A Critical Ethnography of Hmong American Students Navigating and Transforming Their University

By

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Abstract

Since Hmong Americans are considered "Asians," previous literature has often used them to dismantle the Model Minority Myth by focusing on their low educational attainment. This focus on Hmong American students' (lack of) educational attainment does not adequately illustrate their assets and agency in navigating higher education. My dissertation intervenes in these deficit and damaging discourses on Hmong American students. Using critical ethnography, I position Hmong American undergraduates with assets that are crucial to equity and diversity in higher education. Specifically, I collected data at a U.S. public four-year university, which included academic student records, questionnaires, interviews, and participant observations of Hmong American undergraduates. My findings highlight Hmong American students as possessing assets to navigate and transform their educational experiences in higher education. Most notably, in an act of transformative resistance to their marginalization on campus and within the Asian American Studies Department, the Hmong American undergraduates created their own student-initiated and student-led course where Hmong history, culture, and knowledge was centered, legitimized, and affirmed. These efforts brought institutional awareness and actionable plans to imbue a sense of ethnic history, culture, and identity within their university. My study has relevant implications for scholars, educators, policymakers, and community members invested in serving diverse communities from critical perspectives so as to nurture their assets. Furthermore, my study also contributes to scholarship on race/ethnicity, education, and ethnic studies by illuminating the experiences of marginalized groups that are often invisible in the academic literature.

Acknowledgements

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Importantly, thank you to the Hmong American students in this study for sharing your educational experiences with me and ultimately becoming part of this dissertation. Each one of you made tremendous contributions in furthering this study. I hope this—our—dissertation honors your experiences. May the implications of this study lead towards transforming our higher education institutions for Hmong American students and many more Students of Color in the United States.

Lastly, to my family—You have been my greatest strength. Thank you for your unconditional support, encouragement, and love. I would not have been able to embark on this journey and complete it without you.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In Fall of 2009, I, a Hmong[1] American woman, began my first year as an undergraduate at Sky University (pseudonym) located in California. I became an active member of the Hmong ethnic student organization and a part of the Hmong American student community there. After I graduated with my bachelor's degree and entered graduate school, I continued to maintain my connections with the Hmong American student community at Sky University. Later, in October 2015 I would again immerse myself with the Hmong American community at Sky University for two and a half years (November 2017), but this time as a participant-turned-ethnographer. The key difference between these two roles was that now as an ethnographer I was collecting data on my previous undergraduate student community. My hope was to understand Hmong American undergraduates' educational experiences as they pursued their degree. In my process of learning about their experiences and reading the literature on Hmong American students, I was repeatedly struck by the discrepancy between how research has portrayed them and how they were actually navigating Sky University. Hmong American students were not passively pursuing higher education; rather, they were actively engaging in ways that not only enriched their educational experiences but transformed their university spaces and those of many students who came after them. This dissertation was also my own personal awakening to understanding and acknowledging the power of research in its ability to not only dehumanize but also humanize communities, as well as its potential for empowerment and advocacy.

I begin this dissertation with a personal experience that encapsulates the narratives of students from my Hmong community and that indicates the need for research and advocacy that

[1] I acknowledge Hmong and Mong as different spellings for my people. These spellings reflect different dialects, but for this dissertation I use Hmong since this spelling is most widely used.

honors and positions them within a place of power and agency. I employ this experience in order to offer a preliminary argument to incorporate both Asian Critical Race Theory and Community Cultural Wealth to examine Hmong American students' education. In doing so I participate in a paradigm shift in research and advocacy for Hmong Americans that is grounded in asset-based approaches that scholars, advocates, community members, and even Hmong people themselves would be well-advised to utilize. Moreover, discussing Hmong American students from a place of power can lead to liberating experiences that move beyond deficit and damaging discourses that stereotype Hmong American students and their communities. In this introduction, I also include a brief history of Hmong Americans that is pertinent to understanding this overall study.

My Experience

In 2018, as a doctoral student, I attended my first Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) conference on public policies and legislation that impact or will impact our AAPI communities. Towards the end of the conference, conference organizers divided us into groups, where we were given time to select a few legislative bills to advocate for when we met with our state legislators. Folks in my group spanned non-profit representatives and community members who had a strong interest in uplifting the Hmong community. From there, we collectively met with a few state legislators to advocate for bills that were of importance to us; many were related to education.

In our first meeting with a state legislator, I provided the 2010 U.S. Census data on the Hmong population, while the others shared their experiences and knowledge to highlight the bills we agreed on. As I sat in the room, I could not help but notice the words people used to describe my community. These words came from people who were advocating *for* my community, and especially from those who were *in* my community. Through our meetings with different elected

officials and staff, I heard the same rhetoric: “Hmong is lagging behind in education. Hmong is among the lowest in poverty.” Although I could not understand why but in those three meetings, I did not feel right about the way we were describing our Hmong American students and community. Only when I left the conference was I able to identify what it was—we were producing discourses that were deficit and damage-centered (Tuck, 2009; Vue & Mouavangsou, in press). I understand discourse as referring to the spoken or written words that create an image/perception about Hmong Americans. The words that were used that day were deficit discourses because they constructed the Hmong American community as lacking skills to do well in school. These discourses were damage-centered since we were advocating for resources by depicting Hmong people through their oppression. While I understood that we had used these descriptions to advocate and leverage support and resources, at the same time this portrayal was very disturbing.

This Study and Research Questions

These deficit and damage-centered perspectives are still continually used when discussing Hmong American students in the United States especially when scholars try to dismantle the Model Minority Myth (Lee et al., 2017; Poon et al., 2016). The concept of the model minority racially positions Asian Americans as “good minorities” who “achieve universal and unparalleled academic and occupational success” (Museus & Kiang, 2009, p. 6). This stereotype also assumes that Asian Americans do not need educational resources given their “success” (Museus & Kiang, 2009). However, this concept of the “good minority” also creates a dichotomy of the “bad minorities.” According to Kim (1999), Asian Americans have been racially triangulated through valorization and ostracism relative to these White and Black dichotomies. For Hmong American students, moreover, they are valorized homogeneously as

Asian Americans (honorary Whites and model minorities), and at the same time are also perpetual foreigners and unassimilable. Any deviation from the honorary Whites (Model Minority Myth) ideologically *Blackens* them (Lee, 2005; Ong, 1996). Among many Southeast Asian American groups, Hmong Americans are positioned in such racial discourse either manifesting the Model Minority Myth or dismantling it—both of which I argue can be damaging to Hmong American students and the Hmong community as a whole.

With this dissertation, I seek to reshape the conversations on how Hmong American students are framed as educational delinquents and advocate for a shift in discourse that captures their unique experiences within a place of strength. It is important to note this dissertation does not seek to incorporate Hmong American students' education into the Model Minority Myth, but rather to demand to see Hmong American students as themselves outside of these stereotypes. The research questions guiding this dissertation are:

1) What are the educational outcomes and experiences of Hmong American undergraduates as they navigate the university?

2) How do Hmong American undergraduates transform their institutional spaces and educational experiences?

The first question examines the educational outcomes and experiences of Hmong American students. In particular, I focus on their graduation completion and academic trends. I also provide a broad perspective of Hmong American students at Sky University. Meanwhile, educational experiences focus on in-depth, personalized understanding of these educational outcomes. Both educational outcomes and experiences are important to provide a holistic understanding of how Hmong American students navigate (i.e., maneuver higher education) and pursue their bachelor's degree.

The second question focuses on the actions of Hmong American students to transform their university space and experiences. I am intentional about my use of "transform" as more

than simply summarizing that Hmong American students are "changing" their university. Rather, I see my participants' actions in terms of what Yosso (2005) coins as transformative resistance, which takes into account Hmong American students' critical awareness of the oppressive structures within higher education that exclude and marginalize Hmong, along with how Hmong American students choose to change those structures. My use of "institutional spaces" refers to university spaces, specifically, curriculum, classroom, and public visibility within Sky University.

This dissertation emerged from my desire to better serve my Hmong community especially in education. I am reminded by Moua and Vang (2015) that not only is researching my community important, but it is equally important *how* I write, frame, and discuss them. For this reason, I pay close attention to my positionality and how I understand what I am seeing. I am guided by the work of Villenas (1996), moving beyond the researcher as colonizer and towards becoming an activist with my own voice, correcting the representations of my community. To this end, Hmong, especially Hmong American students, are more than a tool to be used to disrupt the Model Minority Myth. We are not well-represented by deficit and damage-centered discourses. Hmong American students—including myself, as a Hmong graduate student—exercise agency and possess assets that we draw upon in accessing and navigating institutional structures, as in higher education.

This dissertation also acknowledges and builds on work of community members who have sought to change the deficit discourse on Hmong Americans. For example, *Success that looks like me* by Pha and Pha (2015), highlights the achievements of 25 Hmong Americans in the United States. Similarly, Txhawb, a free Hmong California directory/magazine since 2008, has published articles online and in print on the history, challenges, and success of Hmong

Americans. Their 2019 directory/magazine issue highlighted 12 Hmong American women and their accomplishments ("12 Inspirational Hmong Women of California," 2019). Along this same vein, the Hmong American Experience Facebook page and website grew out of a desire to change the way Hmong communities are seen. Their website explains:

> It's easy to see all the negative stories about our community in the news and on social media. So we focus on sharing positive stories or news to provide education and empowerment. We hope the stories may inspire you to have the courage to follow your dreams. We hope that we can work together to make our Hmong American community better! (Vang, 2022)

On their website, they feature the accomplishments of Hmong Americans; during the months of graduation, their Facebook shares graduation photos of Hmong Americans across the United States and their educational journeys. These forms of community movements are changing the discourse on Hmong Americans.

History of Hmong Americans in the United States

Since this study focuses on Hmong American students in the United States, this section provides a brief history of their arrival to the United States. It should be noted that rather than attempt to make this section an in-depth historical account, I provide context for readers who are not familiar with Hmong Americans. Most Hmong Americans today are refugees or descendants of refugees who were forced to migrate to many countries—including the United States—because of the Secret War in Laos, a covert operation conducted by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). The Secret War comprised part of the larger Vietnam War and spanned over 10 years, prior to 1968 and well after 1973. U.S. forces recruited Hmong people in Laos as soldiers and trained them to provide ground and air support for U.S. advisors and military (Duffy et al., 2004). After the United States lost the war in Vietnam in 1975, Hmong people in Laos were intensely persecuted and had to flee the country for survival.

The Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act of 1975 was vital for Hmong people because it provided U.S. assistance and refugee status to come to the United States. However, to preserve the secrecy of the "Secret War," Hmong and many ethnic refugees from Laos were *forgotten* or purposefully left out despite Laos being a strategic location to the Vietnam War. To clarify, the earlier iteration of the Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act of 1975 excluded Laos (the country in which many Hmong people now in the United States had lived in before and during the war) and it was not until a year later, on June 21, 1976 when this act was amended to include refugees from Laos such as Hmong (A Bill to Amend the Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act of 1975 to Provide for the Inclusion of Refugees from Laos, 1976; The Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act, 1975). I assert that this persistent institutional and systemic exclusion of Hmong people to the United States extends to the current conditions Hmong American students and their community experience and their advocacy for social justice.

Many Hmong refugees first arrived in the United States in 1975, with the last wave coming in 2004 (Grigoleit, 2006). The U.S. 2010 Census shows California has a Hmong population of 91,224, making it one of the nation's most highly concentrated Hmong-populated states (Hoeffel et al., 2012). According to the Pew Research Center, of the top ten Hmong U.S. Metropolitan areas in the nation, five are located in California (Budiman, 2021). Since 1975, Hmong Americans have made many strides in the United States including the political success of former State Senator Mee Moua, who was the first Hmong American ever elected to the state legislature (Xiong, 2018), as well as the recent achievements of Sunisa Lee, the first Hmong American gymnast to compete in the Olympics and first Asian American to win gold in the all-around Olympic gymnastics competition (Venkatraman, 2021), and also the long-standing

celebration of large Hmong New Year festivals (Yang, 2007). In our efforts to understand Hmong American history and our increased attempts to make ourselves visible in the United States, it is evident that Hmong Americans are still largely invisible in dominant society. The insidious pattern of essentializing Asian Americans as a monolithic group still persists without recognizing our diversity.

Overview of Dissertation

Building on this introduction, my dissertation as a whole examines Hmong American students' educational outcomes and experiences, and emphasizes how Hmong American students themselves are agents in their educational pursuits and higher education. This dissertation consists of six chapters, as previewed in the following paragraphs. In Chapter 2, I contextualize this dissertation within existing literature of Hmong American students' education in the United States. I also make clear the distinctions between deficit-thinking and damage-centered research in order to focus on asset-based research. I end this chapter by introducing two conceptual frameworks guiding this dissertation: Asian Critical Race Theory and Community Cultural Wealth. In Chapter 3, I detail my research process and rationale for conducting this critical ethnographic study. I focus on my methodology and methods, including the study's design, research sites, data collection, data analyses, and validity, as well as my own positionality. Chapter 4 is a findings chapter on the educational outcomes and experiences of Hmong American undergraduates. Specifically, in this chapter I closely examine Hmong American student outcomes and experiences in relation to the forms of cultural capital outlined in Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth, in order to shed light on the assets Hmong American students possess as they navigate Sky University. Chapter 4 ends with Hmong American students identifying institutional opportunity gaps as a way to build into Chapter 5, which focuses on their

transformative resistance. The findings in Chapter 5 show how Hmong American students are addressing these opportunity gaps through the Hmong Student Organization as well as through an undergraduate student-led and student-taught course. In other words, this chapter focuses on the actions of Hmong American undergraduates to bring transformative change to their university in ways that work for them. Chapter 6 summarizes my findings from Chapters 4 and 5 to answer my research questions. I discuss the theoretical and practical implications of my dissertation, concluding with the limitations of my dissertation and directions for future research.

Conclusion

In connecting back to my experience at the conference, I felt responsible because I did not address the deficit narrative, even though I did not produce it. Having gone through this experience, when I was invited to join a group of doctoral students to write a grant for Latinx and Hmong Americans students, I explicitly discussed the importance of how we frame our communities when seeking resources and funding. It is not that our communities are fundamentally needy, but rather that our communities are valuable and deserve an equitable opportunity to reach their fullest potential. This dissertation is not about creating another Model Minority Myth for Hmong, nor is it seeking to tell a new story on Hmong Americans. Rather, my dissertation is telling a story that already exists, yet does not given enough attention and recognition that it deserves. This dissertation calls for a paradigm shift on how Hmong American students and their community are portrayed in order to tell their stories with dignity and on their own terms. Although no one, including myself, is exempt from producing and reproducing deficit and damaging narratives, this dissertation seeks to provide a more nuanced portrayal of Hmong American students' educational experiences. We, as individuals and collectives, must

consistently and constantly work together to transform Hmong American and many other communities' narratives to be liberating and empowering.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

As previously mentioned in Chapter 1, the purpose of this dissertation is to shift the discourse on Hmong American students' education from deficit and damage-centered research toward an asset-based lens. In this chapter, I begin with a review of the relevant literature on Hmong American education as a way to highlight the major trends and gaps in the literature on this topic. Then, I discuss the importance of focusing on students' strengths and assets in higher education. Next, I outline Asian Critical Race Theory (Museus & Iftikar, 2013) and Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005) as conceptual frameworks to center the educational experiences of Hmong Americans through an asset-based approach. Finally, I provide a summary of the chapter.

Literature Review on Hmong American Education

Since the arrival of Hmong refugees to the United States in the late 1970s until now, researchers have studied Hmong American students' educational attainment and experiences in U.S. schools (Gloria et al., 2017; Hvitfeldt, 1986; Lee, 2002, 2005; Rubright, 1993). Within this body of literature, major claims have been made about Hmong American students' academic performance and experiences in the United States, which includes cultural differences and structural barriers.

Cultural differences refer to the contrast in Hmong and American norms which guide their behaviors, beliefs, and social systems (Ngo, 2008; Ngo & Lee, 2007). For instance, cultural differences have been used to explain the educational challenges faced by Hmong American students (Findlay, 1995; Lee, 2002; Ngo & Lee, 2007). In the K-12 literature, Findlay's (1995) study illustrates the differences among Hmong and U.S. cultural expectations regarding student behavior in the classroom. Within U.S. schools, successful students are expected to participate

verbally during in-class activities. In contrast, according to Hmong cultural repertoire, students show respect towards their teachers through quiet engagement (Findlay, 1995). When Hmong students do not engage in a form of classroom participation that Western teachers recognize, it "produce[s] impediments to communication between these students and their teachers" (Findlay, 1995, p. 23) which has a determinantal impact on their academic performance. Furthermore, cultural differences are seen in Hmong practices of early marriages and child rearing which differs from American culture (Goldstein, 1988; Rumbaut & Ima, 1988) and contributes to low academic achievements and high dropout rates of Hmong girls (Goldstein, 1988; Rumbaut & Ima, 1988). Additionally, Hmong cultural favoritism of sons over daughters impacts Hmong women's overall academic performance because it discourages Hmong women from pursuing higher education (Goldstein, 1988; Lee, 1997; Rumbaut & Ima, 1988). Moreover, the collectivist culture that Hmong people operate under clashes with the schooling culture of the United States, which focuses on individualism and competition (Goldstein, 1988; Trueba et al., 1990).

Studies emphasizing the impact of cultural differences on Hmong student achievement assume that failure to assimilate into mainstream American culture accounts for academic performance. Assimilation is understood as the process where a non-dominant group (usually immigrant) adopts the dominant culture and discards their culture (i.e., minority culture) in order to be accepted and successful in the dominant society (Lee, 2005; Strouse, 1987). Strouse (1987) explained that assimilation in educational institutions can happen by learning English, adopting the majority's values, and devaluing cultures that are not part of the majority. As Trueba and colleagues (1990) pointed out, "Refugee and immigrant children [in this case, Hmong students] cannot succeed in America society without understanding the American system, its institutional organization and its philosophy . . . [learning] the English language is crucial to their [Hmong

students'] adjustment to our [U.S.] society, their acceptance of new values and their participation in public life" (p. 2). In contrast, some scholars argue that students can maintain their ethnic culture and still achieve academic success (Bosher, 1997; Lee, 2005). For instance, Bosher (1997) found that Hmong college students who adapt to American culture while maintaining their Hmong culture and identity were academically successful. Additionally, Lee (2005) echoed this same message that the Hmong students with high academic achievements are the ones able to selectively accurate into American culture, while retaining Hmong culture. Similarly, Ngo (2015) found that when Hmong culture is appreciated in schools such as through Hmong Culture Clubs, it creates a sense of belonging that positively supports Hmong students' education.

Many scholars have disputed the simplified claim that low educational performance can be attributed to Hmong American students' cultural differences, and have advocated for a more nuanced understanding of culture (Lee, 1997, 2005; Ngo, 2002). The cultural difference argument is problematic because it assumes that an ethnic culture remains static and its inability to adapt or evolve contributes to students' poor academic performance (Lee, 2005; Ngo, 2002). As previously noted, early studies indicated that the Hmong cultural practice of early marriage contributes to Hmong girls' low academic achievement and school dropout rates (Goldstein, 1988; Rumbaut & Ima, 1988), but studies like Ducklow and Toft (2019), Lee and colleagues (2016), Xiong (2012), and Lee (1997) indicated that Hmong culture is changing with an increase in Hmong women attending higher education. Moreover, Lee (1997) pointed out "[t]he assumption of a static Hmong culture ignores the history of accommodation, resistance and transformation that the Hmong have undergone as an ethnic minority, first in China, then in Laos, and now in the United States" (p. 805). This perspective highlights how Hmong culture is both nuanced and fluid, and changes the conversations of Hmong culture as a deficit to Hmong

American students' academic success (Ducklow & Toft, 2019; Keown-Bomar & Vang, 2016; Lee, 1997; Mouavangsou, 2018).

In contrast to studies that focused on cultural differences, which deflect the responsibilities from structural, institutionalized practices that impact students' education, other studies emphasized the impact of structural barriers on student achievement, which attends more closely to issues of race and/or class (Ngo & Lee, 2007). Lee (2005) argued that schools reproduce the racial inequalities and institutional barriers that contribute to Hmong American students' academic achievement. For example, the tracking of students as English Language Learners limits their postsecondary educational success by constraining their access to resources such as college preparatory courses (Xiong, 2010). Additionally, understanding how race and racism negatively impact Hmong American students' educational experience is important for their long-term academic success (Depouw, 2012; Ngo, 2022). As Depouw (2012) asserted, "explicitly naming race and racism as salient and pervasive aspects of Hmong American educational experience is a necessary first step in facilitating academic success for Hmong American students" (p. 237). That is, Hmong American academic success is intricately connected to understanding how race and racism operates in education. In Depouw's study, she highlighted the many ways these Hmong American undergraduates experience racism on campus that impacts their academic achievement. For example, students' shared that the invisibility of Hmong people, history, culture, and the stereotypes of Hmong people as "lazy" or "don't do anything" can create a hostile environment for Hmong students to drop out of school (DePouw, 2012, p. 235)

These major claims in the literature span cultural differences and structural barriers to provide an overview for understanding Hmong American students' educational outcomes and

experiences. However, the argument of cultural differences positions Hmong culture as a deficit and barrier to Hmong American students' academic success. In contrast, the argument about structural barriers demonstrates how institutional racism can lead to poor academic performance. My study builds upon the argument that structural barriers persist, and I explore the ways in which Hmong culture is an asset to Hmong American students' education. My study also examines the cultural wealth that Hmong Americans students possess to navigate structural barriers. In the following section, I discuss deficit and damage-centered literature in order to shift research on Hmong education research toward a more asset-based approach.

