family and the roles family

members played, roles are now beginning to change as the Hmong people must learn to adjust in order to ensure their survival within American culture.

Cultural Barriers

A number of barriers have come against the preservation of Hmong culture and their adjustment to economic well being in the United States. As with any immigrant to the United States, the Hmong have had to deal with language barriers, racial prejudice, religious misunderstanding, and adjustment to a culture vastly different from their own. These factors along with others have made it challenging for the Hmong to prosper in the United States.

Language Issues

One of the biggest adjustments the Hmong had to make was improvement of their communication skills. Immigrant parents came to the United States with limited English skills. Often parents would isolate themselves and speak only their native tongue. Consequently, they could not communicate beyond their community and needed to rely on others to interpret.

Historically, Hmong communication took place chiefly through oral means. Since their early days in China and as they moved into Laos, the Hmong people have fought hard to preserve their culture and traditions. Because they spent so much time and energy in their efforts to escape

persecution, a written language was not formulated until the 1950's (Hunter, 1994). Even then, not all children were able to attend school and few learned how to read or write the language well. This means that upon entering the United States, there were many Hmong adults and children who entered the country without any written language skills.

Until the 1950's, Hmong families passed along traditions and stories through the use of story cloths or paj ntaub (pronounced "pahn dow"), which have embroidered figures to represent the traditions of the past. In coming to the United States, the Hmong have had to adjust to a highly literate society. This was a challenging adjustment for many of the immigrants, because if one has no written language structure in their own language, they have difficulty constructing grammar in a second language.

In 2002, there are still thousands of Hmong people taking English classes and learning to speak English. This is especially important for such tasks as buying food and understanding money, but even moreso for adults to be able to understand at the work place. Blong Moua, an employee at the Job Center of Wausau (personal communication, February 13, 2002) has stated that one of the most confining factors for many Hmong workers is their inability to understand English. This constricts them from further advancement in the workforce.

Family Structure

Another factor affecting the adjustment of the Hmong people in the US is the way their family structure is set up. Most Hmong grew up in very large families where many children were needed to help with crop harvesting and other daily tasks. Since farming was their chief means of sustenance, it was normal for Hmong parents to have families as large as ten to twelve children. This made transitioning into the United States very difficult for Hmong parents because it is expensive to support children. Adding the factor of large families to limited English skills, Hmong families often struggled desperately to make ends meet. In addition, daycare in the United States is very costly which makes it almost impossible for Hmong mothers to go to work or get further education. This too has contributed to economic strife for Hmong families.

The clan system is also an integral part of traditional Hmong family life. In Laos, Hmong clans are patriarchal in nature, and consist of a male ancestor, his sons and daughters and the children of his sons (Being Hmong Means Being Free, 1998). There are some 20 different clans established, and traditional Hmong people rely on the wisdom and direction given by clan leaders to help them with life decisions. Clan leaders have responsibilities that may include negotiations and meetings with other clan leaders, making major decisions for the clan (such as when and where to move, and which crops to grow), and working to solve conflicts that may arise within the clan

and between clans. For this reason, many Hmong have relocated throughout the United States in order to be closer to other family/clan members. This is why there are such large concentrations of Hmong people in states like California, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Colorado.

Role Adjustments

The way many Hmong people identify themselves or find value in themselves is through their role in the family. In the United States, Hmong lifestyles have had to undergo marked changes. The refugee parent may have had professional status in their old country, but often that changed when they came to America. As Thao (1999) pointed out, in Laos, one's professional and vocational status was intertwined with his identity, social respect, and self esteem. In the United States, adjustment in the new culture means an adjustment to a new self-identity. Thao went on to discuss the fact that many former high ranking military officials who were illiterate had difficulty coping with vocational adjustment by accepting minimal paying jobs such as custodians (1999). Many Hmong males also experienced the evolving sex role adjustment. Traditionally, the men had been the breadwinners and sole supports of their families. However, wherever possible in the United States, wives are also needed to help with living expenses. Many males resent the independence of their wives and feel threatened by the sexually integrated workforce.

Children are also affected by the changing roles in the family. Because the children are required by law to attend school, they are often the first in the family to learn English. Because of their ability to communicate, they often need to assume the role of translator, interpreter, communicator, head of the household, and negotiator. This causes the parent-child relationship to erode. The child has been placed in a position of authority and decision making, which makes it difficult for parents to maintain control of their families (Thao, 1999). Likewise, for the father figure, the inability to communicate and make major decisions means a loss of leadership, respect, and pride as the family leader.

Furthermore, children also have to seek a balance among Hmong cultural expectations, teenage cultural expectations, gender roles and school expectations. Although most Hmong parents agree that school is important for their children, some seem to have a hard time understanding why children are becoming so independent. In American schools, individualism and personal success is valued. In the Hmong culture, familial decisions and group work is valued for the success of the clan. Personal needs must be sacrificed for the greater goal of the family. At times, Hmong children feel misunderstood and confused by the different messages they receive to be successful in each culture.

Gender Roles

Hmong culture also has specific gender expectations for children to fulfill in order to maintain the smooth function of the family. Girls typically have the toughest time adjusting to the demands placed on them. They have obligations ranging from schoolwork, housework and fulfilling cultural pressures to be “good girls” who are deserving of husbands. The oldest girls in the family usually have to fulfill the most responsibilities of cooking and cleaning the family home. In addition, they also take on the majority of the responsibilities of child rearing their younger siblings. Sometimes, the girls find it extremely difficult to keep up with the rigors of their homework in addition to other responsibilities. In attending American schools, Hmong girls are exposed to US culture and witness firsthand how many other teenagers spend the majority of their time-- socializing, shopping, and keeping up with the latest trends. For Hmong girls, adolescence is a confusing time- especially if they come from traditional families who want to preserve Hmong culture (Hunter, 1994). The traditional pressures of early marriage and ultimate household responsibilities are not appealing to girls who witness the carefree attitude of American adolescence. Sometimes Hmong girls become confused and at times rebellious of their role expectations.

Traditional Hmong families often have very high expectations of males (Thao, 1999). Because the male’s identity is entwined with that of his family,

parents often expect males to do well in school. As a result, males experience more independence and more pressure from their family to excel in school. In the experience of the researcher in the position of Education Specialist through the Department of Public Instruction in Wausau, Wisconsin, many males have expressed the pressures they face from their parents to go to school to become either a doctor or a lawyer. Sometimes parents do not factor in their child's interests, skills or abilities, and because a doctor or lawyer is a prestigious profession, they expect their child to pursue it. This is hard on some of the students, and they struggle with the cultural expectations to work for the means of the family versus their individual aspirations as a person.

Financial Concerns

Since as early as 1976, when the fall in Vietnam occurred and Hmong refugees began arriving in the United States, it was the more educated and financially stable Hmong generals and military leaders who entered the country first. These people adapted well to the new culture, and were often literate in both Hmong and English. Often, these people had less trouble with financing or finding suitable jobs to support their families. However, as more immigrants started coming, fewer and fewer had the knowledge or language skills to become economically stable. With this in mind, the barriers for the newer Hmong immigrants become more numerous.

Lack of money

The Wisconsin Policy Research Institute Report (1997) reported that in the 1990's, more than half (54%) of Hmong households were receiving public assistance. The study went on to point out that the average hourly wage for men was \$6.20 per hour and \$4.10 for women. This means that most households were bringing in an average yearly income between \$13,000 and \$21,000. Next, factor in the fact that most Hmong families were often large and averaged between eight to twelve people. With this and other factors in mind, it is easy to see why so many families relied on public assistance. A 1994 report on child poverty by the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families indicated that, "Compared to other states, Wisconsin had among the worst poverty rates for Asian and African American children. The Asian child poverty rate in Wisconsin was the highest in the country- 48.1%, far exceeding the next worst state, Mississippi, where the rate was less than 40%" (Kaplan, 1994 p 4). Furthermore, data from six Wisconsin school districts in the Wisconsin Policy Research Report (1997) delineates the extent of poverty for children in the school districts. In the 1996 school year, it reported that over 95% of Asian (primarily Hmong) school children in the Green Bay area qualified for the school lunch programs. Other counties represented in the study had between 33% (Eau Claire School District) and 57% (Wausau Area School District) of Asian families enrolled in AFDC, school lunch programs, or other assistance.

Effects of Wisconsin Works

As we have started into the twenty first century, the economic struggle for Hmong families has continued. As of August of 1999, there were over 39,000 Hmong residents in the state of Wisconsin (Moore & Selkowe, 1999), and due to cultural differences and language skill barriers, some of Wisconsin's Hmong families have relied on welfare to help support them through their transition to the United States. In 1997, the introduction of Governor Tommy Thompson's Wisconsin Works definitely impacted the Hmong community. Wisconsin Works (sometimes known as W-2) is a controversial welfare reform with tough rules such as: new applicants must do six weeks of supervised job hunting before getting family allowance; thereafter they must do community work for which they are paid by the hour; participants will be provided with training or education needed for unsubsidized employment, and participants are allowed two years of supported participation with the goal that families will become self-sufficient (Wigmore, 1999). The program was designed to replace the welfare system, which aided over 1,194 Hmong families in Wisconsin. Although W-2 has encouraged Hmong families to become more self-sufficient through buying their own cars and homes, a 1999 study done by Thomas Moore, PhD and Vicky Selkowe, shows how W-2 has fallen short with Hmong participants. Nine out of ten participants were placed in W-2 subsidized job categories that included jobs like light assembly, cleaning, or food service. Less than 10% of

participants received any training or classes to improve their employability skills, and 7 of the 10% were enrolled in ESL classes. Furthermore, nearly 70% of participants were unable to communicate with their caseworkers and 87.6% reported difficulty understanding materials they received from W-2. Finally, for those participants working in community service-oriented jobs, there was no adjustment in family size for the amount of aid received. Aid is given out at a flat \$673 per month regardless of whether this is a 2-person family or a 10-person family. Seeing that many Hmong families are often large, they are often at a disadvantage.

In general, four out of five families feel that W-2 has made their family's life worse (Moore & Selkowe, 1999). Although it has good intentions to get Wisconsin working, it has failed to acknowledge important considerations for minority or refugee people. Not only has W-2 forced some families into more impoverished situations, it has also restricted parents from being able to attend colleges and universities because it requires them to work. This seemingly puts them into a confining financial position where it may often feel like there is no way out.

Acculturation/Assimilation

There are some definite differences in comparing Hmong culture to Western culture. As was discussed earlier in this paper, Hmong society was semi-nomadic and based primarily on subsistence, slash and burn agriculture. They typically grew crops such as rice, corn, opium poppies,

which were the only cash crop they had, and raised animals such as pigs, ducks and chickens (*Being Hmong Means Being Free*, 1998). Formal education was minimal, as the focus for families was on raising products for their own survival. For the Hmong, adapting to a highly literate and technological society was difficult, to say the least.

Living in Two Cultures

According to Handlin's theory of culture shock, immigrants who came to a society vastly different from their own find it more difficult to adjust than immigrants arriving from similar backgrounds (Handlin, 1951). To make matters worse, immigrants struggled with knowing how to balance their old culture with the standards the new culture is placing on them. Hunter (1994) pointed out in her thesis that although the United States is regarded as the nation of nations, the traditional American system discourages immigrants from retaining a sense of identity based on their native culture in favor of the American standard of assimilation. Oftentimes, the Hmong people are expected to adapt quickly and are thrown into a system that is very difficult to adapt to.

According to Moua (1998), Southeast Asian youth that arrive in the United States before they enter adolescence have adopted the dress, hairstyles, and manners of American teenagers. These Southeast Asian students quickly take on the outward culture traits of their American peers at the expense of their own heritage. At home, these new traits often cause

friction within the family who rightly wants to preserve their traditional culture.

Living in Conflict at School

Hmong students are faced with the demands of the traditional culture at home and the demands of a new culture at school. This conflict often leads to severe confusion (Moua, 1998). In the United States, the public school system is given the responsibility of assimilating the immigrant youth to the dominant culture and economic standard. The schools are expected to prepare youth for adult life in the majority culture society (Goldstein, 1998). Southeast Asian students have a reputation for having positive attitudes toward education and doing extremely well academically. In reality, not all students are excelling. It appears that school-induced problems such as discrimination, age-grade matching, poorly designed and staffed ESL programs, premature mainstreaming, and the general insensitivity of the school system to their specific needs are all problems (Moua, 1998). Many Hmong students have more difficulty in school than most immigrants because they are not literate in their native tongue. In addition, there was no formal schooling beyond the sixth grade in Thai refugee camps. After children reached the sixth grade, their assistance was needed in the fields to help with harvesting, and children were nearing the age where they were ready to be married.

Bridging the Conflict

Most Hmong also value education as the key to their survival. At the Recent Hmong National Development Conference (2002), national leaders in the Hmong communities stressed the importance of education with Hmong children. They spoke on the future of the Hmong people and Hmong culture, and see education as their only means of survival. Through the education of their children, they hope that Hmong values and traditions will be respected and carried on through future generations

Likewise, Hmong parents see school as a place where their children can learn English skills as well as develop means to cope with an unfamiliar environment. It was a difficult adjustment for Hmong parents to make-settling in a new country with different languages, customs, and expectations placed on upon them. It was their hope that through education, their children could become thriving and contributing forces to the United States.

Most students also have the ambition to achieve and succeed in school. In surveys conducted by M. Tokarz (1992) and followed up by Hunter (1994) and Xiong (1997), they found that nearly 100% of the students they surveyed wanted to be successful in the United States without giving up their traditional Hmong culture. The students felt that, “Education was the key to a better life and a means to help their families” (Hunter, 1994, p 12). This is especially evident when one examines the sacrifices that students must make in order to be successful in school. They must learn the fragile balance

between maintaining their Hmong heritage and integrating Western ideals about success and education.

Educational Struggles

As the Hmong adjust to America, they have had to make significant adjustments to their lifestyles in comparison to their way of life in Laos. They experienced tremendous change in almost every aspect of their world. They had to adjust and adapt quickly to the new social norms of the new society; their acquisition of knowledge was accelerated at an unprecedented rate as they began their lives in the “Information Age” in the highly technological United States; they had to learn survival skills in a country where agriculture was not the chief means of survival; and they quickly learned the truth behind the old American saying: “No pain, no gain.”