Shifting From Deficit and Damage-Centered Research

Education scholarship has contributed towards deficit and damage-centered research on Students of Color and their communities, and needs to recognize, correct, and change these portrayals (Tuck, 2009; Yosso, 2005). Similarly, education research on Hmong American students in the United States has been problematic in creating and continuing deficit (Poon et al., 2016; Vue, 2021) and/or damage-centered portrayals. Deficit education research positions Hmong American students and their community as the reasons for their own academic failure (e.g., limited English proficiency, Hmong culture, intellectual ability, etc.), without attending to the structures in place that uphold whiteness (Lee, 2005). Such narratives of Hmong American students are problematic and fail to consider the impact of these representations. Poon and colleagues' (2016) critical review of 112 articles about the Model Minority Myth found that many of those articles countering this myth have "largely contributed toward the reproduction and reinforcement of deficit thinking" (p. 489). That is, many of the articles/texts construct Southeast Asian Americans (including Hmong Americans) as exemplifying educational deficits when compared to the larger Asian American community (Poon et al., 2016). While researchers

are also producing such narratives in order to justify the need for Asian Americans to be included in social and education programs, these narratives are not acceptable (Ngo & Lee, 2007; Poon et al., 2016). Hmong American students are stereotyped as deficit due to the Model Minority Myth (Poon et al., 2016), which tends to portray successful students as educational deviants (Lee, 2005; Vue, 2021).

On the other hand, some scholars have disagreed that research on the Model Minority Myth reinforces deficit thinking (Yi et al., 2020). Specifically, Yi and colleagues' (2020) analysis of studies published between 2000 and 2013 found little evidence that supports Poon and colleagues' (2016) assertions. Yi et al. emphasized the importance of examining the context, audience, and literature that these studies were situated in before concluding that studies perpetuate deficit thinking. According to Yi and colleagues, considerations are needed in order to "to grapple with the reality that these scholars and advocates might be using a conscious, strategic framing of the myth to impact policy and achieve material racial progress" (p. 27). They argued that these strategic framings were done in part because of the systemic structure of racial ideologies that "forces these labels upon scholars and advocates" (Yi et al., 2020, p. 27). It is undoubtedly true that scholars and advocates may attempt to purposefully disprove the Model Minority Myth in order to benefit all Communities of Color (Yi et al., 2020); however, as Poon et al. stressed, this purposeful move may be at the expense of continuing to portray certain Asian American communities as having low educational outcomes (e.g., Hmong Americans). Such strategic framing, in my perspective, may be used for well-intentioned purposes but still perpetuates harm. Instead, there is a need for what Poon et al. describe as research that "humanizes" and deconstructs "dominant racist ideologies in higher education" (p. 492). When researchers and advocates present students and their communities as lacking or low in

educational attainment, it is not simply their academic performance we are examining but the many historical, institutional, and structural barriers that they have endured. Thus, as part of the resistance process, students and their communities should be presented in a way that does not diminish their humanity and dignity as they are trying to navigate institutions that were historically not made for them. For these reasons, scholarship on Hmong American students should not rely on deficit perspectives but instead focus on nurturing their strengths in order to address educational inequities.

Second, education scholarship should also move beyond damage-centered research. Tuck (2009) distinguished damage-centered research from deficit thinking by specifying that damage research is historically and socially situated. For instance, damage-centered research can examine migration or societal racism as a way to explain contemporary low educational attainment. According to Tuck, ". . . research that operates, even benevolently, from a theory of change that establishes harm or injury in order to achieve reparation" (p. 413) is considered damage-centered research. That is, damage-centered research defines a community based on oppressions, even if those oppressions are institutional. Education research is one of many areas that have utilized damage-centered research in order to advocate for institutional and systemic changes (Tuck, 2009).

Thus, when scholars, educators, and community members seek to disrupt the Asian Model Minority Myth, they often point to Hmong American students' low attainment rates of high school diplomas and bachelor's degrees (Chiang et al., 2015; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Poon et al., 2016; Vue & Mouavangsou, in press). For example, a closer examination of Asian subgroups in the United States demonstrates that while on average 54% of Asians aged 25 and over have graduated with their bachelor's degree or higher, Southeast Asians on average had a graduation

rate of 29% in comparison to Chinese (56%), Filipino (50%), Japanese (52%), Korean (56%), and South Asian (70%) people (de Brey et al., 2019). Within the Southeast Asian subgroup of 29%, Hmong Americans were on the lower end for having received a bachelor's degree or higher, reaching just 18% as opposed to Thai (50%) (de Brey et al., 2019). Hence, while Hmong are considered as Asian Americans, they are perceived as one of the less successful Asian American groups (Lee, 2005).

From my perspective, the disaggregated data of Hmong American students in education research has predominantly been deficit and damage-centered, which creates an unfortunate hierarchy of Asian ethnic groups despite well-intentioned efforts to leverage institutional resources. The disaggregation of AAPI data usually overemphasizes Hmong American students' lack of educational attainment. This portrayal could have been reframed similarly to Xiong (2012) who utilized the 2010 U.S. Census data to analyze Hmong education attainment but position Hmong American students and their community within a place of power. Specifically, he noted the percentage increase of Hmong Americans ages 25 and older who hold a bachelor's degree and higher—tallying 4.9% in 1990, 7.4% in 2000, and 14.5% in 2010 (Xiong, 2012). Xiong stated, "This three-fold increase [of Hmong Americans with a bachelor's degree and higher] within the span of 20 years is remarkable considering that, throughout the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, the vast majority of Hmong refugees arrived in the U.S. with less than a high school education" (p. 9). The discourse Xiong employed highlights Hmong American students and their community's collective progress within educational institutions. Although Xiong did not explicitly call for a shift in the way disaggregated data operates, I see his work as an entry point into this conversation. Hence, an asset-based approach is important when researching

Communities of Color in order to shift the discourse away from damage-centered portrayals and de-center their suffering and oppression.

This dissertation participates in an on-going shift in the discourse that has been produced on Hmong American students' education. In their critical discourse analysis of literature on Hmong American youth between 1986 and 2013, Moua and Vang (2015) claimed Hmong American youth (including college students) have primarily been positioned as either model minorities or delinquents. These types of discourse produced from literature continue to be perpetuated from both Hmong and non-Hmong authors. Recent literature on Hmong American undergraduates have expanded on Moua and Vang's call to shift the discourse on Hmong American students and focus on students' agency and power (Vue, 2019, 2021; Vue & Mouavangsou, in press). In a study similar to this one, Vue (2021) drew on Moua and Vang as a starting point to enter this discussion by rewriting Hmong American undergraduate student experiences from a liberatory perspective that focuses on their creative praxis. In her study, Hmong American college students utilized the Hmong ethnic student organization at their university to highlight the invisibility of Hmong people and make them visible in the curriculum and the larger campus (Vue, 2021). Specifically, the students created their own one-unit course on Hmong American Experience which was also taught by a member of the Hmong ethnic student organization. Vue (2021) argued that these Hmong American undergraduates' successfully disrupted the discourses that overlook Hmong American students' achievements and disregard their efforts toward anti-oppression in higher education.

This dissertation builds on these studies that have introduced a paradigm shift away from deficit and damage-centered discourses and towards asset-based research on Hmong American students (Moua & Vang, 2015; Vue, 2021; Vue & Mouavangsou, in press). However, there

remains a dearth of literature that conducts an in-depth exploration of Hmong American student outcomes and experiences in higher education from an asset-based approach. So far, Vue (2021) is one of the few studies that focused on Hmong American undergraduates and their process to create, lead, and sustain Hmong culture courses. My study will address these gaps in the literature and more in order to shift the discourse on Hmong American students. The scholarship discussed so far is important to understand the need to utilize the conceptual frameworks below.

Conceptual Frameworks

Asian Critical Race Theory (Museus & Iftikar, 2013) was foundational for me in providing the conceptual lens to understand the systemic and racialized experiences of Asian Americans and more specifically, Hmong Americans in higher education. In addition, Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005) served as my central lens in recognizing the assets, knowledge, and wealth that Hmong American students possessed and cultivated in order to thrive in educational institutions. Intertwined together, both conceptual frameworks challenge dominant narratives of Hmong American students. I begin this section by explaining Critical Race Theory (CRT), followed by Asian Critical Race Theory and its application to Hmong American education. Next, I explain Community Cultural Wealth and discuss how these two frameworks build on each other for a more nuanced way to analyze the experiences of Hmong American students.

Critical Race Theory (CRT)

CRT emerged from critical legal studies and radical feminism to understand the relationship between race, racism and power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). CRT has expanded from an analytical tool in legal studies to many fields such as education. Education scholars have utilized CRT to analyze Asian Americans and U.S. educational institutions (e.g., Liu, 2009;

Teranishi, 2002; Teranishi et al., 2009), including Hmong American undergraduate experiences (e.g., DePouw, 2012, 2020).

However, applying a CRT framework is not comprehensive enough to understand Asian Americans' racialized experiences within educational institutions since CRT historically focuses on a Black/White dichotomy (Chang, 1993; Museus et al., 2015). By recognizing CRT's limiting Black/White perspective, Asian American movements have included Asian American jurisprudence, which is the study of Asian Americans and law that brought forth an Asian American Legal Scholarship framework (Chang, 1993). An Asian American Legal Scholarship framework serves to "encompass and mediate between the notions of liberalism underlying Asian American civil rights work and the critical perspectives contained within critical race theory" (Chang, 1993, p. 1249). Some scholars have used the acronym AALS for Asian American Legal Scholarship (Chen, 1997; Song, 2004); however, others have used APACrit for Asian Pacific American Critical Legal Scholarship (Iglesias, 1998) or AsianCrit for Asian Critical Race Theory (Liu, 2009) in association with CRT. Asian American Legal Scholarship and the variations of acronyms were created to fill a gap in the conceptual frameworks in critical race and Asian Americans (Chang, 1993, 1999; Chen, 1997; Song, 2004).

Asian Critical Race Theory (AsianCrit)

For this study, I use Asian Critical Race Theory (AsianCrit) which branches from CRT and builds on existing scholarship on Asian American Studies (Museus & Iftikar, 2013). AsianCrit was conceptualized to examine the unique Asian American experiences with race, racism, and systems of oppression. They specified their framework as suitable for examining the educational experiences of Asian Americans and provided seven tenets for employing their conceptual framework (Iftikar & Museus, 2018; Museus & Iftikar, 2013). Within AsianCrit

(Museus & Iftikar, 2013), there are four tenets unique to Asian Americans, while the last three tenets were iterations from previous CRT tenets:

> 1) *Asianization* refers to the monolithic grouping of Asians and racializing them as overachievers, perpetual foreigners, yellow perils, emasculated men, and hypersexualized women. Asians are often labeled in binary extremes that benefit the White majority.
>
> 2) *Transnational Contexts* refers to holistically understanding Asian American experiences through transnational contexts. The transnational context foregrounds the current Asian American experiences.
>
> 3) (*Re)Constructive History* refers to recognizing that Asian American history has been excluded or distorted from mainstream U.S. history and the need to correct that.
>
> 4) *Strategic (Anti) Essentialism* refers to being strategic about when to generalize Asians, while also recognizing their diversity and complexities. This also includes being intentional about examining certain Asian subgroups in order to understand that particular community.
>
> 5) *Intersectionality* refers to how race and systems of oppression intersect which affects the racial and social identities of Asian Americans (e.g., gender and social class), and therefore by shaping their experiences. This tenet also calls for a "purposeful application of intersectionality" to assess systems and identities in order to understand how "social structures, political processes, and identities intersect to create certain conditions, realities, and experiences than what already exists" (Museus, 2014, p. 27).
>
> 6) *Story, Theory, and Praxis* refers to the connection between the experiences of Asian Americans (i.e., their stories), theory, and practice that can effect meaningful change. Specifically, "story informs theory and practice, theory guides practice, and practice can excavate stories and utilize theory for positive transformative purpose" (Museus, 2014, p. 27).
>
> 7) *Commitment to Social Justice* refers to using critical theory to advocate for the elimination of oppression (e.g., racism, sexism), and recognizing the "intersections between race and other systems of subordination" (Museus, 2014, p. 27).

AsianCrit was foundational in the construction of this dissertation since it allowed me to examine racialized experiences within educational institutions. AsianCrit "provides a holistic perspective that can help clarify how race and racism include the critical contexts and lived realities of Asian American college students" (Museus, 2014, p. 29). In this study, applying an AsianCrit lens

provides the tools to understand the nuanced racialized educational experiences of Hmong American undergraduates at Sky University.

I draw on the seven tenets of AsianCrit to inform how I understand Hmong Americans undergraduates' educational experiences. Important to this study are the usage of *Asianization* and *Strategic (Anti) Essentialism*, which recognizes the importance of examining the uniqueness of Hmong American students' educational experiences as opposed to viewing them as homogenous Asian Americans. *Transnational Context* also informs the way I understand past and present global context as shaping current Hmong American students' educational experiences at Sky University. For instance, by knowing the Vietnam War resulted in Hmong people's forced migration to the United States and that the last wave of Hmong arrivals was in 2004, I have invaluable context to understand how these factors have shaped their educational experiences. Meanwhile, *Story, Theory, and Praxis* emphasizes Hmong American stories in order to inform theory and practice that challenge racial discourse that essentializes Asians, and especially Hmong Americans in education. Furthermore, *Intersectionality* assists in making sense of Hmong American students' multiple identities such as race/ethnicity and gender that shapes their education. In this study, *(Re) Constructive History* focuses on making visible Hmong history which has been silenced, distorted, or limited in the classroom. Additionally, *(Re) Constructive History* informs the current experiences of Hmong American students to seek out their history and educate others about it. This study has a *Commitment to Social Justice* by advocating for (a) an asset-based portrayal of Hmong Americans and (b) the institutionalization of Hmong-centered courses within Sky University and beyond.

AsianCrit provides the framework to understand how race, racism, Whiteness, and White supremacy operate in shaping the experiences of Asian Americans. As such, AsianCrit provides

a non-deficit approach to explain the educational experiences of Asian Americans and how Whiteness and race shaped their experiences (Iftikar & Museus, 2018; Museus & Iftikar, 2013). While scholars are able to utilize AsianCrit to illuminate educational inequity, specific to Asian Americans, I argue that non-deficit approaches are not enough. Rather a combination of non-deficit perspectives and strength-based approaches are essential to producing scholarship that moves away from deficit and damage-centered research. Therefore, in this dissertation, Community Cultural Wealth serves as the central lens to highlight, from a non-deficit perspective and strength-based approach, the cultural wealth of Students of Color, especially that of Hmong American students.

Community Cultural Wealth

Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005) is similar to AsianCrit in that it can be used to analyze Students of Color within institutions. However, Community Cultural Wealth focuses on the knowledge, assets, and values that Communities of Color possess and utilize in order to resist and navigate institutions. This framework counters deficit thinking about Students of Color and schooling by asserting that Communities of Color have many skills, abilities, and knowledge that are valuable to maneuver through their education. Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth is composed of six forms of capital that are not exclusive of each other, but rather builds on one another. These six are listed below: *aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant.*

1) *Aspirational capital* is the "ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers" (p. 77).
2) *Linguistic capital* references "the intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/ or style" (p. 78).
3) *Familial capital* references "cultural knowledge nurtured among *familia* (kin) to carry a sense of community history, memory and cultural intuition" which "engages a commitment to community well being and expands the concepts of family" (p. 79). In

particular, familial capital is inclusive of communal bonds created within social gatherings and in this case, student organizations on campus.

4) *Social capital* references the "networks of people and community resources" that People of Color use to help them navigate institutions (p. 79).

5) *Navigational capital* references the skills that People of Color use to move through institutions, e.g., universities, that have historically marginalized them.

6) *Resistant capital* references the "knowledge and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality" (p. 80). However, resistance capital becomes *Transformative Resistance capital* when there is "recognition of the structural nature of oppression and the motivation to work toward social and racial justice" (p. 81).

Scholars have utilized Community Cultural Wealth to analyze the educational experiences of Students of Color in the United States (Gogue, 2016; Hernandez, 2020; Museus & Mueller, 2018). There are studies that use Community Cultural Wealth to analyze Southeast Asian American students which include Hmong Americans (e.g., Museus & Mueller, 2018). However, few researchers have examined Hmong Americans exclusively and through the lens of Community Cultural Wealth (e.g., Keown-Bomar & Vang, 2016), which this study does. Filling in this gap in the literature is important because it allows for a focus on Hmong Americans' Community Cultural Wealth and an opportunity to counter the deficit and damage-centered narratives about them. Moreover, the integration of AsianCrit (Museus & Iftikar, 2013) and Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005) to analyze Hmong American students' education has yet to be explored in depth. As pointed out by Xiong (2020), often in higher education research, Hmong American students have been aggregated with all the participating students, which does not allow a more in-depth analysis specific to Hmong American university students.

To explore Hmong American students' Community Cultural Wealth at Sky University, I focus on four of the forms of capital which includes aspirational, navigational, social, and transformative resistance to highlight Hmong American students' community cultural wealth at Sky University. I leverage Yosso's definitions to analyze the experiences of Hmong American

undergraduates in this study. I used *Aspirational capital* for the hopes and dreams of Hmong American students despite the institutional inequities that exist. *Navigational capital* provides a way to understand how Hmong American students collectively maneuver the university as they make progress towards graduation. I also use *Social capital* to understand how Hmong American students' utilize student organizations and their social and academic network (e.g., friends and professors) as a means to navigate Sky University. Lastly, *Transformative Resistant capital* is used to highlight Hmong American students' critical consciousness, resistance, and motivation to strive towards equity at Sky University through the student-led and student-taught Hmong undergraduate course. Although I do not explicitly use *Familial capital* in this study, mentions of family and kinship are woven into the *navigational, aspirational, social, and transformative resistance capital* (see Chapters 4 and 5) as these are interdependent and related to one another. These forms of capital aid in highlighting the knowledge, abilities, and value that Hmong American students possess and use while at Sky University.

Combining AsianCrit and Community Cultural Wealth together, they operate like kaleidoscope (see Figure 2.1) which I have adapted from other scholars (i.e., Villalpando & Solórzano, 2005; Yosso & Burciaga, 2016; Yosso & García, 2007) to examine Hmong American students' experiences.

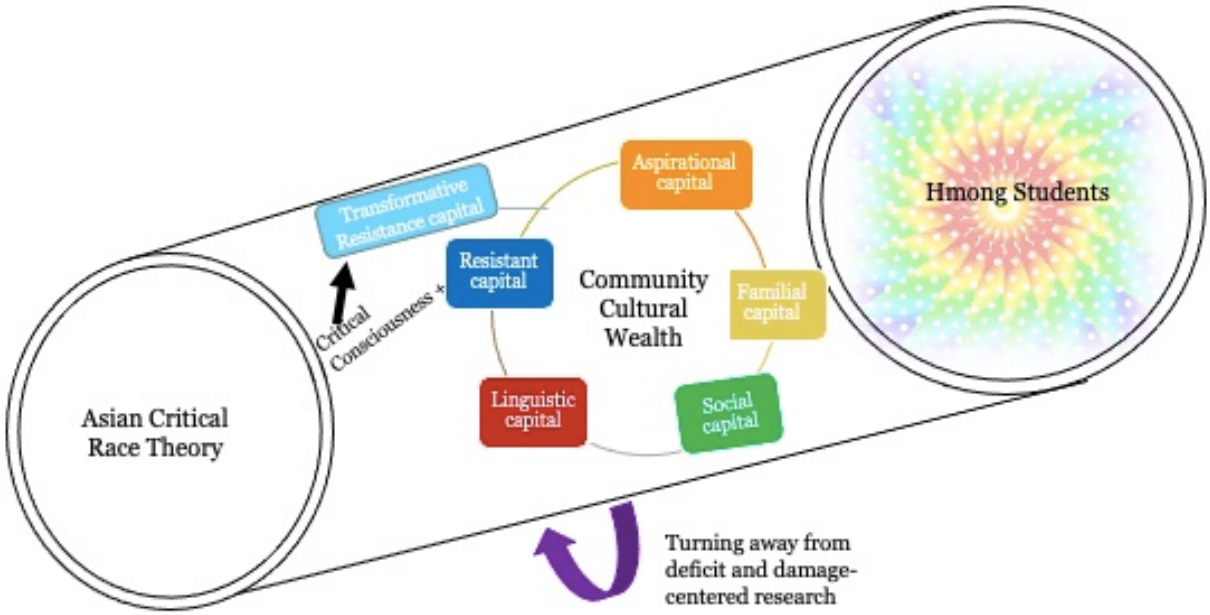

Figure 2.1. Conceptual Frameworks.

Beginning with Asian Critical Race Theory, this dissertation peers through that lens to understand Hmong American experiences in higher education, and then the research kaleidoscope turns (both figuratively and literally) away from deficit and damage-centered research to focus on Community Cultural Wealth through viewing Hmong American students' assets. Depending on which type of cultural capital is emphasized, the end of the kaleidoscope illustrates Hmong American students in that perspective. For example, *Strategic (Anti) Essentialism* allows for a purposeful closer examination of Hmong American student experiences, separate from the larger Asian American experience. When students are able to identify and name institutional inequity that create those experiences, they have become critically conscious. However, the key is not to only focus on how students understand their marginalization, but to see their cultural capital as well. Thus, turning the kaleidoscope beyond their oppressed lived experiences, resistance capital allows a lens to see them strive towards change based on their knowledge of the university. Taken together, the image at the end of the kaleidoscope is of Hmong students demonstrating their *Transformative Resistance capital*, which

encompasses an understanding of their marginalization in the university and their efforts toward changing that.

Summary

Through the literature review and conceptual frameworks discussed above, it is clear that within the umbrella terms, Asian Americans and Southeast Asian Americans, the scholarship on Hmong American students' education needs further exploration. My study positions Hmong American students in U.S. higher education institutions as the center of analysis by drawing on the conceptual frameworks of AsianCrit and Community Cultural Wealth. Intertwined together, both frameworks provide tools to examine Hmong American students within U.S. educational institutions and with an emphasis on the cultural wealth Students of Color possess. More specifically, these two frameworks help to answer important questions in regards to Hmong American undergraduates creating their own undergraduate student-led and student-taught course. By applying both conceptual frameworks, this study contributes to an understanding of the nuanced educational experiences of Hmong American students, the importance of examining the community cultural wealth of Hmong American students, and the ways Hmong American students create space within higher education for themselves and their community. Lastly, this study emphasizes the importance of scholars, educators, and community members advocating for Hmong American students to do so from a non-deficit and non-damaging discourse.

Chapter 3: Methodology and Methods

Because this study aims to shift the discourse on Hmong American students and position them within a place of strength, I employed critical ethnography as my methodology. As with all ethnography, critical ethnography is interested in culture, people's interactions and understanding of their world; however, critical ethnography "assumes that various cultures and groups of people are positioned unequally within society and have varied access to power and resources" (Castagno, 2012, p. 375). This emphasis on how people are positioned within society and institutions also draws from interdisciplinary critical perspectives that guide the research topic, design, analysis, and interpretations (Castagno, 2012; Merriam, 2009). Additionally, critical ethnographers not only shed light on how institutions and society shape experiences, but people's agency in responding to such experiences (Castagno, 2012). For these reasons, critical ethnography as a methodology enables me to highlight and name Hmong American students' experiences that were shaped by institutions (i.e., Sky University and Asian American Studies) and how these students, as agents, respond to and shape their own experiences (i.e., the Hmong Student Organization and the Hmong undergraduate student-led and taught course).

Given the nature of critical ethnography, this methodology guides me in answering my research questions:

1) What are the educational outcomes and experiences of Hmong American undergraduates as they navigate the university?
2) How do Hmong American undergraduates transform their institutional spaces and educational experiences?

As mentioned in Chapter 1, these two research questions aim to understand Hmong American student experiences at Sky University. The first question focuses on their experiences and outcomes shaped by Sky University and the second focus on their response (i.e., their agency; transformative resistance). My intentions behind these two questions aligns with the

goals of critical ethnography in naming the power dynamics of institutions and experiences. Most importantly, the heart of critical ethnography is not to only understand society but "rather to critique and change society" (Patton, 2002, p. 131). In this case, it is not enough to understand only Hmong American students' experiences—we must also change the discourse around Hmong American students and focus on their strengths in higher education.

In line with critical ethnographic approaches, I utilize methods that are also found in ethnography. These methods include what Merriam (2009) described as essential to ethnography research:

> Immersion in the site as a participant observer is the primary method of data collection. Interviews, formal and informal, and the analysis of documents, records, and artifacts also constitute the data set along with the fieldworkers' diary of each day's happenings, personal feelings, ideas, impressions, or insights with regards to those events. (p. 28)

In my study, I used participant observations, interviews, academic student records, and recorded my own reflections and impressions of events. These methods were crucial to observe the everyday experiences of Hmong American students at Sky University and understand from their own perspectives how their identities intersect with their schooling experiences.

In the following sections, I explain in-depth the research site, data collection, and data analyses. Next, I include my researcher positionality as a Hmong American woman, scholar, sister, and student as a way to make sense of how I understand and frame my study. I conclude this chapter with a brief summary of my methods.

Research Design

This critical ethnographic research was designed to be a multi-faceted study focusing on Hmong American students' educational experiences and outcomes. Specifically, anonymized student data from Sky University's registrar were used to describe their educational outcomes, while interviews, participant observations, and questionnaire responses were used to understand

their experiences. Initially, this study was designed to be a longitudinal critical ethnography that followed Hmong American students from their first year at Sky University until graduation (i.e., entering Hmong freshmen for approximately 4 years); however, I encountered some challenges in securing enough first year participants. Despite this initial setback, I modified my research design to encompass a broader spectrum of Hmong American students and was able to witness a student movement, specifically the undergraduate student-led and student-taught class, *Introduction to Hmong Culture* at Sky University. These modifications were reflected in the research design and the majority of my data collection between October 2016 and July 2017.

I focused on currently enrolled Hmong American students from any year at Sky University. This modification did not change the main three components of the study which included a questionnaire (Part 1) that aimed to a general sense of their educational experiences, an interview (Part 2) which was a more in-depth exploration of their experiences, and participant observation (Part 3) where I followed my focal participants on campus. While these three components did not change, Part 3 of the participant observations expanded from only following the first-year students to encompassing subsites such as the Hmong Student Organization and the *Introduction to Hmong Culture* course. The inclusion of these subsites was critical because nearly all of my focal participants were actively attending/participating in them.

Although this study has three main components, not every one of my participants participated in all three parts. For example, towards the end of the questionnaire (Part 1), I had a question that asked the respondents if they were interested in participating in an interview which was Part 2 of the study. Those who were interested in being interviewed were then able to participate in Part 2. Then towards the end of Part 2, I also asked those participants if they were interested in participating in Part 3 of the study, which is where I did the participant

observations. If they were interested in Part 3, then those folks would then proceed to Part 3 of the study. With this range of data, I hoped to understand the experiences of Hmong American students at Sky University. All participant names, universities, and university systems mentioned in this study were given pseudonyms.

Research Site

This study was conducted at Sky University; however, within Sky University there were many research subsites that also emerged. These research subsites included the Hmong Student Organization (HSO), and the student-led and student-taught course, *Introduction to Hmong Culture.* The following sections details this study's research and research subsites.

Sky University

Sky University is a public four-year U.S. university, located near cities with large Hmong populations in California. Based on Sky University's undergraduate student profile for Fall 2016, the time period when the majority of the data was collected (2016–2017), there were a total of 29,379 undergraduates. Of those students, 34% were Asian/Pacific Islander, 26% were White, 20% were Hispanic/Latinx, 3% were African American, 1% were American Indian /Alaska Native, and 3% did not identify their race/ethnicity; students in all these groups were U.S. citizens or immigrants. In addition, Sky University also had 13% of their undergraduate students identified as international students. Excluding international students, Sky University had 10,001 Asian / Pacific Islander students, and within that group, there were 175 Hmong American undergraduates (2%). Of those Hmong American students, 108 identified as female and 67 as male. Despite what seems like a low number of Hmong American students at Sky University, Sky University consistently (since 2010) maintained the highest enrollment count of Hmong American undergraduates when compared to other public research universities in the same state

system, making this institution a key site for this study. It should also be noted that 2010 was the year this university started disaggregating these data.

Research Subsite 1: Hmong Student Organization

The Hmong Student Organization (HSO) was established in 1988 as a Sky University campus student organization by Hmong American students. The mission of HSO is to promote higher education and cultural awareness within the Hmong community. HSO also strives to provide social and academic support to all current and prospective students. Since its inception, HSO has organized cultural workshops, and educational conferences and programs at Sky University. Many of their events are directed at Hmong American undergraduates at Sky University, but they also have education events designed for high school students.

At the time of this study, the HSO officers or cabinet members consisted of the President, Vice President, Secretary, Treasurer, Historian, Cultural Awareness Coordinator, Mentor Program Coordinator, Higher Education Conference Coordinator, and Intramural Sports Coordinator. These officers typically lead the HSO general meetings that were held twice a month in classroom on campus. These meetings generally lasted between 1 and 2 hours. Most of the attendees were Hmong American students that were members of HSO. These members consisted of lower and upperclassmen from various majors, some of whom were also involved in other ethnic student organizations and university programs. The majority of my participants were members of HSO.

Research Subsite 2: Introduction to Hmong Culture Course

The *Introduction to Hmong Culture* class was an undergraduate student-taught course led by Chao (one of my focal participants). Her course was offered during the regular academic

school year during Spring 2017. She had 18 students officially enrolled in her course; there were also students who audited and occasionally stopped by to listen to her lecture for that day.

Chao's class operated under the Undergraduate Student Teacher Program (USTP) at Sky University. This program began in 2016, and there was one Hmong undergraduate student-led and student-taught course prior to hers. This program required students to find a faculty supervisor, develop their own course syllabus and lesson plans, and obtain approval from the department they want to teach in. Additionally, the student instructor would also have to enroll in an independent study course with the faculty supervisor the quarter before teaching. Even after meeting these requirements, there had to be an enrollment of at least five students in order for the class to be offered. Those who enrolled in the class received a pass or no pass on their transcript and the university credit associated with it. The student instructors received units for teaching the course.

Context for the Course. Since one of UTSP's requirement for Chao's class was met with sponsorship by Asian American Studies (AAS), this next section provides context about the department. At the time of Chao's class, AAS had been established as a department for less than a decade (approximately eight years). In the AAS 2016–2018 course catalog, the department had 46 courses listed. Among those courses, there were some that broadly encompassed the Asian American experience, such as *Historical Experiences of Asian Americans* and *Contemporary Issues of Asian Americans.* The department also had ethnic-specific courses such as *Korean American Experience*, *Chinese American Experience*, and *Japanese American Experience.* Although this dissertation does not fully address the Ethnic Studies/ Asian American Studies movement in the 1960s, it is important to note that the ethnic-specific courses in AAS were reflective of the students' advocacy during the 1960s (see Umemoto, 1989). With the emergence

of diverse Asian groups post 1960s, AAS incorporated new courses such as *Southeast Asian American Experience*. Also as a graduate student, I was able to teach two special topics classes in that department. One was on the Hmong American experience, which was taught in Summer 2015, and the other was a Hmong American education course taught in Summer 2018. At the time of this dissertation, there is no Hmong American-specific course listed in Sky University's catalog within AAS.

Data Collection

Recruitment

Since the nature of my study focused on a specific group of students, I used purposeful and criterion-based sampling (Merriam, 2009). Each of my participants were ages 18 and older, a current student, and of Hmong descent. I recruited potential participants through Sky University's two Hmong student associations by making in-person announcements, where I provided an informational sheet about the study to potentially interested individuals. I also posted on their social media and sent out an email request through the listserves for the Hmong student associations.[2] As the study progressed, I realized that I did not have many responders for the various components of my study. This was where I began to use network sampling to recruit the rest of my participants. I relied on one of my close Hmong male participants, who was also a relative, to help me recruit more Hmong male students into the study. I also used my personal network of Hmong female undergraduates to recruit participants into the study. As previously

[2] It should be noted that while there were two Hmong student associations at Sky University, they each had a different focus. HSO's mission (as previously mentioned) was more general in terms of academic and social support, while the other association heavily focused on the health field. Also as previously mentioned, nearly all my focal participants were members of HSO.

mentioned, nearly all of my participants were members of HSO. All participants and student organizations in my study have been given pseudonyms to protect their identity.

Anonymized Academic Student Records

I obtained anonymized academic student records from Sky University's registrar for students who self-identify as Hmong, along with information on their gender, academic standing, major, etc. These records contained Hmong student information from Fall 2010 through May 2015, which was when I received the data from the university's registrar. Since Sky University operates on a quarter system, the data did not include information on the Hmong American students who had been awarded their degree after May 2015. The student records were used to understand the academic progress of Hmong American students (e.g., good standing, academic probation, academic dismissal) during the time period for which data was available. These academic trends were important in describing the patterns of academic achievement among Hmong American students within the University.

Part 1: Questionnaire

A questionnaire for prospective participants was first administered on October 2016 through Google form and was closed by at the end of March 2017. The questionnaire was anonymous and only accessible to Sky University students since it required that students logged in with their university email address. When the students accessed the online questionnaire, they encountered the study information and consent sheet first, which outlined the scope of the study. After having read the information sheet and agreeing to the terms listed there, participants were able to proceed to the questionnaire. The questionnaire was composed of 16 questions and took approximately 30 to 40 minutes to complete. These questions were a mixture of multiple-choice and open-ended questions that would provide information regarding their student profile, their

own educational experiences, and perceptions of Hmong American students at Sky University (see Appendix A). In addition, I also asked if respondents were interested in completing Part 2: The Interview and Part 3: Shadowing of Focal Participants and Participant Observations. The questionnaire also provided an opportunity for individuals who wanted to participate in the study but not commit to being interviewed or shadowed. Thus, this questionnaire allowed me to gain insights into their perceptions and experiences within Sky University. Also, this questionnaire was only administered one time and at their convenience.

In total, 13 individuals completed this part of the study. Out of those 13 Hmong Sky University student responders, 8 identified as females and 5 identified as males. I had at least one responder from each of the entering freshmen cohorts 2011–2016, with the majority from entering freshmen cohort 2015. With different sets of entering freshmen Hmong student cohorts responding to the questionnaire, it provided a snapshot of what their experiences and perceptions were broadly.

Part 2: Interview

Part 2 of the study was composed of participants who completed the questionnaire and expressed interest in a follow-up interview. Those who signed up for Part 2 had the option to stop after this or one-time interview or continue on with their participation to Part 3 of the study. I designed this study with a one-time interview in mind in for two reasons. First, this interview provided an option for Hmong American students who were interested in participating in the study but did not want to commit to Part 3 of the study, which constituted a larger commitment. This interview allowed students to share in greater depth their undergraduate experiences, whether they were in their first, second, third, or fourth year, or graduating the following quarter. The second reason for designing this interview was because interviews become "necessary when

we cannot observe behavior, feelings, or how people interpret the world around them" (Merriam, 2009, p. 88). The interview component was essential in understanding the world in which my participants came from and their experiences at Sky University in their own words.

In total, I interviewed 10 students individually; 6 identified as females and 4 identified as males (see Table 3.1). We scheduled a day to meet that was convenient for the interviewee and me, either in person or through Google Hangout or Skype. The interview was approximately 30 minutes to 1 hour, semi-structured, and audio-recorded (see Appendix B). During the beginning of each in-person interview, I explained the purpose of the study, the importance of the interview, and my use of pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality and identity. In selecting a pseudonym, I told each interviewee to choose one that was similar to their name. For example, if they go by their Hmong name, then to choose a Hmong pseudonym. If they go by an American English name, then to choose an American English name. I gave these specific instructions because their names may have an influence in how people choose to interact with them and how they present themselves to the world.

I also provided the participants a "Consent to Record" form, asking permission to use their audio-recording at conferences. If the interview was through Google Hangout or Skype, then I emailed the "Consent to Record Form" to the participant and had them sign it and email me a scanned copy. If, however, the Consent to Record Form was not received prior to our interview, then that audio-recording would not be used during presentations at academic conferences.[3] I facilitated the interview as a conversation, where I shared my experience, and they were also encouraged to ask questions. Throughout the interview, I also took handwritten

[3] Although I did receive permission to record and use these audio-recordings at academic conferences, I have not used them yet.

field notes of instances that I wanted to refer back to in the audio-recording. At the end of each interview, I asked my participants if they wanted to proceed to Part 3 of the study. All interviewees were given an option of having either my research assistants or me transcribe their interview. Each interview was transcribed using Express Scribe. In total, I had 4 research assistants who contributed to transcribing 7 interviews from Part 2, 5 follow-up interviews with focal participants in Part 3, 4 audio-recordings from the *Introduction to Hmong Culture* course, and 3 audio-recordings of HSO meetings and workshops. All other interviews and audio-recordings not counted above were transcribed by me. One of my research assistants also transcribed all my handwritten field notes of the interviews and participant observations (see the section below on additional notes for audio-recordings and observations). My 4 research assistants were either recruited based on recommendations or applied to the position.

Table 3.1

Demographic of Interviewee Participants

Interviewees	Entering Freshmen Cohort	Gender
Ntxhia Mim^	2012	Female
Chao ^	2012	Female
Janice	2013	Female
Amy	2014	Female
Ntsab Lias ^	2014	Female
Fue ^	2014	Male
Ka^	2015	Female
Jason ^	2015	Male
Jackson ^	2015	Male
Chi Meng ^	2015	Male

Note. Participants with a carrot symbol (^) indicate they participated in Part 3 of the study and were considered focal participants.

Part 3: Shadowing of Focal Participants and Participant Observations

Each focal participant read and understood their responsibilities as participants in Part 3 of the study. Of the 10 interviewees, 8 participated in Part 3 of the study and became my focal participants. Each focal participant completed the anonymous questionnaire, were interviewed, and took part in the observational component. These participant observations varied depending on where the observations took place. Each participant observation was with the participant's permission and the observations focused on their behaviors and interactions in different settings and with various individuals. Some participant observations of focal participants were more frequent than others depending on availability and schedules between the focal participants and myself (the researcher). For example, I would attend the bi-weekly HSO meetings and if any of my focal participants were there (which the majority were always nearly present), then I observed them for about 1 to 2 hours each meeting. Similarly, if my focal participants were present in the *Introduction to Hmong Culture* course*,* then I would see them at least twice a week during spring quarter for nearly an hour each. Additionally, focal participants were also welcome to share any course assignments (of their choosing) that they had completed or were working on in order for me to understand their academic experience as Hmong college students. I also conducted a semi-structured follow-up interview with focal participants at least once during the academic school year to gain additional insights into their educational experiences (see Appendix C).

As I continued to follow my focal participants, this led me to different research subsites within Sky University such as the Hmong Student Organization and the course, *Introduction to Hmong Culture*. Within both the research subsites, I obtained written consent to record from the folks in the Hmong Student Organization (31 students) and the *Introduction to Hmong Culture*

class (24 students and 2 parents). Given that many of my participants in Part 3 were active members of Hmong Student Organization, recording what happened during their meetings and events allowed me to holistically understand my participants' educational experiences. I also obtained permission from HSO's officers and members to audio-record and made observational notes of the meetings. At times, I participated in the meetings I was audio-recording, due to the interactive nature of this student organization. Prior to any audio-recordings, I read the conscript script, and distributed the student organization information and consent form to the present members. During this time, I also answered any questions the members had.

As for the *Introduction to Hmong Culture* class, one of my focal students, Chao, was the undergraduate student-instructor that taught this course through the Asian American Studies Department at Sky University from April 2017 to June 2017. In total, I had 4 focal participants who attended this class, specifically Chao (the instructor), Ntsab Lias (not enrolled in the class but consistently attended), Ntxhia Mim (not enrolled but occasionally attended), and Chi Meng (not enrolled but attended early on and then stopped). There were some students who were not able to officially enrolled in Chao's course to receive course units (i.e., Ntsab Lias and Chi Meng) because they had previously taken a course that had the same course registration number as Chao's. This was essentially an administrative issue—while the content of Chao's course differed significantly from the previous course, they shared the same course registration number. Since the beginning of April 2017, I sat in the class and took observational notes on my focal participants. During the fourth week of the quarter, I obtained IRB approval and the permissions of the instructor and the students in the course to audio-record and make observations. Prior to any audio-recordings, I read the Classroom conscript script and distributed the classroom information and consent form to the students.