For many Hmong coming to the United States, they experienced tremendous frustration. Thao (1999) also found this to be true and highlighted a number of reasons for this frustration. Some of these reasons included: adjustment to the new educational system, loss of native language and culture, development of intergeneration gaps between children and parents, misconceptions of the role of teachers (i.e. concerns about morality and the transmission of social values), lack of prior knowledge and experience that could be passed on to their children, and a feeling of frustration from not being able to help their children develop to their full potential. The next few paragraphs will discuss these issues.

Adjustment to the New Educational System

Upon examination of the educational systems between Laos and the United States, it is clear that there are huge distinctions that exist. Hmong education has been highly influenced by the education system of the French. Historically, French colonization brought the European model of education that was implemented in Laos for nearly 50 years. Thao (1999) points out that this system was highly centralized, traditional, national and teacher-centered. This means that education took place from the top down, and students were expected to memorize their lessons. There was a strong sense of discipline in the classroom, and it was not uncommon for corporal punishment or shaming to be used on students who did not learn their lessons. In contrast, the educational system in the United States usually concentrates on an integrated community based approach to learning. Thao (1999) discussed how, “this model is a combination of local control, centralization, decentralization, modernity and student-centered learning using various methods of instruction” (p. 86). The point of American education is for students to ask a lot of questions and to think things out for themselves. In considering the fact that prior to their arrival to the United States, not many Hmong children had been exposed to formal education, and those who had gone to school experienced a much different system, it is plain to see why adjustment to American education institutions is so difficult.

Native Language and Culture Loss

Hmong families have experienced tremendous native language and culture loss. Hmong families typically communicate with their children using Hmong because those who do know English speak it with a strong accent. This is highly embarrassing for Hmong speakers, so they prefer to speak their own language. However, Hmong children are educated in American schools that use English as their language base. Hmong children are not becoming proficient in either language because they speak to their parents and peers using a combination of both languages. Thao (1999) calls this type of communication “Monglish (Mong + English = Monglish)” (p. 90). This is a mixture of Hmong words and English words, which Thao feels will have deep educational implications. Because the flow of semantic information is different for Hmong parents than it is for Hmong children, it means that language development occurs on a continuum at two different levels and two different rates. Ultimately, this also plays into the way that Hmong parents and children think.

Intergenerational Gap

The most evident generational factor is the fact that Hmong parents were raised in Laos whereas their children are being raised in the United States. Hmong children have more exposure to different kinds of people, settings, and environments that help shape their perspectives, whereas Hmong parents have not had the opportunity to come into contact with

people from as many backgrounds. This causes large discrepancies in how Hmong parents and their children see the world.

As Hmong students get older, the intergenerational gap seems to get wider. At home, Hmong students are taught to conform to Hmong social norms of politeness, filial piety, respect, and obedience. They are taught to respect their elders and to never question or talk back to authority. In American schools, they are taught to be assertive, to ask questions, and to voice their opinions whether they agree or not. Because of these disparities, some Hmong children have started to question and talk back to their parents. They feel they have more freedom of choice and that their parents do not know as much as they do. To Hmong parents, this type of behavior is not acceptable, and they begin to question whether the educational approach used in the United States is the cause for their child's lack of respect, disobedience and misbehavior.

Misconceptions about the Role of Teachers

There are a number of misconceptions that Hmong parents have in regards to the education of their children. Back in Laos, Hmong parents entrusted the education of their children solely to the teacher. They had the mentality that the “teacher knows best”, so they didn’t question the authority of the teacher and saw them as a “second parent” to their child (Thao, 1999 p. 96). Parents expected teachers to educate their “whole child” and to them that meant their behavior, their moral values, and also their social values as

well. Because American schools often stay away from moral and social values for fear of offending anyone, Hmong families have begun to question the quality of their child's education when their children start to question. Parents then begin to ask, "Has the teacher really educated my 'whole child' cognitively, socially, mentally, morally and ethically?"

Lack of Similar Experience

Most Hmong parents lack educational experiences in the United States. Although they may have encountered considerable experiences in Laos, their stories often do not appropriately fit the experiences of their children. Likewise, parents often do not understand or know how to relate to what their children are going through. This often leaves them feeling hopeless and inadequate to help their children take the next needed steps of their education. Through the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, multi-million dollar grants have been accessed from the federal government to give student aid in areas their parents have had no prior experience. The grant funded programs of Talent Search and Gear Up work to help students fill out the mounds of paperwork required for them to be admitted to post-secondary education. The grants also give students exposure and experience in post-secondary institutions through college visits, job shadowing, and pre-college programs.

College for Hmong Students

Hmong education is increasing in the United States. Hmong people know that if their people are to survive in the United States, they must adapt. Adaptation comes through education, and education is definitely stressed in the Hmong culture. Dr. Vang Pobzeb (2001) researched current educational trends and found that there are also increases in Hmong students receiving college degrees. His estimations calculate that there were approximately 300,000 Hmong people in the United States in 2001. In that year, approximately 3,500 of them had received B.A. or B.S. degrees, over 350 received master's degrees, and 126 doctoral degrees. In addition, he estimated that there are over 6,500 Hmong American students currently attending colleges and universities in the United States.

Seeing Hmong education trends continue to rise is very promising for the Hmong people- especially considering the obstacles many of them have had to face. Barriers such as few college role models, inexperience to the freedoms of college, differences in cultural expectations, difficulty with language skills, and lack of study skills have sometimes stood as barriers to the success of Hmong college students.

College Barriers for Hmong Students

Hunter (1994) indicates that college is a difficult adjustment for traditional students of the Hmong culture. However, for low-income, disadvantaged and minority students, it is even more traumatic. Several

factors contribute to the difficulties that disadvantaged students have in adjusting to a college environment.

College Role Models

In most disadvantaged homes, the advantage of the presence of a college-educated role model is absent. In a home with college-educated parents, a college degree is an expectation. Whereas, it may only be a dream or not a consideration at all in a disadvantaged home. The most prominent role model for any youth is probably his or her parent. That is why not having a college-educated parent may act as a barrier. The parent is often unable to guide the student in the high school classes that s/he is supposed to take, and although the parent may support education, s/he may not understand the responsibilities the child has to do her homework. Sometimes parents may make family responsibilities come first. Furthermore, there are a number of forms and paperwork that students must fill out in order to even be accepted into college. If a parent is unaware of the procedures and paperwork, it often falls on the shoulders of the child to take the initiative of first finding the paperwork and then filling it out.

The Move to Independence

College is a new arena where an individual is expected to make the transition to adult social and emotional responsibilities. For most graduating high school seniors, this is their first taste of total independence. For disadvantaged and/or minority students, the transition is often even more

difficult because the social values and norms reflected on campus may not reflect their own family's social and educational expectations. The conflict in backgrounds and experience pose a considerable source of stress for these students. Minority students may additionally experience "culture shock", isolation, and alienation (Moua, 1998).