Additional Notes for Audio-Recordings and Observations

For each of the different components in my study, if I audio-recorded, I received permission from that individual/groups. Along with audio-recording, I also hand wrote field note observations on a notebook to record what happened. When I was unable to audio-record, then I relied on my handwritten field notes. After each audio-recording and/observation, I also included reflective memos to remind myself about certain important interactions or observations. My reflective memos were in the form of a written note, or typed on a word document or audio-recording. As I mentioned earlier, one of my research assistants transcribed all of my handwritten field notes. In total, this research assistant transcribed 47 accounts of handwritten field notes consisting of HSO meetings/events, the undergraduate student-led course, and observations during interviews and focal participants.

Data Analyses

Given the different pieces of my study, I used different analyses to understand the educational outcomes and experiences of Hmong American students. Quantitative analyses, specifically descriptive analyses, were used to see the similarities and differences in Hmong American students' educational outcomes broadly and throughout each of their academic terms. For the qualitative analyses, I used several coding schemes to understand the themes that were emerging from the questionnaires, interviews, and participant observations in the undergraduate student-led class, and Hmong Student Organization. In addition, I kept a reflective memo of my interpretations as they formed based on data collection and analyses.

Descriptive Analyses

For each of the descriptive analyses I conducted, I used anonymized student records of Hmong American students that I obtained from Sky University. As mentioned earlier, the student

records contained information of Hmong American students at Sky University in Fall 2010–May 2015 such as enrollment, graduation, academic standing, degree status, gender, etc. Thus, I decided to only focus on the entering freshmen cohorts 2010 and 2011 because those students had been at Sky University the longest and provided a fuller spectrum of the possible educational outcomes from the moment they first enrolled and their progress towards graduation.

I used the statistical software R to filter and analyze the administrative data for Hmong entering freshmen cohorts 2010 and 2011. I decided combine the students in both cohorts because the number of students per cohort were less than 100. Combining the students provided me a total of 101 Hmong American students. From there, I was able to determine the average percentages of Hmong American students and their educational outcomes. Using R, I counted the number of Hmong American students who graduated within 4 to 5 years, and also examined these figures by gender. I also counted the number of times (i.e., frequency) students were placed on each of the seven academic standings outlined by Sky University. After I had computed these on R, I input the information onto Excel and generated graphs to visualize the information. My intention in creating such visual information of Hmong American students' educational outcomes was not to reprise the deficit and damage-centered narratives, but rather provide a more nuanced understanding (see Chapter 4). The graphs were utilized in conversation with the qualitative data to illustrate a holistic perspective on Hmong American students' educational experiences that may have been limited by either type of data alone.

Qualitative Data Analyses

For the qualitative data analyses, I sorted through each of the following data: Part 1 (i.e., the open-ended responses from the questionnaire), Part 2 (i.e., interviews), and Part 3 (i.e., participant observations in the *Introduction to Hmong Culture* class and the Hmong Student

Organization). I began reviewing the interviews as a way to direct where this study would go. My first set of initial coding focused on low-inference codes which were more basic and descriptive (see Table 3.2 below). I coded my qualitative data on a Word Document. Each code was highlighted in yellow with the letter X (Name of Code). Placing the X in front of the code allowed me to quickly identify the code within the Word Document. These low-inference codes provided a snippet of what each participant said and what I observed at Sky University.

Table 3.2

Low-Inference Codes

Low-Inference Code	CODE	Definition
Friends	XFRIENDS	Related to friends (e.g., housemate, friends)
Family	XFAMILY	Related to family (e.g., family issue, gender dynamic within family)
Academics	XACAD	Related to education (e.g., courses, grade point average (GPA), test, educational experience)
University resource	XUNI-RESOURCE	Related to resources provided by the university (e.g., advisors, professors, university student run programs)
K-12 School Resource	XK-12SCHOOL-RESOURCE	Resources at school (k-12) (e.g., AVID, school counselors/advisors, teachers)
Outside School Resource	XOUTSIDE SCHOOL RESOURCE	Related to resources/support from outside the school/university (e.g., community programs)
Being Hmong	XBEING-HMONG	Related to Hmong culture, events, gender roles, language, racial identity
Student Organization	XSTUD-ORG	Related to student organizations on campus (e.g., Hmong Student Organization, Faith based club)
Advice	XADVICE	Advice/tips participants want to share
Kaozong	XKZ	Where Kaozong shares her own experience & comments

At times, there may be more than one low-inference code that appears in a single excerpt. For example, the excerpt (shown below) was from an interview with Jackson where the code "academic" and "university resources" appeared. Specifically, Jackson's excerpt illustrated his educational experience (hence academics code, "XACAD") and the university resources, "XUNI-RESOURCE" he utilized (e.g., EOP and STEP). Thus, I coded both codes together in that same excerpt.

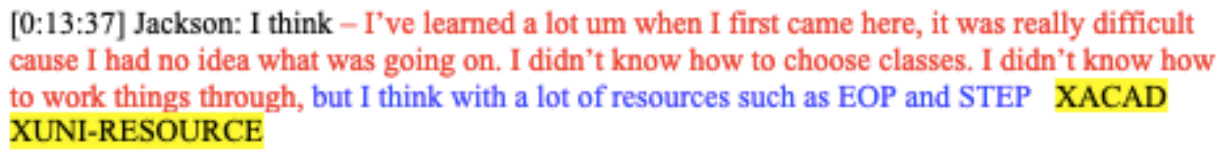
[0:13:37] Jackson: I think – I've learned a lot um when I first came here, it was really difficult cause I had no idea what was going on. I didn't know how to choose classes. I didn't know how to work things through, but I think with a lot of resources such as EOP and STEP XACAD XUNI-RESOURCE

Figure 3.1. Coding Example 1.

In addition to the low-inference coding, I also used different font colors to indicate when students shared their struggles and positive experiences at Sky University. In the same excerpt for Jackson above, red-color font indicated struggles and challenges, while blue-color font indicated positive experiences.

After coding for low-inferences, I created a table to separate the codes and make sense of their experiences. The left column provided information such as whose interview and where exactly in the transcript was the excerpt extracted. The middle column focused on experiences that pulled the students to continue pursuing their studies at Sky University (i.e., positive/motivational experiences); meanwhile, the right column focused on what may have pushed students away from the university (i.e., negative, struggles, challenges). Similarly, to the intermingling of low-inference codes, there were also instances where students described their experience as a struggle, yet it was positive for many reasons. For situations like these, I highlighted them in green (see Table 3.3). For each green highlight, I also provided a short note

to remind myself as to why I had labeled this experience as *both* a struggle yet positive/motivational for the students. For instance as shown below, Line 5051-1075 was highlighted in green with notes to myself that states "Both—community events can conflict with school work (like here, but at the same time if you're not a student you can't partake in these events)—its reciprocal." The words written after "Both" is a reminded to myself as to why I had considered this except as both a struggle but at the same time positive/motivational for the students in my study.

Table 3.3

Two Column Coding with Green Highlights

Amy Interview (P37, Line 1048-1049)	Question: what extent does your FRIENDS, Partner, and Student Organizations play a role in your educational experience? [0:52:39]**Amy:** Um. How does that affect my education. Um. I think. I think. I think it like drives me to do better. XFRIENDS XSTUD-ORG	
Amy Interview (P37, Line 1051-1075)	**Amy**: =In a way. I feel like sometimes though I do – I do value more like community versus um some of my classes that I don't really care for. Cause it's like, yeah I learn about that and then I take the test and then that's it. But here, I'm always learning. I'm always learning how to you know direct in a different way. I'm always learning how to plan these conferences in a different way. Um. Reaching out to different people. Fund raising and all that. Like I'm always learning something new versus like a classroom. We just go to lecture. We just do the same thing every day. So I feel like sometimes I do prioritize community work. XSTUD-ORG XACAD	BOTH – community events can conflict with school work (like here, but at the same time if you're not a student you can't partake in these events) – it's reciprocal

As for the excerpts that were not positive, negative, or both, I highlighted them in light blue. Most of the blue highlights focused on basic background information like the city where they were from, how many siblings they had, etc. In reviewing the divided data between positive and negative educational experiences, I realized that while my participants did experience challenges and struggles in their educational endeavors, they were able to maintain their student status and/or graduated from Sky University with the various types of support and cultural capital they possessed/cultivated. Thus, in my final analyses, I connected their experiences (interviews, open-ended questionnaire, participant observations, descriptive data) back to the conceptual framework of this study, specifically focusing on Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005).

I used the forms of cultural capital outlined in the Community Cultural Wealth framework as a way to structure the findings of my dissertation, with a focus on the most salient ones. Chapter 4 specifically focused on navigational, social, aspirational, and resistance capital. Meanwhile, Chapter 5 extended the resistance capital in Chapter 4 (which focused on students' knowledge of educational inequities) to students' actions in response to these educational inequities (i.e., transformative resistance).

In each of the finding chapters (i.e., Chapter 4 and 5), I selected data excerpts that I thought best illustrated these trends. While I have excerpted some participants' quotes more frequently than others, I selected excerpts that best encompassed the other participants' experiences (e.g., questionnaire responses, interviewees, and focal participants) and were more in-depth in their explanation. However, specific to Chapter 5, which focused on the participant observations, I mainly chose to include data that were relevant to the theme and where my focal participants were present.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is necessary to in order to build credibility that the findings in this study are accurate. To ensure the trustworthiness, I employed a variety of strategies used by critical ethnographers including triangulation, member-checking, and reflexivity (Castagno, 2012; Merriam, 2009). Triangulation is often used to increase the trustworthiness, or in other words the credibility of the findings (Merriam, 2009). In this study, I used a specific type of triangulation known as multiple methods of data (Denzin, 1978; Merriam, 2009) to verify and provide an in-depth understanding of the study's findings. For example, I used anonymized student records to illustrate the educational outcomes of Hmong American students, but understood that the findings from the descriptive analyses provided only a limited story of Hmong American students. Thus, the questionnaires, interviews, participant observations, and my reflective memos were used to provide an in-depth understanding of their experiences while also verifying the data and findings.

In addition to triangulation, I also used member-checking and reflexivity to ensure the trustworthiness of this study (Castagno, 2012; Merriam, 2009). For member-checking, I solicited feedback from some of my participants, especially the focal participants, in order to ensure that this study best capture their perspectives and experiences. For example, I sent them drafts of some initial writings (although some responded and others did not). In a few instances, I was able to have a conversation with them over the phone. Lastly, reflexivity involves the researcher being transparent about their positionality, worldviews, and experiences in order to explain how they had arrived at their interpretations (Merriam, 2009). Next, I address the ways in which my observations and experiences shaped this study.

Researcher's Positionality

A central part of being a critical ethnographer is the researcher's positionality, where the researcher reflects on themselves, their experiences, worldviews, and how these may have shaped their study (Castagno, 2012; Merriam, 2009). These are important for trustworthiness and also for making "our research more transparent" (Castagno, 2012, p. 373). Using critical ethnography as my methodology and drawing on critical theories, I leaned on my personal and professional identities and experiences when designing the study, and collecting, analyzing and interpreting the data. My process was similar to Delgado Bernal's (2008) metaphor of the *trenza* (braids), "when we are able to weave together our personal, professional and communal identities we are often stronger and more complete" in research as opposed to separating them (p. 135). My *trenza* is composed of strands representing my personal, professional, and communal identities that I brought and/or developed in the study.

As a Hmong American woman conducting research within my own Hmong community, I share both a personal and collective history, culture, identity, and experiences with my Hmong participants. Similarly to all my participants, my family is in the United States as a result of the Vietnam War when many Hmong people in Laos were forced to flee the country. My father arrived in the United States in 1978 at the age of 16, while my mother arrived in 1986 at the age of 17. Like many of my participants, I pursued my undergraduate degree at Sky University and was a member of the Hmong Student Organization. Throughout my undergraduate years, I similarly encountered many educational challenges and successes while also attempting to access and learn about Hmong history and culture.

Along with my identities and experiences, I possess what Delgado Bernal calls *cultural intuition*. According to Delgado Bernal (2008), when Chicana researchers do research on their

own communities, their *cultural intuition* illuminates unique viewpoints based on their personal experience, professional experience, existing literature about the topic, and analytical research process. In this case, as a Hmong researcher conducting research on my own community, my cultural intuition allowed me to provide a perspective that was grounded in the components outlined by Delgado Bernal. Given my identity and shared history and experiences with my participants, I found myself connecting with some of their experiences but also being cognizant of not placing my own experience before theirs. For instance, in a reflective memo to myself after reviewing Janice's transcript I wrote the following:

> I'm sharing a bit of my own family with them too. I also see myself exerting my own claim into the Hmong Student Organization . . . . but do they also see me like that too? I see that with each interview, I'm connecting with each of the students/participants either through my own position as a Teaching Assistant/Mentor or just sharing my lived experience. I wonder how they felt about it? Am I exerting too much of myself? (interview notes, June 27, 2018)

This reflective memo illustrates my own understanding of the beauty and challenges with researching within one's own community. On one hand, we have shared experiences that goes beyond finding commonality in the literature but through our lived experiences. On the other hand, my awareness of allowing the data to guide me as opposed to guiding the data was important in order to ensure that my findings were data driven. As I reflect on my own question on whether I was exerting too much of myself, I believe I was able to find that balance between sharing my experiences to build an authentic relationship while also carrying out this study.

Prior to conducting this study in 2015, I had already established a relationship with the Hmong community at Sky University. I had been affiliated with many Hmong American students and the Hmong Student Organization (HSO) at Sky University for many years. On various occasions, I was a mentor, a friend, workshop facilitator, and a resource. Over time, my participants contacted me to meet individually to vent, to go over their goals, and they have also

recommended other Hmong American undergraduates to come talk to me about graduate school. At times, I also participated in my participants and HSO's members' interviews and videos/documentaries for their class projects. Sometimes, my participants and I also had lunch or dinner together. Given our varied interactions, I did have many ethical dilemmas about what I *should* and *should not* record and/or include in this study.

Although I entered this study as my complete self, I also encountered many unexpected internal questions. As Delgado Bernal (2008) cautioned, "At the same time, weaving together these and many other identities is fraught with complexity, tensions and obstacles" (p. 135). At times, I wondered if I should "take off" my researcher hat for this moment, or do I keep it on for the entire time that I am with any of my participants? Similar to the ethical struggles described by Tamale (2005), I encountered very personal information based on cultural, social, familial, academic, and intimate relationships that may have greatly shaped my participants' undergraduate experiences. Like Tamale, how much I reveal about my community, the students' experiences, and the university depended on me as the researcher. At the core of this study was the trust and authentic relationship that I had built with them, which were crucial for this study. I carefully managed and protected their stories and experiences that they shared with me; I share anything only with their full and informed consent.

Another internal dilemma I had in weaving my *trenza* was I did not want my participants to feel like I was using them to extract information and vice versa. I wanted my participants to know I genuinely and sincerely care for their well-being and will support them to the best of my ability. I listened to their concerns about school, family, relationships with friends and loved ones, and provided advice and resources that they may find helpful. I also became more involved in HSO aside from attending their general meetings and workshops. Specifically for my

interviewees, towards the end of every interview I always asked if they had any questions for me and made sure to answer their questions honestly. Some were curious about this study and who it benefited. Some were curious about my experience and sought advice for life after they graduate. There were also those that really wanted to see the completion of this study and offered to promote it. I am sincerely grateful to the Hmong American students at Sky University and especially to my focal participants.

Summary

In conclusion, this chapter discussed in depth the methodology and methods used in this study. For example, I explained the importance of using critical ethnography as a methodology in order to understand Hmong American students' educational experiences and outcomes and their agency in responding to such experiences. I also discussed the various methods I used to collect data such as acquiring the anonymized student records, questionnaires, interviews, and participant observations. Although a variety of methods were used, data were primarily drawn from the interviews and the participant observations of Hmong American undergraduates. Additionally, I also discussed the data analyses for the anonymized student records and the qualitative data analyses, the trustworthiness of this study, and my own researcher's positionality.

The following two chapters, Chapter 4 and 5 will discuss the findings of this study. In particular, Chapter 4 focuses on the educational outcomes and experiences of Hmong American students, whereas Chapter 5 emphasizes the students' agency (i.e., transformational resistance) at Sky University. These two findings chapters will shed light on the strength and assets that Hmong American students possess and bring with them as they pursue their bachelor's degree.

Chapter 4: Hmong American students' Educational Outcomes and Experiences

As mentioned in Chapter 1, this chapter is one of two findings chapters that addressees the research questions posed. Both findings chapter participates in a paradigm shift in the portrayal of Hmong American students' educational achievement by highlighting their strengths and utilizing Asian Critical Race Theory (Asian Crit) and Community Cultural Wealth. In this chapter, three of the seven tenets to Asian Critical Race Theory—namely*, Asianization*, *Strategic (Anti) Essentialism*, and *Intersectionality*—will be discussed. This chapter addresses my first research question: What are the educational outcomes and experiences of Hmong American students? I begin this chapter by drawing on Hmong American students' academic trends data at Sky University. I then discuss student participant interviews, and student questionnaire responses to shed light on their experiences including their challenges and the assets they drew on to address those obstacles. Thus, I divide this chapter into Section 4.1 and Section 4.2. Section 4.1 focuses on academic trends data (descriptive statistics), while Section 4.2 examines student interviews and questionnaire responses that highlight their strengths and assets in this study.

Section 4.1: Hmong American Students' Educational Outcomes at Sky University

Section 4.1 focuses on the descriptive statistics of Hmong American students at Sky University in order to provide an overview of their educational trends. These trends counter the dominant deficit portrayals of Hmong American students in the literature. As emphasized by Lee (2005) and Poon and colleagues (2016), Hmong Americans are often depicted as the failed model minorities and used to disrupt the Model Minority Myth. As the following descriptive statistics demonstrate, most Hmong American students at Sky University performed well academically. *Figure 4.1* provides a snapshot of 314 Hmong American freshmen at Sky University from a span of 2010 to 2016, detailing the percentage rates of first-year retention and

length of time to graduate. Each year from 2010 to 2016, at least 80% of new entering Hmong American freshmen cohorts returned to Sky University the next academic year. While first-year retention is important, examining the length of graduation towards completion is also equally important. Six-year graduation rates for earlier cohorts were 69% (2010) and 75% (2011).

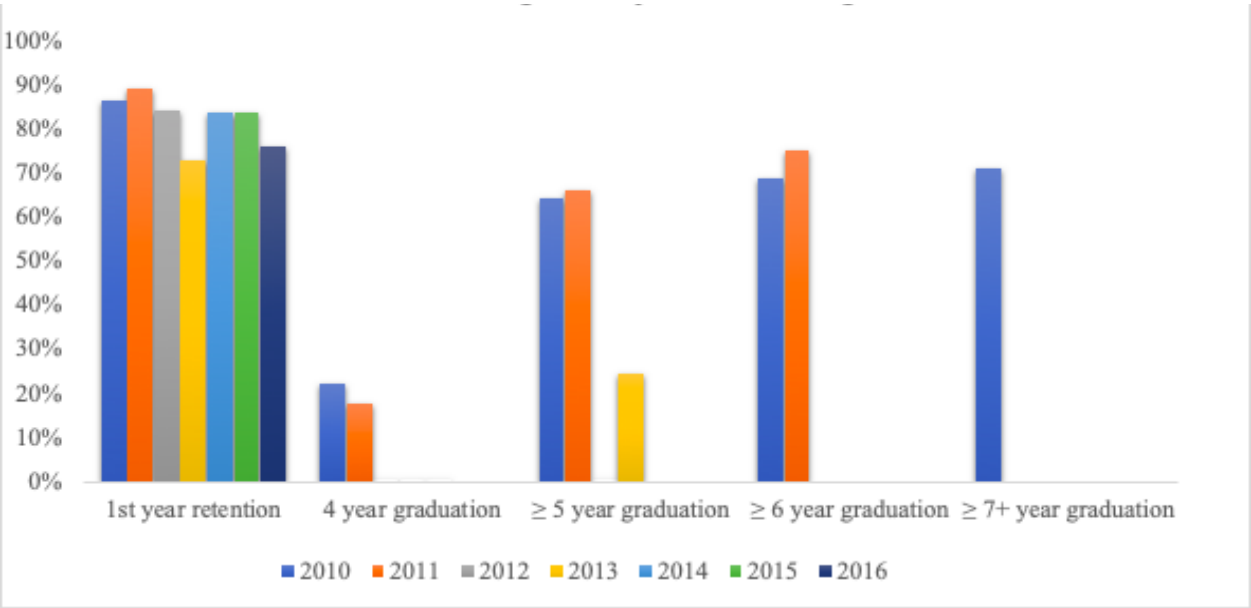

Figure 4.1. First-Year Retention and Degree Completion for Hmong American Students at Sky University.

Source: Sky University's public information on Hmong American students, excluding transfer students.

While Figure 4.1 suggested that Hmong American students were performing well overall, a closer examination between Hmong American female and male undergraduates indicates there is a gender gap in Hmong American students' pursuing a postsecondary education and degree awarded at Sky University. *Figure 4.2* shows there were 101 entering Hmong American freshmen students from the aggregated cohorts 2010 and 2011; 65 were female and 36 were male. Thus, the number of Hmong American female students attending Sky University was nearly double that of Hmong American male students in these two cohorts. At Sky University,

Hmong American student enrollment trends aligned with previous literature showing that there were more female students attending postsecondary education than male students (Xiong, 2012).

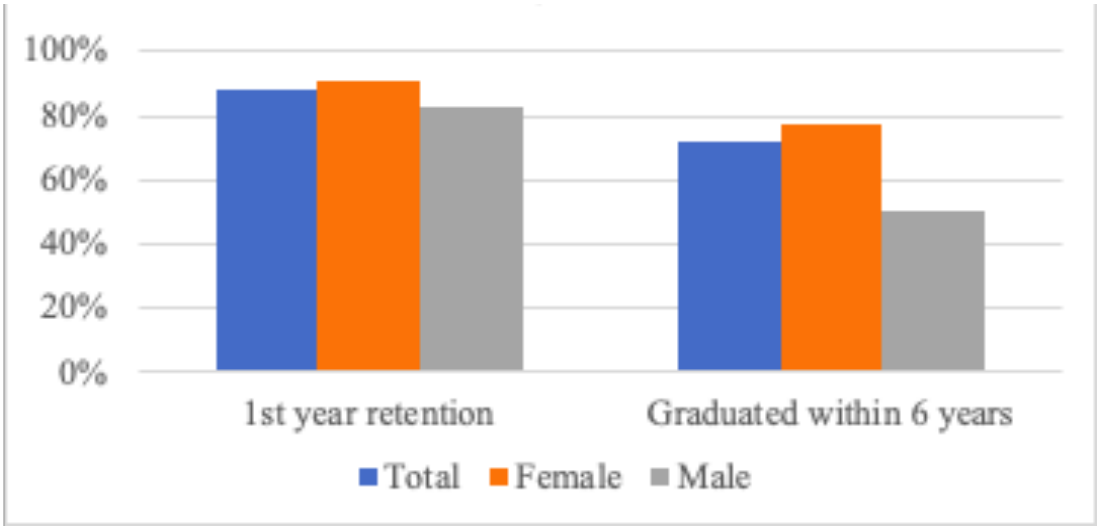

Figure 4.2. Aggregated Hmong American Freshmen Cohort 2010 and 2011.

Source: Sky University's public information on Hmong American students, excluding transfer students.

This figure also provides an overview of both first-year retention and graduation within 6 years for the aggregated 2010 and 2011 Hmong American freshman cohort, as grouped by gender. Despite the higher enrollment of Hmong American females in comparison to males, first-year retention percentage rates were fairly close, with female students at 91% and males at 83%. However, 77% of Hmong American female students graduated within 6 years in comparison to 50% of Hmong males. While these figures provide some context on Hmong American college student outcomes, they do not provide enough information to understand Hmong American students' experiences between their first enrollment and graduation.

A more in-depth investigation of the entering Hmong American freshmen 2010 and 2011 cohorts shown in *Table 4.1* provides a deeper understanding of their academic performance, specifically their academic standings at Sky University. Depending on students' academic

progress, they were placed into one of six academic standings per quarter. Students who were in "Good Standing" met the minimal progress requirements of earning a grade point average (GPA) of 2.0+ for the quarter, earning a cumulative GPA of 2.0+, passing their quarterly coursework of at least 12 units, and having less than 16 units of incomplete coursework. If students did not meet any of these "Good Standing" criteria, then they were placed on "Academic Probation." If students were previously on "Academic Probation" and continued to be on probation the following quarter, then their academic standing would be "Probation Continued." Students would be placed on "Subject to Academic Disqualification" if they earned a quarterly GPA of less than 1.5, or by their third quarter if they were still on academic probation for not earning a cumulative GPA of 2.0+, or if they have more than 16 units of incomplete coursework (before the final grades have been assigned). Students would be placed on "Dismissed/Disqualified" if they either did not meet the minimal progress stated above or did not satisfy the entry writing requirement by their third quarter at Sky University. Students who have been dismissed or disqualified from Sky University can still reapply and be "Reinstated." By presenting figures for students in these categories, Table 4.1 shows the overall academic trends for Hmong American students from their first year to their fifth year at Sky University based on the different academic standings.

Per university regulations, only academic standings with more than 10 students were recorded in the table for confidentiality reasons. A student could be counted twice within an academic year. For example, a student could be in "Good Standing" in their first year and had also been on "Academic Probation" in that same year. However, each student was not counted more than once in a given academic standing per year. For instance, a student would not have been counted twice for being in "Good Standing" in their second year.

Table 4.1

Aggregated academic standing for entering Hmong American freshmen 2010 & 2011 cohorts per year

Academic Standing	1st Year	2nd Year	3rd Year	4th Year	5th Year^
Good Standing	95.05%	92.00%	93.00%	95.00%	100.00%
Academic Probation	18.00%	16.00%	*	*	*
Probation Continued	*	*	*	*	0.00%**
Subject to Academic Disqualification	*	13.00%	*	*	*
Dismissed/Disqualified	*	*	*	*	*
Dismissed/Reinstated	*	*	*	*	*

** Less than 10 students who had this academic standing.*
*** There were 0 students who had that academic standing.*
^ Only included 2010 freshmen cohort since data was obtained in 2015, thus 2011 were in their 4th year.
Source: Sky University's anonymized Hmong American student data from 2010 to 2015.

Hmong American students at Sky University were overwhelmingly in "Good Standing" with 95% in their first year, 92% in the second year, 93% in the third year, 95% in the fourth year, and 100% in their fifth year. There were only a few who were placed on "Academic Probation." In their first year, 18% were on "Academic Probation" at least once; similarly in their second year, 16% of Hmong American students were also on "Academic Probation." A subset of Hmong American students, 13% specifically, experienced "Subject to Academic Disqualification" in their second year. As for "Probation Continued," there were 18% of Hmong American students who did experience that designation in their first year, and then 16% during

their second year. However, in the fifth year there were no students on "Probation Continued." The percentages listed for the fifth year were incomplete because data obtained was during the middle of the academic school year. While the academic trends/outcomes among Hmong American students provide valuable insights, these numbers do not explain the factors contributing to their academic challenges nor how they also thrived. The following section will dive more deeply into the challenges, but most importantly Hmong American students' assets for overcoming their challenges.

Section 4.2: Educational Challenges and Hmong American Students' Community Cultural Wealth

Student experiences unpack the story behind their academic performances. In accordance to Asian Critical Race Theory (Museus & Iftikar, 2013), the Whiteness of institutions creates and shape the educational experiences of Hmong American students—not that Hmong American students themselves are deficient. Since their inception, U.S. educational institutions have operated to maintain Whiteness, which consequently shapes the educational outcomes and experiences of its students. Whiteness refers to the ideological belief that normalizes White people socially, institutionally, and systemically, creating a norm against which People of Color are measured (Cabrera et al., 2017). In discussing Whiteness in this way, my intent is not about pitting White people against Communities of Color, nor is it about being anti-White people. Rather, my purpose is to discuss the persistence of Whiteness in our educational institutions despite diversity and inclusion efforts. Thus, the challenges Hmong American students encountered at Sky University are connected to how the educational system itself is designed (as I discuss later in the resistance capital section). Despite these challenges, Students of Color—in this case, Hmong American students—possess Community Cultural Wealth (assets, skills,

knowledge, values, and experiences) that allows them to thrive in academia (Yosso, 2005). In this study, the questionnaires and interviews I conducted illustrate the strengths of Hmong American students at Sky University as they faced their challenges and progressed towards graduation. In this chapter, I highlight the most salient assets that align with the challenges Hmong American students identify. As noted by Yosso (2005), none of these forms of Community Cultural Wealth are isolated from one another; rather, they are interconnected and interwoven. Towards the end of each capital, I also interweave these connections back to Asian Critical Race Theory.

Navigational Capital Intersects With College Transition

Navigational capital are the skills and abilities Students of Color use to maneuver institutions not designed for them, such as educational institutions. Since Sky University operates on a three-quarter system, students must learn how to adjust to the pacing and policies in place at Sky University. Responder 8's open-ended questionnaire response to what he believes may contribute to the academic performance of Hmong American students on academic probation highlights this transitional challenge: "[N]ot being able to adapt the environment of college. The Sky University system is fast. Midterms come as early as they leave and sometimes we can't keep up with the system."

Responder 8's response focuses on a key aspect of the Sky University "system," the environment it fosters and the impacts it has on Hmong American students. Specifically, "the system is fast" is in reference to the 10-week quarters that Sky University operates by. In having a "fast " system, it fosters an environment that does not allow room for students to fall behind academically. Moreover, this system and environment becomes more challenging for students as they are also adjusting to their "new experience" as a university student. Thus, students are

compounded with multiple layers of transitional challenges that shape their academic performance within and beyond the courses they enroll in.

While transitioning to Sky University can be difficult, students' *Navigational capital* provides them the skill to overcome it. Students must be aware and understand the culture of the institution. Jackson demonstrated his *Navigational capital* as a first-generation college student:

> I've learned a lot when I first came here. It was really difficult 'cause I had no idea what was going on. I didn't know how to choose classes. I didn't know how to work things through, but I think with a lot of resources such as EOP and STEP that gave me a large insight [...] they had a presentation on what university requirements were, what college requirements were, and what class requirements were, what your major requirements were. So I think slowly, I had to do it myself. I broke it down into steps [...] And saw like, "Oh this university here requires a certain GEs but then college requirements require a foreign language. My major requires these lower prereqs and these upper divisions courses." If I really wanted to do anything, I had to search for it by myself. But I think being introduced to it—like on a large scale first is what I had to force myself to do [...] And then things [unintel] but um especially through this quarter system. So 'cause I think it went through pretty fast sometimes . . . But I was able to adjust to it, pretty okay.

Jackson's excerpt illustrates what many first-year students experience, such as the unfamiliarity of the university system and needing to understand how this system works. Jackson participated in these college programs (EOP and STEP) which are dedicated to supporting historically disadvantaged students and often first-generation college students both academically and socially in their transition and progress in higher education. These programs provide services such as mentorship, financial assistance, advising, planning what courses to take, etc. While university resources expose students to Sky University requirements, courses, etc., the final decision on whether to enroll and/participate is determined by Jackson. In addition to understanding Sky University systemically, Jackson also had to adjust from a semester system (high school) to a fast-paced quarter system (Sky University). Thus, illustrating Jackson's ability to maneuver through Sky University with the support of these programs that he chose to participate in.

Another way student utilizes their *Navigational capital* to support them in their college transition is illustrated in Chi Meng's experience. Different from Jackson, Chi Meng is not a first-generation college student; but he, too, experienced challenges during his first year at Sky University. Understanding that at Sky University, students' quarterly academic progress is determined by their overall GPA and completed units per quarter which are classified by academic standings (see Section 4.1). These quarterly progresses are indicators that students are meeting the university requirement towards their graduation. In Chi Meng's experience, he started his first quarter at Sky University in "Good Standing" but then was placed on "Academic Dismissal" for failing classes and thus not meeting the GPA and unit completion requirement. At the end of his winter quarter, he was able to advance to "Academic Probation." Finally, his academic standing returned to "Good Standing" at the end of spring quarter of his first year. Chi Meng shared how he was able to overcome his educational challenge:

> My motivation was I didn't want to disappoint myself. But rather, when I found out that I wanted it [continue being a student] for myself […]. Then I had that person who was there to support me when I really wanted it and being able to go that person and talk with them and then having them tell me what to do and guide me.[…] It wasn't like they were really helping me. But rather when I needed them and when I needed someone to talk to and when I needed support and when I was tired of standing up on my own two feet they were there to help build me up again so I can stand on my own two feet and rise to the occasion.

Chi Meng's experience exemplified *Navigational capital* operating in two parts. The first is he needed to find out for himself if he wanted to continue pursuing his studies at Sky University. When he "found out" continuing his studies was indeed a decision he wanted for himself, it motivated him to do his best to return his academic standing to "Good Standing." The second is his ability to identify the type of support he needed during his most crucial moments. Although there was a person who Chi Meng could turn to for guidance and support, it was "when [he] needed" it that made the difference. This "person" whom he later shared with me were multiple

persons in his family that supported him so he could "stand on" his own "feet." Unlike Jackson, Chi Meng had parents and siblings who were either pursuing their undergraduate, graduate studies, or had graduated from college that he could "talk" to for necessary support. His excerpt shows his ability to identify what he needed when he needed it.

Other ways *Navigational capital* operates in supporting Hmong American undergraduate students in their college transition is students' ability to identify and connect with their professors. According to Responder 13's survey, a part of the transition to college is, "students don't generally talk to their professors or address their concerns"; however, this response positions the sole responsibility on the students. In Chao's experience, she demonstrated that it's not simply students talking to the professors but rather the connection between the professor and students that will enrich a student's education:

> I think it was harder for me during sophomore and junior year because I wasn't able to connect these theories into much of my experiences and observations. I realized that I always have trouble with a lot of these [theories]. […] [The reason] I wasn't so close to my Anthropology professors versus my Asian American Studies professors is that I feel like I wasn't able to connect what I learned to myself. I think that's why it was kind of hard for me to build a relationship with my Anthropology professors but with my Asian American Studies professors, they made it in a way in like it's not just about these dead white guys and theories it's about you. […] and so, I think 'cause I was able to do that and these courses my fifth year I tend to start to do better. I have better relationships with my Asian American Studies professors because I can just go talk to her and be myself.

Chao's experience shed light on the importance of connecting with the course materials and professors in meaningful ways in order to navigate Sky University. Chao's ability to apply the courses' theories to herself and her community allowed her to "do better" during her fifth year at Sky University. She was not just learning about "dead white guys," but learning about herself and was able to incorporate her own experiences into the classroom. Her example illustrates her navigational ability to find courses and connect with professors who were able to push her to think critically, especially in applying the theories she learned.

In connecting *Navigational capital* with college transition, these student experiences highlight key tenets within Asian Critical Race Theory, namely, *Asianization and Strategic (Anti) Essentialism*. The students' challenges of transitioning to college relate with *Asianization* by disrupting the monolithic assumption that regards Asians as model minorities who automatically excel in schools. These experiences illustrate that being racialized as Asian does not automatically equate to educational excellence. Nor does being racialized as Asian equate to coming from a high-socioeconomic status family or having college-educated parents (as seen in Jackson's example). By critiquing stereotypes of a monolithic "Asian" identity, the concept of *Asianization* emphasizes the diversity among Asian ethnicities so that educational programs like EOP and STEP can continue to support students like Jackson. Moreover, Jackson's experiences demonstrate that beyond being racialized as Asian, his status as a first-generation college student sheds light on the diversity among Asian ethnic groups who are typically perceived as having college-educated parents. Additionally, *Strategic (Anti) Essentialism* emphasizes focusing on one particular Asian community in order to recognize these complexities (e.g., Hmong students racialized as Asian and therefore educationally successful but at the same time considered educational deviants). Together, these two tenets provide a more nuanced and understanding of Hmong American students as located in this dichotomy of perpetuating the Model Minority Myth while simultaneously being considered the failed model minority. In turn, knowing these dynamics sheds light on the diverse and complex racialization experiences of Hmong Americans.

Social Capital Intersects With Student Organizations

Student organizations serve as important sources of *Social capital* that enable my participants to thrive in academia both as individuals and students. In accordance with previous literature, student organizations create a space for students' sense of belonging and navigation

within the university (Vue, 2013, 2021; Yosso, 2005). For example, Responder 13 identified a challenge Hmong American students encounter at Sky University:

> Not having a strong academic support whether it be at home or in Sky [University]. […] Once they [Hmong American students] found a solid study group, their grades and confidence in themselves about the class started to show.

Once students are able to find their "group," however, they would be able to maneuver through educational challenges.

For many of my participants, student organizations provided them that strong academic support through creating a sense of belonging within academia, providing resources on how to navigate Sky University and support them emotionally. In addition, student organizations allowed my participants to expand their social network through making friends within the group. Jason, a transfer student in his third year at Sky University, expressed how HSO provided a space for him to connect with other Hmong American students through their shared ethnic identity, which was important to him:

> They really help me a lot because like I feel like peb yog Hmoob sawv daws os [We're all Hmong] that's already family to me already . . . And everybody makes everybody feel like they're included and we are brothers and sisters . . . for me when I'm hanging out with them you can't feel like there's this tension or this this yeah fear of like them judging so it's kind of like I feel like true friends forever . . . So like that's a security that I have with Hmong Student Organization so that that makes me feel like I'm wanted here and I'm a part of something that by being here is effective […] Also when I'm struggling with something they're also [an] emotional support me too so that's why I can balance work and school everything better.

Jason described the various ways HSO was a family to him because of their shared ethnic identity as Hmong people. For Jason, sharing ethnic identities allowed him to be comfortable within the student organization and also receive the emotional support he needed at Sky University. His excerpt conveyed HSO as the space within Sky University that made him feel a sense of belonging and home.

However, not all student organizations that Hmong American students participate in have to be ethnic-specific in order for them to thrive at Sky University. Fue, a third-year student at Sky University, also identified as a Christian and had been a member of the Asian Christian Student Association (ACSA) (pseudonym) for three years. Besides being faith-based, what makes ACSA unique from HSO is that many Sky University alumni are active members with ACSA. These active alumni are considered staff within ACSA and since they had already graduated from Sky University, they were able to support current students like Fue. The following exchange captured the support Fue had received through this organization:

> **Fue:** . . . this Christian Fellowship group it's called Asian Christian Student Association. They assigned us like staff.
>
> **Kaozong:** (inaudible) Staff as in?
>
> **Fue:** Staff as in people that used to go to Sky University, then they graduate and then they became staff for the church.
>
> **Kaozong:** Ohh! Okay.
>
> **Fue:** Yeah, so I was assigned like a leader. And then during all those hard times this leader of mine, he reached out to me. He talked to me about his experience and what helped him and whatnot. And he helped me study. He hosted study halls. […] I found that to be really helpful.

The ACSA fueled both Fue's spiritual and academic pursuits at Sky University. Similar to HSO, ACSA is the student organization that had the most positive impact on him because of the stated reasons, and even more so since he was able to make friends who shared his faith and goal:

> I have engineering friends too. I have like all kinds of friends with different majors, and we strive to do one goal. 'Cause for us, we're Christians. We have goals in mind like planting church here or in the east coast or somewhere in the world. And now being able to have that degree will help us be able to support ourselves and our families. Every day after we're free, we'll get together and study and then we'll do activities together. Go out and eat and just talk about life. That's like a positive impact for me, because not a lot of friends are doing that. I realize, because instead of studying they would like go play or party or do a lot of unhealthy stuff.

Student organizations provide many students like Fue a place to make friends and serve his academic needs. Fue shared that he was a member of the Hmong Student Organization but chose to step away from this organization since it did not fulfill what he was looking for. Fue's experience with the HSO and ACSA suggested that student organizations play an important role in contributing to the academic performances of Hmong American students. However, simply being a member of any student organization is not sufficient; rather, it is what the student organization is able to offer to support their own developmental growth, both as a person and academically. For Fue, ACSA offered the educational network with Sky University alumni, peers who shared his major, socializing and studying habits, and faith.

Likewise, my participants also formed friendships with fellow members of student organizations, and these friendships supported their educational endeavors. Although Fue and Jason's experiences with *Social capital* were gained in different spaces, they both benefitted from receiving social and academic support through student organizations to thrive at Sky University. Thus, *Social capital*—whether it is from ethnic-specific organizations or not—encompasses tools that Hmong American students in this study use in order to navigate the university. In connecting *Social capital* with student organizations, these student experiences relate to Asian Critical Race Theory, specifically *Strategic (Anti) Essentialism*. This tenet emphasizes being purposeful about exclusively examining the experiences of Hmong American students in order to counter monolithic views of Asian American student experiences and understand Hmong American students' diverse, complex and contradictory experiences. While Hmong American students collectively draw on their *Social capital* through student organizations, there are differences in the types of student organizations that really resonate with them. In Fue's example, it was the faith-based student organization that he drew on to support

him in navigating Sky University, while for other Hmong American students in this study, it was HSO.

Aspirational Capital Intersects With Gender

Reflecting on the different educational outcomes among males and females, Hmong American students also described *Aspirational capital* in a manner that intersected with their gender. Throughout each interview and observations I conducted, I learned about my participants' dreams and hopes for their future at Sky University and post-graduation, both of which connected to their own gendered identity. According to Yosso (2005), these hopes and dreams exemplified *Aspirational capital* that Students of Color continue to have despite educational challenges and inequities. This subsection demonstrates how *Aspirational capital* and gender identity play out within students' family dynamics and in the careers they select.