Differences in Cultural Expectations

Cultural expectations placed on Hmong youth can be confusing and contradictory. As mentioned earlier, in the United States, children are taught to be aggressive, independent, and self-reliant. The opposite is true for Hmong children. Their responsibility is to their family and society. Personal needs are sacrificed for the goal of the family (Moua, 1998). Furthermore, Thao (1999) and Hunter (1994) point out that the authority of the traditional Hmong parent is absolute, a trait that produces hardworking and obedient students who thrive in the structured school setting. As children become college students, they often flounder when faced with the bewildering array of choices that no previous generation of Hmong have ever encountered.

Lack of Study Skills

Hmong students may also lack strategies for studying and the skills for critical thinking and reasoning in college (Thao, 1999). As mentioned earlier, their educational transitions to the American education system has been difficult and their language acquisition skills between Hmong and

English have been mixed. As a result, many Hmong students struggle academically with their classes. In addition, sometimes the student's English skills are not where they should be- making it difficult for students to understand lectures or write papers.

Hmong Outlooks on College

Despite these barriers, there have been a significant number of success stories of Hmong students going to college and being successful. Research has shown that not only have a number of students made it into college, but also that a large number of Hmong students have graduated from college (Moua, 1998; Thao, 1999; & *The Educational Performance of Hmong Students in Wisconsin*, 1997). These students have become engineers, teachers, counselors, and doctors, and many have returned to their communities to serve as role models and mentors for younger youth.

College Perceptions

In general, the Hmong people know that education is their key to survival. They value education, and are encouraging their children to pursue the highest degrees possible. Although there are some substantial barriers, Hmong students are working to overcome these to succeed in the professional world. More and more of them are not only starting college, but also completing higher degrees.

Retention

Retention is one of the most sought after qualities of colleges in regards to their minority students as well as their students at large. The 1997 Wisconsin Policy Research Report indicated that in general, retention rates in the state of Wisconsin have been fairly high for Southeast Asian students (*The Educational Performance of Hmong Students in Wisconsin*, 1997). For the entire UW- System, there were around 23, 776 students enrolled in UW-Schools. Retention for the general population of students going into their second year of college was 79.2%. In comparing Asian data during this same year, comparative retention data for their second year was 73.4%- one of the highest retention rates for all minority students. Within the Wisconsin Policy Research Report, one UW-System administration staff member who reviewed the data remarked, “The retention figures for Southeast Asian Students are competitive with white students. ...If they continue like this, they will blow white students out of the water” (*The Educational Performance of Hmong Students in Wisconsin*, 1997 p. 23).

If trends like this continue, Hmong students look to be extremely successful in completing their post-secondary degrees. Although there are barriers that can stand in the way of education for Hmong students, there are also many strong-minded and ambitious young students who are willing to fight the battle to make it through college. As has been proven before, the Hmong people won’t give up their fight for survival. As their educational

trends continue to increase, so will their status in the professional world. The Hmong have always peacefully pushed for success and identity and although change is inevitable, their success seems well on its way.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Introduction

This chapter will describe the subjects under study and how they were chosen to participate in the study. It will describe how the instrument was chosen and developed, and why certain items were chosen to be included. It will then conclude with methodological limitations.

Subjects

The subjects used in this study were Hmong college students attending the University of Wisconsin-Stout in the 2001-02 academic year. They were spread throughout the ranking of undergraduate and graduate levels, and included all students who were considered completely or partially Hmong in decent. All students were currently legal residents of the United States and were attending college at least part time. All subjects were earning credits at UW-Stout, Menomonie, Wisconsin.

Sample Selection

All Hmong students currently attending the University of Wisconsin-Stout were given the option of filling out a mail back survey (either by postal service or e-mail) regarding their reasons for attending the University of Wisconsin-Stout, Menomonie, WI. In addition, they were asked to identify factors that helped them to feel connected and successful at this post-secondary institution. They were also asked to rank UW-Stout on a seven-

point Likert scale based on their satisfaction with a number of services provided to all of UW-Stout's students.

Instrumentation

The researcher developed a descriptive survey for this study. The items came from personal experience working with Hmong students as well as from consultation with the current Hmong advisor from Multicultural Student Services at the University of Wisconsin-Stout. The Multicultural Student Services Center (referred to as MSSC hereafter) office personnel were very interested in gaining research on the effectiveness of the university's services for Hmong students. Furthermore, current research was done to add insight and validity to the questions asked. The survey was designed to examine the following areas:

- 1) Gender, age, marital status and number of dependents at the present time
- 2) Fluency in the Hmong language (spoken, read, and written)
- 3) Employment status at present time
- 4) Number of semesters attending and current grade level at UW-Stout
- 5) Reasons for choosing UW-Stout (list of answers as well as write-in section)
- 6) Intent to complete current degree at UW-Stout (and if not, what are credits being used for)

- 7) Current status of citizenship
- 8) Current grade point average at UW-Stout
- 9) Factors contributing to grades
- 10) Factors/organizations which allow students to feel included in the collegiate atmosphere at UW-Stout
- 11) Factors/organizations which have aided in the success of the student at UW-Stout
- 12) Ways student may feel that the university could better serve Hmong students
- 13) Time(s) the student might have felt discriminated against or unappreciated by UW-Stout
- 14) Times the student may have felt supported or acknowledged by UW-Stout

15) Overall satisfaction with different services provided at UW-Stout

This survey was sent out to current UW-Stout students in the spring of 2002. The mailing included a cover letter (See Appendix A.), a two-part descriptive survey (See Appendix B and C.), and the informed consent (See Appendix D.) Stephen Vang of the MSSC office at UW-Stout was asked for further assistance on the survey. Additionally, comments were taken from other UW-Stout professors to refine and polish the survey.

Informed Consent

Students were mailed informed consent notices with their survey. They were asked to sign the consent stating they were aware that the survey was optional. It also delineated that all information would be kept confidential and that no information would be used to identify the participants. The intent was to help students to understand how this information would be helpful in possibly improving services and attitudes toward Hmong students at UW-Stout.

Data Collection

The list of Hmong students was obtained from Stephen Vang at the MSSC office at UW-Stout. Addresses were taken off the database, and surveys were mailed out to current students through both the postal system and via e-mail. Students were reminded that they had the choice to complete the survey either way, and results would be kept confidential.

The questionnaire was mailed out to all Hmong students attending UW-Stout in the spring semester of 2002. Surveys were sent with self-addressed stamped envelopes so the students could return their surveys to the researcher. The letters were coded with numeric digits so the researcher could keep track of which students returned their surveys. Follow up was done by making reminder phone calls to students who did not mail back their survey. This persisted until nearly 40% of the surveys were returned.

Data Analysis

The information was analyzed to determine if any trends had occurred in the data. The researcher was seeking out themes of successes and failures for UW-Stout Hmong students and to get their input on what services/organizations would help improve their success at UW-Stout. Furthermore, the researcher was examining the current services available to Hmong students and whether those services were adequate according to the students attending Stout.

Limitations

Limitations to this study are the fact that the information was gathered from only one post-secondary institution in one geographical location, which makes generalizing most results rather difficult. Furthermore, the number of Hmong students attending UW-Stout is small, and should not be generalized to infer the attitudes and needs of all Hmong students.