While studies have shown that Hmong families are one of the factors that supports students' academic endeavors (Xiong & Lam, 2013), this study suggests that they also present challenges. An example of a challenge was identified in the questionnaire by Responder 13:

> I also noticed that when Hmong American students head back home, they are bombarded with familial issues, responsibilities, burdens, pressures, and concerns, that makes studying at home difficult. When they come back to Sky University, they feel many mixed emotions-guilt, confusion, upset, sad-which affects how they deal with their studies.

Responder 13 highlighted many of the expectations that Hmong American students of both genders experience when they visit home and return back to the university. Family plays an intrinsic part in both the pressure and motivation for student success (Museus, 2013; Supple et al., 2010). The feelings of familial responsibilities do not disappear simply because they are at the university and not at home. Hmong American students like Responder 13 illustrated the invisible yet palpable obligations and motivations through the "guilt" and "confusion" they may experience for not being present to take on the familial responsibilities. These familial

responsibilities intertwine with their education and can serve as a motivation and pressure to complete their degree and return home. These motivations and pressures are further elaborated in the forthcoming examples.

Though Hmong American students of both genders have familial responsibilities, these play out differently in their motivation for educational success. Jackson, a second-year undergraduate, shared his experience that captures this family pressure and motivation as a son:

> They've very supportive [of my education] 'cause we do have cousins here and there who are involved in gangs and drugs. They don't really care if I become a doctor or a lawyer or whatever 'cause so I was really glad about that so there's not a lot of pressure [cause…] they know that I am in higher education […I have the] freedom to choose what I want to do. It's just I do get pressured 'cause as a son; I have to support them in the future. I think I put the pressure on myself sometimes too knowing that I have to make a lot of money to take care of them for thanking them for taking care and raising me.

Jackson's aspiration to continue pursuing his education is fueled in part by his family and his positionality as a son. He expressed that as a son, he felt "pressured" by cultural expectations to take care of his parents. As a result, Jackson put "the pressure on" himself to bear the responsibility of his parents' well-being. The pressure he referenced aligned with literature on the cultural expectations for sons to provide and take care of their parents (Lee, 2005; Supple et al., 2010). Furthermore, the pressure he put on himself suggested the layers of obligation and expectation he had experienced internally due to external cultural expectations. Like Jackson, many of the students who I interviewed continued to express their hopes and dreams for a better future regardless of the challenges they faced at Sky University in relation to their gendered identities.

Although Hmong daughters are not culturally expected to provide for and take care of their parents like Hmong sons, Amy did. As a fourth-year undergraduate, she sees herself as a potential candidate to take the responsibility of caring for her parents in the future. Among her seven siblings, Amy is the youngest and first in her family to attend this type of university. Amy

will also be the first daughter to receive her bachelor's degree. Although her parents are supportive of her educational aspirations, she shares that at times they expressed this phrase, "If you were a son." This phrase connects back to gendered cultural expectations and highlights the gendered power dynamics within the Hmong community. As a daughter, Amy is not culturally responsible to care for her parents once she marries because she is expected to then take care of her spouse's parents. Culturally, there is no room to take care of both parents. Though Amy is not a son, she shared, "I don't mind if my parents do live with me in the future." The responsibilities of caring for the parents and one's family aligns with the work of Xiong and Lam (2013), whose study indicated that for Hmong male and female students, the desire to give back and support their families were contributing factors towards completing their degree.

Another example of the convergence of *Aspirational capital* and gender was exemplified by Amy. In an attempt to find resources about the Hmong diaspora, Amy met with Anthony, a staff member in the Asian American Studies Department who provides resources to Asian American and Pacific Islander students and serves as a liaison to the community. Amy described her experience of reaching out to Anthony:

> And when I went to talk to Anthony about potentially getting my master's and studying the Hmong diaspora, he was like, "You know what, I actually can't give you any resources but you can talk to Kaozong or Chee." And I'm like, "Okay so you don't have like any other resources besides them because there's no other Hmong professors here?" And so THAT really struck me. You know what, I WILL be a Hmong professor [giggles].
>
> **Kaozong:** Mmm . . .
>
> **Amy:** I think that's why I am set on like being a professor because then I can also advocate for students who wants to go into these kinds of profession.
>
> **Kaozong:** Mmhm . . .
>
> **Amy:** 'Cause I know that there's a few Hmong professors but I think they're like also guys, so it's, like, you know, they need a girl [laughs].

As a result of their meeting, Amy felt "struck" at the limited resources available to students who wish to learn more about the Hmong diaspora. Her experience also reveals to her that there is no professor in the Asian American Studies Department at Sky University who has expertise in this area. The referral Amy received was to meet with me, a graduate student, or Chee, an undergraduate student, which suggested there are scarce resources that the staff is able to identify to support her interest in the Hmong diaspora. These realizations ignited Amy's desire to pursue the professoriate to become a Hmong professor. Lastly, Amy's recognition and call for a "girl" Hmong professor also suggested her view of the gender disparity among Hmong professors in academia.[4] Moreover, she emphasized that she "will" become a Hmong professor, which manifests her aspirations to pursue this career despite not seeing Hmong women professors represented. She wants to effect change in our educational institutions and gender equity both in the field of Asian American Studies and in higher education.

In relating to *Aspirational capital* with gender, Asian Critical Race Theory, specifically *Intersectionality* provides insights about in Hmong American students' educational experiences. For example, both Jackson's and Amy's experiences illustrate their complex lives as a Hmong son and daughter, and how their gendered identities can serve to motivate and pressure them to pursue a higher education. In Amy's case, her parents are supportive of her education which aligns with current literature of Hmong parents' shifting to be supportive of their daughter's education (Ducklow & Toft, 2019; Mouavangsou, 2018). However, the complex reality of culturally expecting sons to care for the parents still lingers with her parents expressing "if [you]

[4] I want to note that there are Hmong female and male professors in the United States. However to verify if the number of Hmong female professors are limited in comparison to Hmong male professors, may be suitable for future research. In any case, Amy's perception of a lack of female Hmong professors inspired her to become one.

were a son." In Jackson's case, he experiences cultural pressure to care for his parents and will adhere them, while Amy is changing cultural expectation by welcoming her parents to stay with her in the future. Despite how their gendered identities create these experiences for them, their identities comprised part of the *Aspirational capital* that they possess in order to continue striving towards the goal of pursuing higher education.

Resistant Capital Intersects With Calling for a Hmong Space

Pertinent to Hmong American students' abilities and skills to navigate and thrive in the university is their *Resistant capital* (Yosso, 2005), the recognition of structural inequities and motivation to enact change. Throughout each component of the questionnaires, interviews, and participant observations, the Hmong American students in this study identified structural inequity, specifically the opportunity gap of not having a Hmong space at Sky University. The theme of wanting, creating, and naming a space in the university for Hmong American students were salient. In the following subsections, both interviews and questionnaire responses provide insights around students' need for the recognition of a Hmong space within Sky University.

All my participants were aware of their own positionality as Hmong American students and the spaces they occupy (and not) within the university. For example, Responder 1's answer to what Sky University could do to support Hmong American students highlighted the need for an unequivocal Hmong space:

> Supply a space for Hmong American students to help and support one another. Also acknowledge more that Hmong (along with many unrepresented Asian communities) are recognized rather than being grouped with all other Asian especially like international students.

The response from Responder 1 suggested Sky University does not fully recognize the diversity of Asian ethnic group and further assume Asian American students and international students are the same. This problematic monolithic assumption that all Asian ethnic groups are the same have

been documented by researchers in order to advocate for data disaggregation and recognize the diversity of Asian ethnic groups (Iftikar & Museus, 2018; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Vue, 2013, 2021). Moreover, Responder 1 recognized the limited institutional space specifically designed for "unrepresented Asian communities" such as the Hmong community, and the importance of having a space in the university. The phrase "Supply a space" in this response suggest the following: (a) visibility for the Hmong community; (b) acknowledging the diversity within Asian communities; and (c) distinguishing the difference between Asian American students and Asian international students.

While there were AAS professors who had chosen to include a course reading and/or a lecture relevant to Hmong history and culture, those were not enough for students. Chi Meng's experience highlighted the extent and limit of learning Hmong-related content in AAS:

> **Chi Meng:** . . . Where um I know for Asian American Studies 2 there was a reading specifically for Hmong and for my others [courses] they talked about the Vietnam War. I think we talked about it for a good week—
>
> **Kaozong:** Oh a good week
>
> **Chi Meng:** Yeah about the Hmong. Yeah because we mentioned. We talked about yellow rain and other things as well in that class. Whereas for Asian American Studies 1 we didn't talk about the Hmong that much. It was just like mention[ed] but that was about it.

In Chi Meng's two Asian American Studies courses, one course dedicated a week to teaching about Hmong history in the context of the Vietnam War, while the other course merely "mention[ed]" Hmong. Chi Meng recognized his professors' efforts in integrating Hmong-related materials into the classroom; however, his experiences suggested they were not sufficient. They did not satisfy the longing and desire of students like him who sought to learn more about their Hmong community.

Chi Meng's complex relationship with AAS is not unique to Sky University. In Vue's (2013, 2021) and Depouw's (2012) studies, their participants—Hmong American college students—also expressed similar feelings where AAS classes do provide an opportunity to learn about Hmong history/experiences, but these are limited to the fraction of a class session and/or reading. Despite the rare opportunities to learn about Hmong history, culture, and experiences in Asian American Studies, Hmong American students still seek out this department. For example, in this study, Ntsab Lias shared:

> ...I think one of the main reasons why I wanted to major in Asian American Studies was to also like see where Hmong people are at like in relation to other Asian American communities. Like where do Hmong people fit? And I think I already know that I'm not gonna get a lot of shit on Hmong people in Asian American Studies because I'm already starting to see that it's very over powered by certain like topics and certain groups of people. It makes me kind of sad but I feel like it also pushes me to study in it and to also try to get in it so that I could also tell people like about Hmong people you know. But I dunno. It's hella complicated.

Ntsab Lias's interview suggested the opportunities to learn about Hmong history, experiences, and culture in the department were rare. Her statement, "I'm not gonna get a lot of shit on Hmong people in Asian American Studies . . ." sheds light on her experience and her future expectation in the department. Based on the courses Ntsab Lias had taken, she understood that there would be little space in the curriculum that focused on Hmong people. Her excerpt aligned with Chi Meng's experience with AAS courses where Hmong people were positioned at the margins due to limited representation in the curriculum.

Further, Ntsab Lias understood and knew about the "complicated[ness]" between AAS and the minimal coverage of Hmong people in the course content. I asked her to clarify what she meant by "over powered by certain group." Before she provided me with that clarification, she defended her professors' curriculum:

Ntsab Lias: I don't think they do it like purposely too you know.

Kaozong: Like the professors?

Ntsab Lias: Yeah and what they talk about. Okay. Maybe I haven't taken enough classes to say this…So for example, I took Asian American Studies 108 (pseudonym) that's about Asian American Communities.

Kaozong: Okay.

Ntsab Lias: And I'm just so upset and butthurt beCAUSE in that class 'cause *koj paub* (you know) Professor Singh (pseudonym)?

Kaozong: Mmhm . . .

Ntsab Lias: In that class, I'm really disappointed because in that class a lot of readings that we do is all based on South Asians. Okay. I can't say all but the majority of them is based on that and it's like I understand that like. Okay. I haven't like clearly confirmed if she's South Asian but then I feel like *nws yog os* (she is) and like *kuv* (I) feel like . . . that's what she focus on and that's what she knows. That's her study and like it's like she can't pull from other places too. Like that's her study then she would teach us what her study is or whatever. And I feel like I understand that but at the same time it's like Asian American Communities. It just sucks to only know about that community.

Kaozong: Mmhm . . .

Ntsab Lias: And she touches [taps bench again] on other communities but then like it's like—well I thought was Asian American Communities. Like how come you're not talking about other communities too and you're just talking about mainly this community.

Ntsab Lias expected that in this *Asian American Communities* course, she would be learning about many Asian American ethnic groups. However, she experienced the opposite since content primarily focused on South Asians. Ntsab Lias's experience suggested an inconsistency between the advertised course description and curriculum in practice. Ntsab Lias defended the way her professor had designed her class. As a student, Ntsab Lias understood her professor may not be an expert on other Asian American communities, and therefore could not teach in depth about them. Ntsab Lias's response also implied the limited opportunity to learn about other Asian American groups such as her own Hmong community. Her experience illustrated an institutional gap at Sky University, specifically the need to hire professors with expertise in an array of Asian American communities including the Hmong community. Ntsab Lias's experience exemplified

the centering of certain Asian American communities and the decentering of Hmong people among others within the AAS curriculum.

The desire to learn about Hmong, to have a Hmong space, and a Hmong class, are not only expressed in the interviews, but also in the questionnaire. In the questionnaire, I asked what Sky University should do to support Hmong Students. The majority of the responders (n=8/13) expressed that Sky University should create a Hmong space to support Hmong American students. Although Sky University has many student centers on campus and programs dedicated towards diversity and inclusion, these are not enough. As Responder 1 suggested in the questionnaire, Sky University should "[s]upply a space for Hmong students," or in the words of Responder 8, "giv[e] them a place." Their specific suggestion implied that current spaces on campus are not sufficient to support Hmong American students.

In connecting back to Asian Critical Race Theory, in particular, *Strategic (Anti) Essentialism* needs to be mindful about understanding Asian Americans as a whole and also recognizing their diversity and complexities. In this case, there is an emerging need to de-essentialize Hmong American students from Asians in order to fully comprehend and support them. In an example from Responder 10, he said:

> I believe that Sky University should acknowledge the Hmong population and other small minority groups on campus. If Sky University were able to speak out and give some acknowledgment to the Hmong students at Sky University, I feel like it would give some kind of motivation to these students who sometimes struggle in a tough academic system. Knowing that your school is willing to help is definitely positive to know and to persuade in succeeding.

His response explained his belief that if Sky University "acknowledged" Hmong American students, it could motivate and create positivity for Hmong American students to succeed. Responder 10's response is consistent with scholarship which suggests validation and sense of

belonging within the university helps Students of Color thrive in higher education (Museus et al., 2016; Vue, 2013, 2021).

To implement ways in which Sky University could show validation and belonging for students, Responder 6's response provided an avenue:

> Allow Hmong students (grad, undergrad, etc.) to help teach Hmong history classes so that more students (especially Hmong students) can become aware of who Hmong people are. I feel that the reason why many Hmong students (including myself) do not know sufficient details of the Hmong history is because of the marginalization of Hmong people within American society and even within the Asian category. And growing up many Hmong becomes only aware of the American history taught in grade school, which rarely mentions the Hmong people and what they have contribute to America. A way for Sky University to support Hmong students is to make these opportunities available for students to teach their own people's history, especially for groups like the Hmong.

By identifying Hmong as marginalized within mainstream U.S. American society, Responder 10 advocated for Sky University to "allow Hmong students" to teach Hmong history courses. The implementation of these courses suggests Sky University's support in making Hmong American students visible within the university, while at the same time allowing spaces for Hmong Americans to learn more about who they are. In this regard, her recommendation to have Sky University "allow Hmong students to help teach Hmong history classes" as opposed to the hiring of Hmong professors/faculty is surprising. Yet, perhaps her response may reflect her own experiences at Sky University where the only Hmong-dedicated courses have been student-led and student-initiated and not taught by faculty. Moreover, her response points to Hmong American students' resistant capital to understand the structural limitation in Asian American Studies and at Sky University more broadly.

In using an Asian Critical Race Theory lens, Hmong American students' *Resistant capital* and a Hmong space within Sky University connects with *Asianization* and *Strategic (Anti) Essentialism.* As previously mentioned, *Asianization* refers to how Hmong Americans are racialized as Asian, and seen as a monolithic group which impacts their disparate educational

experiences. In this case, the lack of Hmong courses available suggests the invisibility of Hmong people in Asian American Studies and indicates the lack of recognition of the diversity within Asian ethnic groups. Thus, students' resistant capital of intentionally creating a Hmong-specific course in Asian American Studies and at Sky University provided an opportunity to learn exclusively about Hmong history, culture, and experiences, while understanding that Hmong people in the United States are still considered Asian. The intentionality behind these courses in Asian American Studies—but also for Hmong students—is a form of *Strategic (Anti) Essentialism.* As mentioned earlier, *Strategic (Anti) Essentialism* includes understanding the complexities and nuances between and among Asian Americans and at times may include an exclusive examination of a particular group, in this case, Hmong Americans. Also, as the questionnaire responses and interviews highlight, the students' *Resistant capital* reinforced the necessity of understanding the differences between Asian ethnic groups and the complexities that exist for Hmong American students. Moreover, the Hmong American students' *Resistant cap*ital in identifying and naming what they need for their educational success sets in motion the process of transforming their university and ultimately, their experiences, as I discuss in more depth in the next chapter.

Summary

This chapter presented a counternarrative to the deficit and negative depiction of Hmong American students in comparison to other Asian American ethnic groups. Drawing on specific Asian Critical Race Theory tenets, this chapter illustrated the complex nuances and diversity in Hmong American students' education and the importance of it. Contrary to the deficit narratives of Hmong American students, the findings presented in this chapter depicted the majority of Hmong Americans as thriving in higher education. Based on academic performance, Hmong

American students were generally in “Good Standing” each academic quarter at Sky University. Additionally, the interviews with Hmong American students provided insights to understanding their educational experiences at Sky University. In particular, their interviews shed light on their Community Cultural Wealth including aspirational, navigation, social, and resistant capital; each of these forms of capital were salient in supporting their educational endeavors. For instance, the HSO provided important social capital for many of my participants; they even considered the space their home away from home because it supported them academically and socially.

Although Hmong American students were doing well in terms of their academic performance, their experiences also provided further understanding of the challenges they continually encountered at Sky University. Some of these challenges were related to transitioning and adjusting to Sky University. However, what was salient among the questionnaire and interviews was the necessity for a Hmong space within Sky University. The findings strongly identified the lack of a Hmong space for Hmong American students as a significant institutional gap. In recognizing this institutional gap, Hmong American undergraduate students collaborated to create the Hmong undergraduate student-led course, which is the focus of Chapter 5. Their advocacy and continuation of this Hmong course serve as an initial solution for the creation of a Hmong space at Sky University.

Chapter 5: Hmong American Students Transforming the University

This chapter addresses the second research question of this study, how do Hmong American undergraduates transform their institutional spaces and educational experiences? This "transformation" focuses on Hmong American students as critical agents in shaping and changing the institution, and their own educational experiences to challenge systemic inequality and inequity. As noted by Yosso (2005), ". . . transformative resistant capital includes cultural knowledge of the structures of racism and motivation to transform such oppressive structures" (p. 81). In this case, Hmong American students recognized the injustice in the institutional space (i.e., university) related to Hmong history, culture, experiences, etc. (as previously noted in Chapter 4) and took actions to make those changes in their university.

This chapter contains accounts of what I have witnessed that illustrate Hmong American undergraduates transforming their institutional spaces through creating their own spaces. I first focus on the Hmong Student Organization (Section 5.1), where Hmong American undergraduates center Hmong identity, history, culture, and experiences at Sky University. The second part of this chapter focuses on the undergraduate student-led and taught course, *Introduction to Hmong Culture* (Section 5.2), where Hmong American undergraduates brought their knowledge, experience, and community which legitimized learning Hmong culture and history while simultaneously bringing awareness to the lack of Hmong courses within the university. Likewise, these institutional transformations are interconnected and overlap with their own educational experiences. Therefore, in transforming the institution, students also transform themselves.

Section 5.1: "This is my jam": Hmong Student Organization

Through an AsianCrit lens, the Hmong Student Organization (HSO) functions as a counterspace to whiteness in higher education and to the marginalization of Hmong American students by drawing on a collective experience, identity, and culture to create a Hmong space at Sky University. HSO as an ethnic student organization counters the essentialization of Asians and instead is *Strategically (Anti) Essentialism* (Museus & Iftikar, 2013). By focalizing on Hmong Americans, HSO counters the grouping of Asians as monolithic. In connecting HSO and Community Cultural Wealth, HSO is evidence of students' *Social capital* and *Transformational Resistance capital* to navigate Sky University. The impact that HSO has on Hmong American students was brought about by the officers and members of the organization. Additionally, the officers and members' own educational experiences and trajectory were transformed through their engagement with the university and HSO.

Typically, HSO's general meetings served as avenues to build relationship with HSO officers and members while also disseminating information relevant to Sky University students (e.g., university events, community events, workshops, etc.). As noted in my field notes and audio-recordings (October 2016–November 2017), these meetings were held twice a month in the evening and in a classroom on the Sky University campus. These meetings usually lasted between 1 and 2 hours, starting around 7 p.m. and ending close to 9 p.m. Below is an account of a typical meeting based on a combination of handwritten field notes with audio-recording transcript:

On the evening of October 17, 2017, HSO held their second general meeting of the 2017–2018 academic school year. Ntsab Lias (focal participant and HSO officer) greeted two first-year students in the room. When the meeting was about to start, the HSO officers played a Hmong

song which changed the vibe of the room, making it livelier. Ntsab Lias exclaimed aloud, “This is my jam.” Two more songs played in the background as people formed a line to sign-in for today’s meeting. As everyone settled in, one of the HSO officers introduced himself and mentioned, “First off, we will be doing an ice breaker.” He explained the rules of the activity and did a demonstration. In pairs, members would do “Rock, Paper, Scissors,” and the winner of their round would then choose another partner to do “Rock, Paper, Scissors.” Meanwhile, the person who lost that round would be cheering on the winner of their game and this would create a chain effect of people cheering their person(s). As the number of winners from each round of “Rock, Paper, Scissors” narrowed, the room grew louder and louder with people cheering.

After the ice breaker, many HSO officers took turns announcing upcoming events and programs. For example, HSO’s Mentorship Coordinator introduced the program, Tsev Neeg (translates to family, and is a pseudonym) where younger students paired with an upperclassman who he described as “someone that actually knows the school, has resources, know what they’re doing, and can help freshmen throughout [their] school year like financial aid or resources, GPA-wise, emotional-wise. Since so many of you are away from home, you might miss your parents but then having someone there to talk to, tell your concerns with might help you do better in class.”

Once all announcements had been made, it was time for Slam Jam, where two students had prepared a PowerPoint presentation about themselves to HSO. Since this was the first Slam Jam of the academic year, two HSO officers took the lead in doing the Slam Jams. Both presenters had personal family photos and shared where they were from, their family, their high school experience, hobbies, and if any, their experience at Sky University thus far. The HSO audience were very receptive to learning about the presenters. They cheered, laughed at the

presenters' jokes, and asked questions to learn more about them. Once both presenters finished their Slam Jams, everyone applauded them for their presentations. The presenters would then each choose someone to present at the next general meeting. There was hesitation and nervousness among the members regarding who would be selected. Amy (HSO officer and interviewee participant) described the purpose of Slam Jams to the members: "It's a way to express yourself. You don't really have to do a PowerPoint and it's really for us to get to know ya'll." This process of selecting presenters and presenting Slam Jams would happen throughout the academic school year.

The above account captured how students, especially HSO officers, sought to create a space where new and returning members of HSO would feel comfortable and energized. The routines of the general meetings, especially with an ice breaker in the beginning, provided ample opportunities to meet someone new within the student organization. Moreover, concluding each general meeting with the Slam Jams provided opportunities for the non-presenting members to connect to the presenters' life and educational journeys. These ways of scaffolded community bonding were intentional and important in creating a place in the university where Hmong American students could turn for community and support. Further, this general meeting supports previous scholars' findings on how to assist Hmong American students from academics to social support (Vue, 2013, 2021; Xiong & Lam, 2013). In this study, Hmong American students were cognizant of the challenges their peers and they themselves experience at the university. Hmong American students' recognition in creating a program within their student organization, in addition to the types of academic and social support they can offer each other, aligns with the factors that contribute to overcoming academic challenges (Xiong & Lam, 2013).

Section 5.1.1: Home Away From Home: What HSO Means to Hmong American Students

For many of the Hmong American students at Sky University, having a Hmong institutional space, HSO, was important for their sense of community and motivation towards graduation. In my interviews with students about their educational experiences and the student organizations they were involved in at Sky University, many referenced HSO and provided explicit examples of what HSO meant to them.

Finding a "home away from home"

The transition from home to college could be challenging for many first-year college students. Their first year may be the first time they moved away from their family and community, to a place where they would have to create/find their community in their university. This was Ka's experience when she first came to Sky University:

> **Ka:** I think it was kinda hard for me at first because I was so use to being around Hmong people like Fresno [...] And then I thought I was the only Hmong person in my dorm […] I was talking to some of my friends and they're, "Oh yeah so and so lives in that dorm too." I was like, "Oh, okay." But I never met any Hmong people in my dorm. And I guess it kinda made me miss Hmong people just because I wasn't around them so much. And I think that's one of the reasons why I joined HSO so I can surround myself around my people and my community.

Ka's description of her first year at Sky University provided a glimpse of what many first-year students experienced. Ka had been used to being in a town like Fresno, where there was a large Hmong population, but she experienced the opposite when she moved away for college. Ka's search for "my people and community" in Sky University—from her dormitory to the student organization—suggest how much HSO meant to her, to be surrounded with people who shared an ethnic identity, culture, language, and history. Even though Ka's goal at Sky University was to obtain her undergraduate degree, she still yearned for a place that reminded her of home—her Hmong community.

Similarly, Chi Meng shared his search for "a home away from home" by making a distinction between HSO and the Coalition for Southeast Asians (CSEA), a university student-run program.

> **Chi Meng:** My first impression of Hmong Student Organization was that it was a pretty cool Hmong group. But I wasn't too sure if I was going to stay there because it wasn't what I was searching for. That was my first impression of it.
>
> **Kaozong:** When you say what you were searching for did you know—
>
> **Chi Meng:** When I say what I was searching for, it was more of just a place where I felt like home.
>
> **Kaozong:** Ah I see. Okay. You were searching for home.
>
> **Chi Meng:** A home away from home I guess […] And then when I went to the CSEA, my first impression of it was like, "Wow. This is a home away from home. This is exactly what I've been looking for." However, I found that the longer I stayed with HSO and CSEA, their roles flipped […] the longer I got to know [HSO] the more I felt as if this was home […] And the more I hung out with CSEA, I felt as if, "Why do I feel as if this is all an illusion where as if we're all just playing this game of trying to be friendly and all." […] I had legitimate reasons as to why I was feeling like that. There were times when they [referring to CSEA] hosted a lot of big and little sib stuff [...] We were just like, "Wow. This is a big and little sib event but none of the bigs are here it's just us littles." They did a very bad job of retaining their members, of trying to keep them in. Whereas for HSO I felt as if they aren't as well known and everything. And they don't come off as a good first impression. But the longer you get to know them and if you stick with it. You find that the people there are very loving and caring and they don't have to act in a way where as if they're loving and caring you just end up loving and caring for them for who they are rather than the CSEA people who I felt as if they had to force this impression—
>
> **Kaozong:** Uh Huh
>
> **Chi Meng:** But after a while. Then you feel as if it's very inauthentic.

The key difference between HSO and CSEA was HSO was a student-run and student-funded organization and CSEA was a university student-run program. CSEA was not composed of officers like HSO but university undergraduate student staff paid to plan, organize, and maintain the program and student center. CSEA had a physical and permanent space on campus designated for CSEA programming. Meanwhile as a student organization, HSO officers were

dedicating and volunteering their time to carry out the goals of the student organization without a permanent physical place on campus. HSO had to continually reserve rooms on campus for their meetings and would meet at their officers' homes to plan out events.

While HSO and CSEA took on different forms, they provided similar academic services like mentorship programs between Sky University upperclassmen and lowerclassmen, retreats, and workshops. Unlike HSO, CSEA did not have registered members but participants in their program. Chi Meng misunderstood that CSEA was not a student organization and so did not have members; instead, they have participants. Additionally, a key difference between HSO and CSEA was the majority of the members in HSO were of Hmong descent (with exception of a few), while CSEA had participants who identified as Southeast Asians/Southeast Asian Americans. Despite differences between HSO and CSEA, the feelings of searching for a "home away from home" drew Chi Meng to them and ultimately, influenced why he chose to stay or leave. Both Ka and Chi Meng's excerpts illustrated a yearning for a community who not only looked like them, but also understood and truly cared for their well-being. In other words, they valued the authenticity of the community. For many of my participants, HSO was their community—their home away from home.

"Without the community, I would have dropped out"

This subheading was taken from Amy to highlight how HSO had motivated her to continue in her education. While there were many students, who referenced how HSO had ignited their passion for sports (e.g., Janice), and helped them thrive in their major (e.g., Ntxhia Mim), I chose to focus on Amy because of the depth with which she explained the connections between HSO and her experiences. While participating in extracurricular activities may deter students from their academics, Amy shared how her experience was the opposite:

> **Amy:** I think to motivate me is to also do community organization and do something that I like because if I'm just going to school and back, then I'm just gonna be really bored. If I just do that I would have already dropped out. […] 'Cause there's nothing to look forward to and I think that's why I really enjoyed this quarter. […] Every week I get to direct the culture show. I see them four hours a week, two days a week and that's something that drives me like, "Okay, I have to finish my paper because then tomorrow I'm busy doing this."

Amy also made the distinction between HSO and her family, and how each supported her differently:

> **Amy:** I think without the community, I would have already dropped out so. My parents don't understand, "Oh. Why are you part of a club? Why do you have to do this and that?" But it's like, "Cause I like it" [laughs]. And it's fun and it motivates me. My parents are supportive but then, they're not. They can't physically be here and they can't support my social life. They can only support me financially and educationally. HSO definitely did help support my social life.

The excerpt above shed light on the nuanced ways that both family and HSO supported her education. While Amy's family supported her pursuit of attaining a higher education, they were not with her "physically" in Sky University. Like many of the students mentioned earlier, HSO served as their community, which in this case for Amy embodied the "social life" that she needed. Her involvement in HSO since her first year—and at the time of the interview, as the Hmong Cultural Show Director—revealed HSO's impact upon her own transformation.

Amy also reminded me that while she was actively involved in HSO, she did not forget about her role as a student. She discussed how her involvement in HSO had helped her "prioritize [her] education":

> **Amy:** I feel like sometimes I do value more community versus some of my classes that I don't really care for. 'Cause yeah, I learn about that and then I take the test and then that's it. But here, I'm always learning. I'm always learning how to direct in a different way. I'm always learning how to plan these conferences in a different way. Reaching out to different people. Fund raising and all that. I'm always learning something new versus like a classroom. We just go to lecture. We just do the same thing every day. So, I feel like sometimes I do prioritize community work.
>
> **Kaozong:** Mmhm . . .

> **Amy:** But like I DO know that I need to also prioritize my education because if I'm no longer a student, I can't plan these events. So, I think THAT actually drives me a lot to do better. I definitely think that community organization and all that drives me to do better 'cause like this whole week and last week if I didn't go to class then I'm in the library studying.

What I took away from Amy were the intricate ways HSO had very profoundly shaped her educational experience—keeping her in school, motivated, and enjoying what she was learning. In addition, through taking on leadership roles in HSO she was also developing career skills that would be beneficial post-graduation such as funding, organizing, and coordinating events. Amy's experience served as a prime example and captured how her participation in this student organization had impacted her. Moreover, her experience reinforced the importance of student organizations as a form of social capital at Sky University (as previously mentioned in Chapter 4) (Yosso, 2005).

"Help me be who I am today": HSO Workshops

Each quarter, Hmong American students, alumni, and community members offered workshops in HSO covering different Hmong topics such as history or culture. Sometimes these workshops would happen right after HSO's general meetings and sometimes they would not. The scheduling of these workshops often depended on who was facilitating the workshop and the availability of the officers. All the workshop facilitators were volunteers and may have been approached by one of the HSO officers or volunteered themselves to do a workshop. In my experience, I had been a participant observer and have led my own workshop for HSO. A few of my focal participants also created and led these workshops as well.

For example, one of my focal participants, Chi Meng, did a workshop for HSO on November 28, 2017. Per his request, I did not audio-record his workshop and relied heavily on my handwritten field notes. As he stood in front of room, he introduced himself and announced that he "plans to teach a Hmong class" during spring quarter of this academic school year and the

purpose of this workshop was to "bring interest" to his future class. He passed around half-sheets of white paper, lined papers, and markers to all the participants in the room. He explained that the concept for his workshop was inspired by our Hmong Story Cloth[5] which "originated from the refugee camp." He then connected the idea of sharing our stories and that "we have our own struggle." He continued: "Even if you don't speak Hmong or know Hmong culture, you're still a Hmong son or daughter. For me that's something that I had to really think about." Chi Meng shared the story of how one of his Hmong friends had invited him to attend Hmong events but he wouldn't want to go. So that friend asked him, "Why don't you want to go?" To which Chi Meng replied, "It's funny, how I prioritize everything but my Hmong culture."

After sharing his story, he wrote on the chalkboard, "Write/Draw an experience that had an impact on you." Chi Meng reminded the audience that the story he shared earlier was an example of an experience that had impacted him because his friend asserted that he, "didn't care about Hmong people." Then folks in the room started writing/drawing their story. Amy asked Chi Meng, "What if I don't identify as Hmong?" Chi Meng replied that you don't need to identify as Hmong, but you must use the markers and paper to write your story. I recognized that Amy posed this question to Chi Meng because there were people in the room who were not Hmong, but they were present. Her question also opened the door for students in the room who do not identify as Hmong but could still participate in this workshop. By 8:30 p.m., Chi Meng had everyone come back together and asked them, "Can you share your story?"

One person shared a similar story as Chi Meng on how Hmong culture was of the "least priority" to them, too. Although they did not speak Hmong, by being exposed to the HSO

[5] Hmong Story Cloth is a form of paj ntaub (flower cloth) embroidery that tells the story of Hmong people's lives and folktales. These story cloths emerged in the Thai refugee camps and was also a way for Hmong refugees to earn an income by selling their story cloths.

Cultural Show and coming to Sky University, they acknowledged how they "became more aware of [Hmong] culture." Chi Meng chimed in, "He brings up a good point [about] los[ing] Hmong culture."

Next, Ntsab Lias shared her drawing of a Hmong woman with a Hmong hat. She explained that her drawing represented her as a Hmong woman, who spoke up against everything that was expected of her. For example, in high school she had to come home immediately after school, and couldn't go out on the weekends. In response, though, Ntsab Lias rebelled: "I went out and did everything I wasn't supposed to do." She shared that her journey "help[ed] me be who I am today." She then pointed to another image on her drawing which was of a xwm kab (a small altar with incense). "For me, this began the year of struggles with the Hmong American idea of fate and that you have choices and control of your life." She explained how Hmong culture believed in destiny, but in Western American culture, it is about one's fate and the choices one makes. She concluded and asked if folks were interested in hearing more about this topic, they should talk to her.

Amy shared next: "I just wrote words. Elders. Growing up as a female in the Hmong community, [I] was looked down upon." She told the story of her grandma and a conversation about marriage, which led Amy to conclude, "I'm going to get a job. Elders think females can't do shit." At that point, as a student at Sky University and active in the HSO, Amy stated her desire to "empower others."

After folks shared their stories, Chi Meng reflected, "Individually, our story, our Hmong story cloth connects with a lot of people—not just one. These individual papers [referring to the white half-sheet papers] are an accumulation of our Hmong experience here [at Sky University]." He asked folks to pass their stories to the front of the room so they could be taped into one huge

Hmong story cloth. He then asked them to use the lined paper that was passed out earlier to answer these two questions: (a) Is it important to have a Hmong class? And (b) Do you think learning about Hmong is important or not? Why?

One person asked what he planned on doing with this collective story that they pasted together into a story cloth. Chi Meng replied, "I plan to ask the Asian American Studies Department. But I'm going to see if they [will] allow it." Chi Meng was referring to having the collective story cloth hung somewhere in the hall of the Asian American Studies Department.

These workshops that students and community members created for HSO provided a space for students to reflect on their experiences while simultaneously (re)connect back to their Hmong roots. Through an AsianCrit approach, these workshops aligned with *(Re)Constructive History* (Iftikar & Museus, 2018; Museus & Iftikar, 2013) which operates in two parts. The first is recognition of Hmong history as limited in Sky University, and the second is making visible Hmong history at Sky University. As previously demonstrated in Chapter 4, the opportunities to learn about Hmong history were limited, and thus this workshop provided a space within the university where Hmong history was centered. Specifically, Chi Meng's workshop was a form of *(Re)Constructive History* where he already recognized the limited space to learn about Hmong history, which prompted this workshop that could raise interest in the specialized Hmong American course that he planned to teach that subsequent spring quarter.

Additionally, he began his workshop with the history of the Hmong Story Cloth and where it "originated from," which made visible the history of how these Hmong Story Cloths came to be. Moreover, his workshop also incorporated elements of *Intersectionality* as expressed by Museus and Iftikar (2013), where multiple identities intersected and shaped students' experiences. In Chi Meng's personal story and from the participants who shared their stories

aloud, it was evident that *Intersectionality* was present in their experiences. For example, Amy's story about being a Hmong woman and being looked down upon by her elders highlights how gender has shaped her experience and as previously noted in Chapter 4, how her gender shaped her educational aspirations. Lastly, Chi Meng's plan to display their collective story cloth from this workshop in the Asian American Studies Department hall suggested where he deemed Hmong history fitting at Sky University. These workshops were also the Hmong American students' attempt to create a visible space for themselves and in the Asian American Studies Department, similar to the Hmong American students in Vue's (2021) study.

Serving the Community Outside of Sky University

While Sky University Hmong American students created HSO for the Hmong American students at their university, HSO also served the broader Hmong community outside of Sky City. HSO had a variety of events (including fundraising), and community outreach to bring non-Sky University Hmong American students and their community to their university. These events included the Higher Education Conference designed for high school students and their family members, and fundraising events opened to the community to support this conference. In this section, I chose to focus on Amy, the Director for HSO's Cultural Show, and her vision to highlight how intentional HSO students were to bring Hmong culture, ethnic clothes, identity, music, and community to the university. The Cultural Show focused on Hmong experiences through a musical play, which was directed and written by an HSO student. This event was held in Sky University, and was free and open to the public. In an interview, Amy elaborated on her perspective:

> **Amy**: This is the first time I've ever written a Hmong play at all and I think it's also something very important that HSO needs to bring the community together. I honestly don't really know what Chao's purpose of the culture show is. But I feel like my purpose is you're putting on a show, you're getting the Hmong community to come out and watch

> the show right. It's gonna be like the TALK of HSO for a while and I hope that comes across in the play and that can also bring out conversations within the community and we can like figure out how to resolve that.

Amy's intention to use the Cultural Show as a mechanism to bring the Hmong American community into university spaces was intentional. For example, they had invited Hmong American artists and dance groups from the local area to perform during the intermissions. There were also family members, HSO students, Sky University students and alumni, and many more who came to watch the Cultural Show. Since Amy's Cultural Show was a four-hour event, HSO also provided free snacks and raffle tickets for the attendees, too. Amy also referenced the earlier Director, Chao, which illustrated this Cultural Show as a student-initiated and student-imagined space to integrate into the university. In other words, this Cultural Show utilized students' Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005) to create a public space within Sky University that countered their marginalization and visibility on campus. The Cultural Show allowed for artistic ways to highlight topics that may have been unspoken and/or controversial within the Hmong American community. In Amy's play, she focused on a love story that took place prior to Hmong people's arrival to the United States; key topics spanned orphans, forced marriages, and domestic violence. In connection to AsianCrit (Museus & Iftikar, 2013), this Cultural Show served to (re)construct Hmong history, specifically the lived experiences of Hmong people through story, theory, and praxis to bring awareness to these issues through art. Such retelling of these stories through the art by Hmong Americans demonstrates their resilience and the possibilities for educational transformation (Vue, 2019).

Section 5.1.2: The Impacts and Struggles of Hmong American Students in HSO

Section 5.1 focuses on what HSO meant to students and how HSO transformed Sky University by centering Hmong history, culture, and experiences, especially the way HSO served Hmong American students and the events they coordinated to bring the Hmong community to

the university. In this subsection, I focus on the lived experiences of students, in particular how HSO transformed their educational experience and also their struggles and challenges in HSO.

Prior to Being HSO Members

Throughout the interviews, what surprised me was the connection these students had with HSO prior to enrolling at Sky University. One of the annual events that HSO organized was Exploring College (pseudonym), where high school students shadowed Hmong American undergraduates at Sky University for a few days. In this program, high school students were exposed to college life, courses, and interactive workshops coordinated by HSO. The other event was HSO's Higher Education Conference, where high school students and family members receive an introduction and preparation for college. In my study, many of my participants had been high school students who had attended either one or both of the events hosted by HSO. As high schoolers, these experiences influenced them to pursue their higher education at Sky University.