CHAPTER 4

Results

Introduction

This chapter will review the results of the mail out survey mailed to current UW-Stout Hmong students in Menomonee, Wisconsin in the spring of 2002. The survey attempted to examine Hmong College students to help determine factors that aided them in attending this post-secondary institution. More specifically, it examined their experiences, secondary trends, programs that encouraged them to continue with college, support of family members and clans, and other factors that have helped students choose UW-Stout as their college of choice. Furthermore, it examined supportive factors that have aided Hmong students in succeeding and finishing out a post-secondary degree at UW-Stout.

Objectives

The objective of this study was to gather information as follows:

- 1) Gender, age, marital status and number of dependents at the present time
- 2) Fluency in the Hmong language (spoken, read, and written)
- 3) Employment status at present time
- 4) Number of semesters attending and current grade level at UW-Stout

- 5) Reasons for choosing UW-Stout (list of answers as well as write-in section)
- 6) Intent to complete current degree at UW-Stout (and if not, what are credits being used for)
- 7) Current status of citizenship
- 8) Current grade point average at UW-Stout
- 9) Factors contributing to grades
- 10) Factors/organizations which allow students to feel included in the collegiate atmosphere at UW-Stout
- 11) Factors/organizations which have aided in the success of the student at UW-Stout
- 12) Ways student may feel that the University could better serve Hmong students
- 13) Time(s) the student might have felt discriminated against or unappreciated by UW-Stout
- 14) Times the student may have felt supported or acknowledged by UW-Stout
- 15) Overall satisfaction with different services provided at UW-Stout (based on a Likert scales)

The researcher both e-mailed and postal mailed surveys to all current Hmong students at the University of Wisconsin-Stout Menomonie, Wisconsin. The number of total surveys sent out was 58. Of the 58 sent out, the

researcher received 22 surveys (or 38% of the total sent out) from students who returned them. Follow up was done through making reminder phone calls to students who did not mail back their survey. This persisted until nearly 40% of the surveys were returned. Students were asked to confidentially return surveys through a self-addressed stamped envelope or via their e-mail account.

Demographic Information

The researcher received surveys from fourteen males and eight females. The age range of the participants showed that six students fell in the 19-20 range (four males and two females); seven students fell in the 21-22 range (five males and two females); four students were 23-24 (four females); and four students were between 25-30 (five males).

Of the males, six of them were married, and eight of them were single. Five of the six married males had at least one child and all were in the age range of 25-30. The other married male without children was 21. The females reported that only one of the eight surveyed was married. The married woman stated she was 21 years old and had one child. There was also a single female who stated she had one child.

Educational Status

Statistics also showed that there were three freshmen (14%), seven sophomores (32%), five juniors (23%), four seniors (18%), two master's students (9%) and one student who reported he was working on his general

education credits. One hundred percent of (n=22) students reported taking UW-Stout credits during the spring of 2002 and 86% (n=19) of these students reported being the first generation in their family to pursue a post-secondary degree. The three who were not first generation students reported that they either had parents who had completed degrees or in one case someone's wife had completed a degree.

The majority of students (59%) responding to the survey reported that UW-Stout was their first college of choice. The top reasons students gave for making UW-Stout their number one choice was because it was a good school (18%), UW-Stout was close to home (18%), they had relatives living close by (14%), and UW-Stout offered the program they wanted to study (9%). For the 41% (n=9) of students who noted that Stout was not their first school of choice, reasons they gave for coming to UW-Stout were 14% said they changed their major, 9% said it was close to home, 9% said they preferred the smaller class sizes, and 5% said that Stout was the only school to accept them.

Seventy-three percent (n=16) of the students surveyed said that they went straight from high school into college. The 27% (n=6) who did not go straight on were mostly the men in the 25-30 range. Many of these men noted that they started working and having families previous to starting college. They needed income to support themselves and to raise their families. Some of the factors influencing them to return college were that

they wanted to make more money; they wanted to provide a better life for themselves and their family, the lack of availability of jobs, and the desire to pursue further knowledge in their current career.

Currently 64% (n=14) of the students are working at least seasonally with 5% working full time, 41% working half time, and 18% working seasonally. The other 36% of students responded that they were not currently working.

Fluency in the Hmong Language

Hmong students were also surveyed on their abilities to communicate in the Hmong language. The results showed that 86% (n=20) reported ability to fluently speak Hmong, while 9% (n=2) reported they had some ability to speak Hmong, but not fluently. Results went on to point out that 77% (n=17) of the Hmong students could read Hmong and 23% (n=5) could not. Numbers continued to decrease with 50% (n=11) of Hmong students reporting an ability to write Hmong and 50% (n=11) could not. Generally, the older the student, the better the tendency s/he to be able to write Hmong. All of the students (males) in the 25-30 range could write Hmong. The two oldest females (age 23) also reported that they could write Hmong.

Satisfaction with Grades

Currently, the Hmong students are majoring in a large variety of majors at UW-Stout. The majors cover the spectrum from Human Development (27% of students), Early Childhood (9%) and Engineering (9%)

being the most popular to Business, Hotel and Restaurant Management, Technical Communications, and Marketing to name a few of the others.

Although not all students gave their grade point average, most students surveyed (59%) reported that they were unsatisfied with their grades. Thirty-six percent (n=8) of students reported their grades to be between 2.0 and 2.5; 23% (n=5) of students put themselves in the 2.5 to 3.0 range; 18% of (n=4) students fell in the 3.0 to 3.5 range; and 14% (n=3) of students were in the 3.5 to 4.0 range.

In further pursuing grade satisfaction, students were asked to note factors contributing to their unhappiness with grades. The top reasons given were: 1) I don't have enough time to study because of family responsibilities (32%); 2) I feel like I have inadequate financial support (27%); 3) I feel uncomfortable asking questions in class (23%); and 4) other reasons such as inability to balance family, school and work, classes being very time consuming, and family leadership roles taking precedence.

For those feeling satisfied with their grades, the top contributing reasons students gave to their successes were as follows: 1) I feel comfortable approaching my teachers with questions (32%); I feel comfortable asking questions in class (23%); I have found help through groups or multicultural support services (18%); and I study often (18%).

Extracurricular Involvement

Extracurricular involvement with Hmong students at UW-Stout appeared to be fairly high with 68% (n=15) of those surveyed being involved in at least one activity. Of those involved, all reported being a part of the Hmong Stout Student Organization (HSSO). Twenty three percent (n=5) of the students are also involved in various other activities.

The 32% (n=7) of Hmong students who are not involved in extracurricular activities named a number of factors that keep them from participating. The top reasons given were that there was not enough time, and that participants needed to spend more time with their families. There was also one student who mentioned that there were no organizations that interested him.

General Feelings Toward UW-Stout's Treatment of Hmong Students

The vast majority of Hmong students surveyed (86%) felt that in general, the University of Wisconsin-Stout does a good job of serving Hmong students. The few who were unhappy did identify ideas on how the University could better serve Hmong students. Some suggestions mentioned to improve Hmong relations with the University were to provide more diversity of ethnic foods, better-educated University staff on cultural and Hmong issues, and improved professor to student communication with course requirements and objectives.

The final questions to the survey asked students to discuss and comment on times they may have felt discriminated against. Nearly 41% (n=9) made comments on specific times they had encountered a discriminating circumstance. Comments ranged from Caucasian peers not feeling comfortable with Southeast Asian students, to professors acting rude, making ignorant comments, and interrupting a presentation, to students finding offense by the use of old documentaries relative to Asian culture.

On the other hand, students were also asked to discuss times they may have felt supported or acknowledged by UW-Stout. Nearly 64% (n=14) responded regarding times the University had supported them. Comments were overwhelmingly complimentary to the support of the office of the Multicultural Student Services Center and the helpful staff of that department. Nearly every student commenting in this area mentioned this! Students also commented on the money they were receiving to help them through school, teachers who were considerate and understanding of the Hmong culture, the support of the Hmong Stout Student Organization (HSSO), and advisors who gave aid to Hmong students as they chose their programs and classes. As mentioned earlier, the majority of students felt UW-Stout does an adequate job serving Hmong students.

Likert Ratings toward Satisfaction with UW-Stout

Part II of the survey consisted of likert ratings based on a seven-point scale. Students were asked to rate different aspects of the University from a

one to seven scale where 1 meant “no satisfaction” to 7 meaning “excellent satisfaction”.

In rating the satisfaction of the Multicultural Student Services (MSS) office at UW-Stout, 73% (n=16) of students reported having “good” or “excellent satisfaction” with their services. No students rated below a 3 “fair satisfaction” and two students (9%) rated MSS at a 3 of “fair satisfaction”.

As for satisfaction with the housing services offered at UW-Stout, most students (68%) scored “does not matter or apply”. The majority of the students surveyed do not live in University Housing. Of the seven students who do live on campus, five of them reported positively with “fair” or “good satisfaction”, and two reported “little satisfaction”.

In rating the satisfaction Hmong students have with the helpfulness of the teachers/professors, 95% responded positively with “fair” or “good satisfaction”. One student marked that it “did not matter” to him or her.

Students felt mostly satisfied with the acceptance they found from college peers. Nearly 73% reported positive satisfaction with 23% feeling “fair satisfaction”, 45% feeling “good satisfaction”, and 5% feeling “excellent satisfaction”. The other 27% of students fell in the “little satisfaction” category (9%), “fair satisfaction” (4%) and “does not matter or apply” (14%).

Most responses toward satisfaction with the extra curricular activities available to students also were positive ranging from “fair” to “excellent”. Seventy-three percent (n=16) of students had responded as follows: 27% with

“fair satisfaction”, 27% with “good satisfaction”, and 18% with “excellent satisfaction”. The other 27% of responses marked the “does not matter or apply” category.

Most students responding to the University childcare responded that they do not use the childcare services at UW-Stout. The three students who do use it had mixed responses. One student said she had experienced “good satisfaction”, one student said she had “fair satisfaction”, and another student said she had “no satisfaction”.

Satisfaction with the staff at UW-Stout was also graded positively. More than 86% of the students said they felt “fair satisfaction” with their professors (31%), “good satisfaction” (50%) and “excellent satisfaction” (5%). The other 14% of students marked that their staff satisfaction “did not matter or apply” to them.

Financial support for Hmong students at UW-Stout also received mostly positive responses. Eighty-six percent of responses fell within the “fair satisfaction” to “excellent satisfaction” range. There were a few students (10%) who responded negatively with “fairly unsatisfied” with their financial support and 4% who said it “did not matter or apply”.

In general, students gave positive marks to their overall satisfaction with the services UW-Stout provided for them. Over 86% (n=19) of students gave positive responses with 68% of them being good or excellent. Students left comments about their satisfaction toward the quality of education they

are receiving, but left additional comments about the way the University could do a better job of integrating more cultural activities throughout the campus.

CHAPTER 5

Conclusion

Introduction

The Hmong have been a persevering people who have struggled to find a balance between their Hmong culture and that of American culture, as they seek to find refuge in a place they can call home. Since as early as their roots in Chinese civilization, the Hmong have fought hard to maintain their cultural traditions and to keep their definitions of the heritage they call Hmong (Hamilton-Merritt, 1993). Although this struggle has never been an easy one, the Hmong continue to seek change and improvement as they learn the latest survival skills in the United States. From their struggles of language illiteracy as they were challenged to learn a new language in the United States, to the challenges of keeping up mentally, socially, and economically in a technologically advanced society, the Hmong people have definitely had their set of challenges (Thao, 1999).

Most Hmong people would agree that education is the strongest tool they have to maintain their identity while adjusting to the expectations placed on them in American society. Although the barriers have seemed intense, more and more Hmong people are attempting to earn post-secondary diplomas. A number of factors have contributed to the success of these students, and current research is looking to define factors that have made the post-secondary process more successful for Hmong students.

Current Research

The author's current research aimed to assess current University of Wisconsin-Stout students to examine factors that have aided them in choosing and being satisfied with this University of Wisconsin Institution.

The objectives of the study were as to review the following:

- 1) Gender, age, marital status and number of dependents at the present time
- 2) Fluency in the Hmong language (spoken, read, and written)
- 3) Employment status at present time
- 4) Number of semesters attending and current grade level at UW-Stout
- 5) Reasons for choosing UW-Stout (list of answers as well as write-in section)
- 6) Intent to complete current degree at UW-Stout (and if not, what are credits being used for)
- 7) Current status of citizenship
- 8) Current grade point average at UW-Stout
- 9) Factors contributing to grades
- 10) Factors/organizations which allow students to feel included in the collegiate atmosphere at UW-Stout
- 11) Factors/organizations which have aided in the success of the student at UW-Stout

12) Ways student may feel that the University could better serve Hmong students

13) Time(s) the student might have felt discriminated against or unappreciated by UW-Stout

14) Times the student may have felt supported or acknowledged by UW-Stout

15) Overall satisfaction with different services provided at UW-Stout
(based on a Likert scales)

Research Findings and Implications

In general, research gathered showed that Hmong students at the University of Wisconsin Stout tended to more often be single students who continued right into college after high school. This emphasizes the fact that more Hmong people are valuing higher education and seem to be adapting their traditional cultural trends of early marriage, which can sometimes act as a barrier to higher education (Thao, 1999). Another sign of cultural change is the fact that seven of the eight females who returned surveys were all single and individually taking the steps toward better career options and higher education. Traditionally, Hmong women were more subservient to their husbands and relied more heavily on the male to supply the income for the family. Today more Hmong women seem to be seeking out co-equal roles in work along with family responsibilities.

This research also points out that although there were a few students who were not first generation students, the majority of them still are the first generation in their family to pursue post-secondary degrees. This probably means that aid in helping Hmong students fill out the paperwork and begin the process of admittance into college is still necessary. Research has shown that when there are role models to help students take the right steps of getting into school, Hmong students will be more apt to begin the process and be successful at it (Thao, 1999; Hunter, 1994).

Most Hmong students reported in this survey that they felt dissatisfied with their grades at UW-Stout. They contributed these feelings toward a number of factors, but as mentioned in the findings, the most common reasons were because of their family responsibilities, their lack of financial support, and an inability to find a balance between family, school, and work. For the Hmong people, family is probably the most important factor in their life and culture. Because group survival and cohesion is stressed, many Hmong students find it difficult to put time into their studies when there are family needs that seem more important. This has been a difficult transition for Hmong students to make.

Citizenship is also more commonly being seen as a norm with increases in Hmong students that have been born in the United States. At least half of the Hmong students returning surveys reported to be US citizens, which means their English proficiency is also probably improving. As students are

more proficient with the language, they have better understanding and more accessibility to the process needed for higher education.

Extra-curricular activities at colleges are also an important factor for the general college experience for University students. Involvement with extra curricular activities teaches students to invest in their communities and to find areas of interest other than their academic studies. Hmong students seem to be getting more involved in extra-curricular activities with almost 75% of them being in at least one additional activity. However, as one student pointed out, most Hmong students only take part in the Hmong Stout Student Organization (HSSO) on campus. This implies the need to continue such an organization, which offers a sense of belongingness and social/academic support.

In general, most Hmong students reported that UW-Stout does and adequate job of serving Hmong students at UW-Stout. Many of them *have* encountered instances of discrimination, but those instances, such as the presentation in class, seem like isolated cases. Ratings on satisfaction with individual University services mostly ranged positively from fair to excellent with the majority of ratings between fair and good. This could suggest that although students were mostly satisfied, there can still stand some room for improvement.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In conclusion, the majority of students rated the University of Wisconsin-Stout with overall good satisfaction in regards to the services the University provides for them. As one Stout student stated, "Stout is great. It establishes itself and hides behind nothing." This summarizes the general trend in student perceptions toward the university. In addition, comments towards the Multicultural Students Services Offices were also extremely favorable. Over three quarters of the students commented on their positive support and services for the Hmong students. However, as there is with any institution, there are always areas that can use improvement.

Recommendations for improvement based on the results of the student survey:

- 1) The University could look into providing more cultural diversity activities for *all* Stout students- such as workshops, presentations, and more publicity of cultural events.
- 2) The additional training for staff and professionals at UW-Stout with mandates of integrating diversity within the curriculum.
- 3) The possibility of better monetary support for services like the Multicultural Student Services Offices (MSS) so they can support and recruit a larger population of minority students.
- 4) A better understanding of the Hmong culture and the barriers Hmong students face (i.e. family responsibilities, monetary

hardship, few college role models, and different cultural expectations). Together, Hmong students and teachers could come to a place of mutual respect and understanding to the expectations of them as an individual college student.

- 5) The need for additional aid for Hmong students in writing and grammar. A number of Hmong students commented on the difficulty they have with translating Hmong to English, and with their writing skills for papers. The languages are structured and translated so differently that students sometimes need additional support.
- 6) A better variety of ethnic foods offered to all University students.
- 7) Additional monetary supports to help students economically support themselves (and sometimes their families) as they complete college.
- 8) A more diverse staff of teachers including more Hmong and Southeast Asian teachers. Students are inspired by teachers who can role model, relate to and tie in their culture heritage. Furthermore, these teachers can help with translations and have first hand knowledge of cultural barriers.

In summary, the Hmong continue to press on in their survival in the United States. From their early agricultural lifestyle to their adjustment in a highly technological society, the Hmong continue to adjust well to life in the

United States. Though Hmong culture is diametrically different than that of US culture, the Hmong also have constitutional freedoms to protect, preserve and enjoy their heritage. As they do so, they will continue to acculturate as necessity dictates while trying to find the best mix of Hmong and American traditions. To this, and the education of Hmong people, we can attribute the future of Hmong-Americans. Through their hard work, determination, and perseverance, the Hmong will continue to become highly productive citizens to American society.

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Appendix A

Melissa B. Crevier
W5270 Fowler Drive
Merrill, WI 54452

April 24, 2002

Dear UW-Stout Hmong Students:

Let me start out by introducing myself. My name is Melissa Crevier, and I am a graduate student in the School Counseling Program at UW-Stout. I currently work for the Early Identification Program (EIP) at the Department of Public Instruction in Wausau, and have a sincere interest in Hmong culture and the well being of ht Hmong people.

Part of my graduate studies includes completing a thesis in which I need to do research. Because I have such an interest in Hmong culture, I thought it would be interesting to see what the Hmong perceptions are of UW-Stout. I want to see if you are satisfied with the services they are providing you.

I want to ask a HUGE favor of you... Could you please fill out the enclosed survey and it back to me in the self addressed stamped envelope? I want to hear input from all Hmong students on campus, and your comments are very IMPORTANT to me. If you could donate about 15 minutes of your time, and fill out the surveys, I would be forever grateful to you.

I am currently working with Stephen Vang in Multicultural Student Services, and am hoping that the results to this study will help the University to examine how they can better serve Hmong students in the future. Your input will hopefully improve the opportunity for a better educational experience of Hmong students in the future.

If you have any questions, please feel free to call me at (715) 539-8966 or e-mail me at mcrevier@juno.com. Again, I look forward to receiving your survey. I have also emailed this to your Stout e-mail account, so if you prefer to do it online, you can also send it back to me that way.

Best wishes to you now and always!

Warmly,

Melissa Crevier
Graduate Student

Appendix B

Student Informed Consent

I have been invited and I have freely consented to take part in this scientific study about the factors influencing attendance and retention of Hmong Students at the University of Wisconsin-Stout. This study is being performed by:

Melissa Crevier
W5270 Fowler Drive
Merrill, WI 54452
(715) 539-8966
mcrevier@juno.com

I understand that I have been invited to participate because the research pertains to persons like me. It will only take about 5-10 minutes in which I will fill out a survey (either electronically or though a mail-out survey). I understand the explanation that has been given to me, and I know that my participation will help to gather data about Hmong students attending UW-Stout. I know that if I have any questions or concerns, I will direct them to the researcher who will be happy to answer any questions.

I understand that my participation is strictly voluntary, and that I am free to discontinue my participation at any time without any penalty. I am also free to decline from any questions on the survey that I may feel uncomfortable answering. My refusing and/or discontinuing will in no way affect my relation to the University of Wisconsin-Stout, to its representatives, or to its services.

I understand that the results of participation will be treated in strictest confidence, and that I will remain anonymous with respect to the results of the study. I may request final information about the study should I be interested in the results. I also understand that my participation in the study does not guarantee beneficial results to me, but that I will aid the researcher and the University with how they may better serve minority students (i.e. Hmong) in the future.

I understand that if I have any questions concerning the purpose or procedures of this research project, I may write or call the researcher's advisors without revealing my name.

Dr. Jill Stanton
Department of School Psychology
University of Wisconsin-Stout
Menomonie, WI 54751
(715) 232-2362, Ed. & Human Service Bldng

Stephen Vang
Office of Student Services
University of Wisconsin-Stout
Menomonie, WI 54751
(715) 232-1381, 217 Bowman Hall

I understand that if I have any additional questions or concerns about the treatment of human subjects in the study, I may write or call:

Dr. Ted Knous, Chair
Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research
University of Wisconsin-Stout
Menomonie, WI 54751
(715) 232-1126

Although this person may ask my name, I understand that all inquiries will be kept in strictest confidence. I understand that if I am completing this survey electronically, my typed signature constitutes my signed consent.

Signature of Participant

Date

Appendix C
Survey
Hmong Students at UW-Stout:
Factors Influencing Acceptance and Retention

After signing the consent to participate, please fill out the survey as completely as possible. Your answers will give UW-Stout a better understanding of your successes and struggles being a college student. Remember that your data will remain confidential and will only be reported within group data.

1. Gender

- Male
 Female

2. Age _____

3. Marital Status

- | | |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Single | <input type="checkbox"/> Divorced |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Married | <input type="checkbox"/> Widowed |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Separated | |

4. Do you have any children?

- Yes—if yes, how many? _____
 No

5. Do you fluently speak Hmong? Can you read Hmong? Can you write Hmong?

- | | | |
|------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes |
| <input type="checkbox"/> No | <input type="checkbox"/> No | <input type="checkbox"/> No |

6. Are you employed?

- | | |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Full-time | <input type="checkbox"/> Seasonal |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Part-time | <input type="checkbox"/> Not employed |

7. Are you currently attending classes at UW-Stout?

- Yes—if yes, for how many semesters? _____
 No

8. What is your current grade level?

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Freshman (13 th year) | <input type="checkbox"/> Master's Program |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sophomore (14 th year) | <input type="checkbox"/> Doctoral Program |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Junior (15 th Year) | <input type="checkbox"/> Other _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Senior (16 th Year) | |

9. Were you the first person in your family to pursue a college degree?

- Yes
 No—if no, list other family members who have completed degrees.

10. Was UW-Stout one of your first colleges of choice?
 Yes—if yes, why? _____
 No—if no, why did you end up coming to UW-Stout? _____
11. Did you continue on to college right after high school?
 Yes—if yes, skip to question # 14
 No—if no continue with question # 12
12. What did you do between high school and college? _____

13. What factors influenced you to return to college? _____

14. What is your major? _____
15. Are the classes you are currently taking going to be used toward your major?
 Yes—if yes, when do you plan to graduate? _____
 No—if not, what will your credits be toward? _____
16. What is your current grade point average? _____
17. Are you currently satisfied with your grades?
 Yes—if yes, skip to question #19
 No—if no, continue to question #18
18. What factors have contributed to your unhappiness with grades? (Mark all that apply.)
 I don't know how to study
 I feel my teachers are unapproachable
 I feel uncomfortable asking questions in class
 I feel there is no one to help me when I don't understand
 I don't have the time I need to study because of family responsibilities
 I feel like I have inadequate financial support
 Other reasons _____
- SKIP TO QUESTION 20
19. What factors have helped you to feel satisfied with your grades (Mark all that apply.)
 I study often
 I feel comfortable asking questions in class
 I feel comfortable approaching my teachers with questions
 I have found help through study groups or multicultural support services
 My family has helped with my responsibilities at home so that I can study
 Other reasons _____
20. Are you currently a US Citizen?
 Yes—if yes, when did you receive your citizenship? _____

_____ No—if no, how old were you when you arrived in the United States? _____
21. Are you involved in any extra-curricular organizations at UW-Stout?

_____ Yes—if yes, skip to question number # 23

_____ No—if no continue to question # 22

22. What is keeping you from being involved in any extra-curricular organizations at UW-Stout? (Mark any that apply.) SKIP TO QUESTION # 24

_____ Lack of time

_____ No clubs that interest you

_____ You don't feel welcomed or accepted in the organizations

_____ Other factors _____

23. What organizations are you currently involved in? _____

24. Do you feel that in general, UW-Stout does a good job of serving Hmong Students?

_____ Yes

_____ No—if no, how could they better serve Southeast Asian students? _____

25. Has there ever been a time at UW-Stout that you have felt discriminated against?

Please explain.

26. Has there ever been a time when you have felt particularly supported or acknowledged by UW-Stout? Please explain.

PLEASE SCROLL TO CONTINUE TO PART II OF THE SURVEY

Appendix D
Part II

Please rate the following items on the seven-point scale. Choose only the whole numbers to represent your answers. Circle your answers, or type them in the space provided. The scale will be represented as follows:

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
|-----------------|---------------------|-------------------|--------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|------------------------|
| No Satisfaction | Little Satisfaction | Fair Satisfaction | Does not Matter or apply | Fair Satisfaction | Good Satisfaction | Excellent Satisfaction |

1. I have been happy with the services that the Multicultural Student Services Office has provided me. _____

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
|-----------------|---------------------|-------------------|--------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|------------------------|
| No Satisfaction | Little Satisfaction | Fair Satisfaction | Does not Matter or apply | Fair Satisfaction | Good Satisfaction | Excellent Satisfaction |

2. I have been satisfied with the housing services available at UW-Stout. _____

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
|-----------------|---------------------|-------------------|--------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|------------------------|
| No Satisfaction | Little Satisfaction | Fair Satisfaction | Does not Matter or apply | Fair Satisfaction | Good Satisfaction | Excellent Satisfaction |

3. I have been satisfied with the helpfulness of the teachers/professors. _____

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
|-----------------|---------------------|-------------------|--------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|------------------------|
| No Satisfaction | Little Satisfaction | Fair Satisfaction | Does not Matter or apply | Fair Satisfaction | Good Satisfaction | Excellent Satisfaction |

4. I have been satisfied with the acceptance I have found from college peers. _____

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
|-----------------|---------------------|-------------------|--------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|------------------------|
| No Satisfaction | Little Satisfaction | Fair Satisfaction | Does not Matter or apply | Fair Satisfaction | Good Satisfaction | Excellent Satisfaction |

5. I have been satisfied with the extra curricular activities available to me. _____

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
|-----------------|---------------------|-------------------|--------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|------------------------|
| No Satisfaction | Little Satisfaction | Fair Satisfaction | Does not Matter or apply | Fair Satisfaction | Good Satisfaction | Excellent Satisfaction |

6. I have been satisfied with the childcare available to me at UW-Stout. _____

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
|-----------------|---------------------|-------------------|--------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|------------------------|
| No Satisfaction | Little Satisfaction | Fair Satisfaction | Does not Matter or apply | Fair Satisfaction | Good Satisfaction | Excellent Satisfaction |

7. I have been satisfied with the staff that I am dealing with at UW-Stout. _____

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
|-----------------|---------------------|-------------------|--------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|------------------------|
| No Satisfaction | Little Satisfaction | Fair Satisfaction | Does not Matter or apply | Fair Satisfaction | Good Satisfaction | Excellent Satisfaction |

8. I have been satisfied with the financial support I have received from UW-Stout. _____

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
|-----------------|---------------------|-------------------|--------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|------------------------|
| No Satisfaction | Little Satisfaction | Fair Satisfaction | Does not Matter or apply | Fair Satisfaction | Good Satisfaction | Excellent Satisfaction |

9. In general, I am satisfied with the overall services UW-Stout provides for me. _____

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
|-----------------|---------------------|-------------------|--------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|------------------------|
| No Satisfaction | Little Satisfaction | Fair Satisfaction | Does not Matter or apply | Fair Satisfaction | Good Satisfaction | Excellent Satisfaction |

10. Please comment on your overall satisfaction with UW-Stout, and discuss any changes that could be made to make UW-Stout a more satisfying and effective place for collegiate study.

Thank you so much for your time in filling out this survey