For Jackson, HSO's Higher Education Conference was not the only Hmong Higher Education conference he attended. He had attended many of these conferences when he was in high school. He explained, "I already knew that college was an option, but another thing that motivated me to go more into higher education were educational conferences." He listed the various events—organized by Hmong Student Associations across Sky University's sister campuses—he had attended and the impact these experiences had on him. "Through [going to conferences], it motivated me more to go to college. I was able to get a taste of which college I wanted to go to specifically." In Jackson's experience, it was clear that HSO's programming was not unique to Sky University, but occurred in many other Hmong Student Associations throughout the regional university system. These similar programs suggest that the Hmong

ethnic student organizations at the different university campuses recognize the importance of exposing Hmong American high school students to the possibilities of college. Moreover, the community outreach that HSO does beyond Sky University's campus does indeed play a role in recruiting folks from the Hmong American community to the institution. For students like Fue, Ntsab Lias, and Ka, it was these outreach efforts that drew them to Sky University. As Ntsab Lias said, "I wanted to come to Sky City, too, and what kind of pulled me in was the Hmong Student Organization."

As HSO Members and/ Officers

In my study, I learned how students in HSO had transformed the educational experiences of many Hmong American students. Through HSO, many of my participants were able to learn about themselves and their passion, and obtain skills they would never have imagined. Janice described HSO:

> **Janice:** They're like my family away from home that's how I view them because they're like one of the strongest support systems that I've discovered and all of us [laughs] we don't match up [laughs].
>
> **Kaozong:** [laughs]
>
> **Janice:** But we always help out and it's funny the different personalities. Tou and Ger [laughs]
>
> **Kaozong:** Oh [laughs]
>
> **Janice:** They're like the total opposite of me [laughs] but they're like some of my favorite people in HSO kind of like they balance me out and I guess it's kind of that's why like they're kind of like my family too. You might not think alike or like even match perfectly but they're still there and they still support you and they make you better and stronger and also something about HSO is it made me more courageous. I don't think that I would have ever been able to do some of the things I do if I didn't become an officer in that club [referring to HSO].

The way Janice described HSO as a family and also with different personality, brought forth how much HSO meant to her. Similarly, to what one would have imagined with a family, where you

are supported and able to grow, HSO served that role for Janice. Her strength and courage grew from being part of HSO. At the time of the interview, Janice told me she would be participating in HSO's annual fundraising event, the Gala, their annual retreat and also the cultural show. Specifically, for the cultural show, I watched Janice in her role as one of the minor characters, performing in front of a crowd, wearing Hmong clothes and singing some lines in Hmong.

As for Ntxhia Mim, the folks in HSO helped her reconnect with her passion and ultimately supported her in finishing up her last and final year at Sky University.

> **Kaozong:** Since you know you're going to be graduating so like what do you believe has contributed to your um.
>
> **Ntxhia Mim:** Towards graduation?
>
> **Kaozong:** Uh huh . . .
>
> **Ntxhia Mim:** I would say it has to do with a lot with finding the right group of family here and HSO is a big part of that. The reason why HSO is a big part of that is because a lot of my close friends here. I try joining other orgs, but I realized that the one that I'm the closest to is from HSO and the reason why is because we're Hmong, we're just able to connect more relate more with each other . . . I'm also in a sorority but most people in the sorority are Chinese and I couldn't really relate to most of the things that they could do or talk about but I did try. At one point in my sophomore year, I did feel like I didn't have anyone here, I had no support system. All I did was work and that's why I decided to join my sorority because I needed friends in my life. So when I went over, out of all the girls in the house, I talked to Chao the most because we found common interest which was Hmong history, Hmong textiles, Hmong clothing, Hmong anything Hmong [laughs].
>
> **Kaozong:** [laughs]
>
> **Ntxhia Mim:** And she was a part of the [officers] for HSO for that year so she would tell me about her struggles with HSO and it made me want to take part in HSO. more and I would say that because I decided to take part in HSO my junior year, which is the year that I am most proud of because I became more established, I networked more and I found a sense of community.

Ntxhia Mim's excerpt highlight an important distinction between being racialized as Asian and being Hmong. While Ntxhia Mim's sorority were composed of folks who were Asian, specifically Chinese, she was not able to relate to them at a deeper level. Her experience

demonstrate what previous researchers have demonstrated in dismantling the idea that Asians are a monolithic group (Iftikar & Museus, 2018; Lee, 2005; Lee et al., 2017; Vue, 2013). When Ntxhia Mim was hanging out with Chao, she was able to connect and share common interests and passion for Hmong history, textiles, etc. Through meeting Chao, an active member of HSO, Ntxhia Mim's educational experience changed.

Struggle and Learning in HSO

While HSO transformed Sky University's institutional space and the experiences of Hmong American students, HSO faced many challenges. For HSO officers, while they were able to create institutional spaces for Hmong American students within Sky University, they also struggled balancing their academic work and their commitment to the student organization.

> **Jackson:** Last year, I was a member so it was really fun 'cause you just go to participate. This year, as an officer of an org., I find it really draining 'cause I have to participate in everything as an officer. I have to go to weekly meetings and then I have another meeting or if I actually become more involved, I find it a lit bit more tiresome. Last year, it was like, "Oh, I'm just a member. I'm going to have fun and enjoy."

I asked him to clarify if being in the student organization was also draining, and how that impacts how well he does in his classes.

> **Jackson:** Yes because of my extra curriculars, I just couldn't focus. I barely studied and when I came back from the retreat, crammed a lot of information but it still wasn't enough for me to do well. And then even this quarter, I'm doing better than I thought I would. So I put less prioritization on the organizations, but then it makes me feel bad because I'm an officer.

Balancing between academics and community work was a struggle that some other students experienced first-hand. Jackson made a distinction between being a member, where you only attend and were able to enjoy the events organized by HSO, and being an officer, where you must not only attend but plan the events, while simultaneously staying on top of your school work. Jackson's reference to "barely studied" and "crammed a lot of information" shed light on the efforts it took for students to create these institutional spaces. As an officer, students must

learn to balance between their academics and community work. While finding that balance can be a struggle, if students are able to do it then it can become a very important life and career skill.

In addition to balancing community work and school, some students may choose to prioritize their community work over their school. At the extreme, there may be students like Ntsab Lias who risked everything for their student organization.

> **Ntsab Lias:** During the summer into my second year, me and my co-coordinator, we worked our ass off to try to fund raise money for the conferences. And I think I'm those people who just get really addicted to the community [giggles] and who's willing to risk hella shit.
>
> **Kaozong:** Mmhm . . .
>
> **Ntsab Lias:** And so during the summer, I spent HELLA money and these were moneys that I fucken loaned [giggles].
>
> **Kaozong:** [GASP]
>
> **Ntsab Lias:** These were LOAN, you know.

In order to carry out the events/projects HSO had, fundraising has always been very important. In this interview, Ntsab Lias revealed she herself took out loans to support the conference. However, to what extent did the other members of the student organization know or were aware of this, I am not sure. Her usage of "addiction" and "risk hella shit" suggest the extremes that some, such as herself may choose to prioritize the student organization over their school work and personal finances. The struggle between balancing and not overdoing community work were important to sustain a healthy status as a student, both academically and financially.

While HSO served Hmong American students, HSO was not a good fit for all Hmong American students as in the case of Fue. Similarly, to many of the participants in my study, Fue chose to enroll in Sky University because he attended HSO's Higher Education Conference as a high school student.

> **Fue:** So I came [HSO's Higher Education Conference] and I was like, "Wow, these people are cool." And then I got here and I really got to know them. My relationship with them is still good! But I . . . went to a lot of their parties and oh man it was bad. […] I was like, "Oh man, this is not how I would want my younger siblings to see me. This is not how I would want them to do."

While Fue initially attended HSO, he stopped going because he started associating HSO with parties. However, an important note to consider was that HSO the student organization did not host those parties, but rather the people within the student organization did. Although Fue and the students in HSO have a shared ethnic identity and language, the social activities outside of HSO did not align with him. Instead, as previously mentioned in Chapter 4, it was the Asian Christian Student Association (ACSA) that aligned with Fue best through his faith and goals that he strived for at Sky University.

Despite Hmong American students choosing to be members of HSO or not, student organizations were central to their experiences. What was salient throughout these organizations was finding a community on campus that would help you thrive. For Fue, while HSO did play a role in recruiting him to Sky University, the community that supported his academic and social endeavors was not HSO, but rather ACSA. As mentioned earlier, these student organizations were illustrative of the *Social capital* pertinent to students' success in education (Yosso, 2005).

Section 5.2: Transforming Institutional Space Through the Hmong Undergraduate Course

In order to place Hmong at the center of institutional spaces, Hmong American undergraduates utilized the Undergraduate Student Teacher Program (USTP) to create a course specifically about Hmong culture. As part of my research, I observed a class in Spring 2017, *Introduction to Hmong Culture* taught by my focal participant, Chao, who utilized USTP. While USTP may seem disconnected to HSO, they were in fact very connected because this program enabled Sky University undergraduates to teach their own undergraduate courses. Chao, the Hmong undergraduate student-instructor I observed, was a member and previous officer of HSO

and had also utilized the organization as a platform to advertise her undergraduate student-led and taught course. Additionally, many of her enrolled students and attendees (individuals not enrolled in the course but would visit/audit) were members or had affiliations with HSO. Similarly, Chi Meng who was aspiring to teach his own undergraduate student-led and taught course, had also used HSO to get people interested in his upcoming course. Chi Meng had a workshop in order to gauge how many people would be interested in taking a course that emphasized Hmong culture and experiences. Thus, Hmong American students, especially members of HSO and HSO itself, were crucial in the establishment of the Hmong undergraduate student-led and taught courses.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, USTP was a program that began in 2016 where undergraduate students could create and teach an undergraduate course of their choice at their university. However, the undergraduate student instructor who would teach this student-led and taught course had to secure a faculty supervisor and obtain approval from the sponsoring department. Additionally, the undergraduate student instructor would also have to complete an independent study course with the faculty supervisor before teaching. Once all these conditions have been met, the undergraduate student-led and taught course would then be published along with the department's courses for that quarter for Sky University students to register. These undergraduate student-led and taught courses were not letter-grade courses, but pass/no pass where enrolled students could earn credits. Lastly, there had to be at least five students who enrolled in the course in order for it to be offered.

Moreover, as mentioned in Chapter 4, the AAS department and faculty was also a space where some Hmong American students felt the most connected to their Hmong identity and history despite AAS' limitations. These undergraduate student-led and taught courses were one

form of transformative resistance (Yosso, 2005). They made Hmong people visible as part of their response to the marginalization they experienced within AAS and the university. In addition to a Hmong course, what the students were learning and how they were learning about Hmong history and culture added layers understanding this transformational institutional space and their educational experience. For instance, as I will discussed further in this section is the inclusion of Hmong parents sharing their knowledge of Hmong culture with students in this class which also filled in gaps in what they knew about their own Hmong history and culture. In highlighting the multi-layer institutional spaces, I discuss the undergraduate course and the inspirational legacy it gives to the next generation of Hmong American students.

Introduction to Hmong Culture **Course**

As mentioned in Chapter 3, the first Hmong undergraduate student-led and student-taught course was taught in 2016 and it focused on Hmong culture and language. At that time, Chao was in her second to last year at Sky University and served as a volunteer undergraduate teaching assistant to that Hmong undergraduate-student instructor. Prior to being an undergraduate teaching assistant, Chao had always had a strong interest in Hmong culture, language, and history. She aspired to become an elementary school teacher who taught Hmong to her students. Chao was also an active member of HSO and served in many leadership roles there. For instance, she had been the Cultural Coordinator who organized HSO events that were related to Hmong culture. She also created Sky University's first Hmong Musical Cultural Show that invited not only HSO members and Sky University community, but also the broader Hmong community (e.g., parents, siblings, etc.) from neighboring cities.

Through being a teaching assistant in that first course, Amy came to a realization about her educational experiences at Sky University. She realized that she should "take advantage of

what's really in the university […] Your college experience it's really what you make of it and you just have to find it and I think I kind of found it this year" (Interview, March 14, 2017). With this philosophy as her guide, Amy took on the role of the undergraduate instructor during her final undergraduate year at Sky University. By then, she was also immersed in carrying out an independent research project with another Hmong American undergraduate under the supervision of Sky University faculty members. In designing her course, she focused on Hmong history and myths, as well as contemporary Hmong culture. The course *Introduction to the Hmong Culture* was designed as a 2-unit pass/no pass class.

Structure of the Class. The goals of Chao's class were to analyze Hmong culture through history and myth starting in China and Southeast Asia to the United States. Similar to the first Hmong undergraduate student-taught and student-led course, Chao also had a volunteer undergraduate teaching assistant to support her in this role. She had 18 enrolled students and a few students who audited or visited her class. They met every Tuesday and Thursday for 50 minutes. The room had a max occupancy of 41 with chalkboards, PowerPoint projector and overhead projector (see Figure 5.1 for classroom illustration).

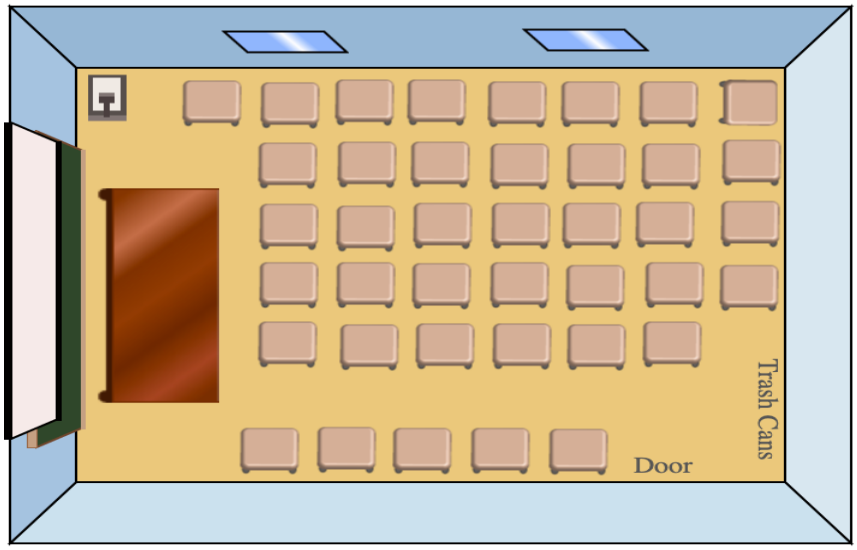

Figure 5.1. Classroom Illustration.

Chao's lectures consisted of PowerPoint presentations, though at times she would write on the chalkboard, use the overhead projector, or bring props to show her students. Each week, students learned different topics such as shamanism, family/clan structure, weddings, funerals, New Year Celebrations, music, fashion, etc. Chao designed her Tuesday lectures to focus on the historical and mystical background of Hmong customs and rituals, whereas Thursdays explained how those customs and rituals have changed.

For example, during the week focused on New Year Celebrations, her Tuesday lecture was on Hmong New Year Celebrations and what that looked like historically, and then on Thursday she discussed how Hmong New Year was celebrated in the United States. As an example of contemporary Hmong New Year celebrations, she showed a video montage of a Hmong New Year Celebration in North Carolina. She also emphasized that historically Hmong New Year was celebrated within the home, but in the United States, attending these larger Hmong New Year gatherings at the fairgrounds (for example) had become a ritual. In addition,

the Hmong New Years in the United States had also functioned more like a business. Different groups oversaw and competed with each other as they organized the multiple Hmong New Year celebration events across the United States. For instance, the controversy in Fresno, California where Hmong non-profit organizations competed with each other to secure the Fresno Fairground location to host the Hmong New Year Festival. Specifically, a new non-profit organization called *Hmong Cultural New Year Inc* outbid the previous Hmong non-profit organization, *Hmong International New Year*, who had previously held onto this location for many, many years. Additionally, there was another non-profit organization, *Hmong 18 Clans* who hosts their own Hmong New Year Festival in Fresno, California, too. Structuring her Tuesday and Thursday classes in this way helped Chao make explicit connections between the past and present, and how much has changed or not changed.

Centering Hmong Identity, Culture, and Experiences in the Classroom

In addition to creating a space within the university, the Hmong course also centered Hmong ways of knowing and experiences. Hmong ethnicity should be considered an umbrella term: there is diversity in Hmong people when it comes to dialects, clothing, history, experiences, etc. In the ten weeks I observed the student-initiated and student-taught class by Chao, I witnessed her centering Hmong identity, culture, and experience in her classroom. She did not take on an authoritative approach to teaching, but rather a co-constructive approach in thinking and building the knowledge/history gaps about Hmong people (see subsection Classroom Space as Community Space for details). From her syllabus to her lectures, everything contained Hmong ways of knowing and cultural repertoires. This course built upon Chao's understanding of Hmong history and culture that had been informed by her own Hmong identity, experiences, her ancestor knowledge from her family, and her own research.

Classroom Space as Community Space

As I sat in *Introduction to Hmong Culture*, I witnessed how this course functioned as an academic space that brought the Hmong community into the classroom. Chao's approach to who could be in the classroom learning and sharing their knowledge suggested that her classroom was also a community space, even though she never used that term herself. Likewise, her students themselves were very receptive to her opening their classroom to students who were not registered in the class and/or were not Sky University students. For example, on April 12, 2017, the HSO at Sky University had their annual Exploring College program (pseudonym), which provided high school students—the majority of whom were Hmong—a hands-on experience on what it was like to be a college student. The high school students were paired with at least one Sky University student in HSO. Given that Chao's class was fairly small with 18 enrolled students, it was very easy to notice new faces in the room. Chao allowed her students who were mostly part of HSO to bring their high school students to her class. I was surprised to note that while the high school students were in the class, Chao did not give them any special attention. Rather, Chao treated each of the participants in the class the same, as usual.

Moreover, she had made invitations to Hmong community members to share their expertise and knowledge with her and her students. In my meeting with Chao on April 4, 2017, she shared her plans for the class. In particular, she had invited two guest speakers who she hoped would present in the class. One guest presenter was a young Hmong qeej master who taught qeej, a sacred Hmong wind instrument. The other was a Hmong alum of Sky University who came to share her experience as a Shaman in training. Chao's choices to include Hmong community members, including a Sky University alumna, showed how important it was for her

to have her students see the connections from community to the classroom. To note, however, I was not able to attend these sessions.

Beyond Chao's initiative to bring the community to the class, her students also did the same in bringing the community to her and their peers. During Week 8 of the quarter, one of Chao's enrolled students invited her father, Bee (pseudonym), and mother, Paj (pseudonym), to visit the class. That student's parents paid for their own university parking permit and sat in the 50-minute class, listening to Chao's lectures. They first visited on Monday, May 15, 2017, but unfortunately I was not there to witness their first day. However, I saw them on their second visit on May 17, 2017, where Chao lectured about Hmong weddings. She explained what the wedding process looked like and reviewed many of the important key roles in the wedding. As Chao lectured and went through her PowerPoint presentation slides, she also answered students' questions. Before moving to the next part of her presentation, she paused and asked, "Any other comments?" Her question opened the opportunity for people in the class to chime in, to which Bee, the visiting father, politely did.

The following exchange highlights the community knowledge, where Bee shared what he knew with Chao and her students.

Bee: I think that on the two previous slides, the first, thov txim (sorry).

Chao: [Goes through her presentation and stops at the slide Bee was referring to.]

Bee: Yeah, that one there. I just sort of wanna . . . I don't know make a suggestion that I think the second-to-last one here, "tub tuav cawv" it should have been "tub teej cawv"

Chao: Oh yeah. Okay.

Bee: Yeah. I just wanna—yeah, because "tuav" meaning holding, "teej" means [pauses]

Chao: —Pouring

Bee: —Pouring into the

Chao: —okay.

[Bee also made another suggestion but I have omitted it in order to stay consistent with this discussion on tuav and teej]

Bee: But I think definitely the second-to-the-last there should have been—

Chao: —Teej

Bee: —Just for future reference you might just wanna use instead of like holding use pouring.

The interview script, combined with field notes shown above, suggest that although Bee was hesitant to comment on the Hmong words Chao had used for this specific role, it was important for him that she and her students knew and used the most appropriate words that best describe the role she had explained. Generally, during the wedding this role would be given to a male individual to oversee the drinks. After Bee explained the definitions and differences between "tuav" (to hold) and "teej" (to pour) to Chao and her students, Chao was able to understand his suggestion and the reasons behind it. She was very receptive to his suggestion because eight minutes later she used the word "teej" in "tub teej cawv"(shown below) without any hesitation when she continued lecturing about the later parts of a Hmong wedding.

Chao: And this is where the tub teej cawv, okay the beer holder boy comes and pours the people's shots or beer or wine or whatever. So once that all settles down, the next step is for the groom and the groomsmen to kowtow and this is important for the guys as well […]

In this example, Chao used the suggestion from the parent "teej" meaning to pour, which shows that she understands the term, "teej" and how to use it. Although she uses the word "beer holder" in English right after saying "tub teej cawv," it makes sense since she is speaking in English and says " the beer holder boy comes and pours." It should also be noted that "cawv" does not directly translate to beer but is a broad term for alcohol. Chao's usage of both "teej" (pour) in

Hmong and "holder" and "pours" in English demonstrated her language process and how she had conceptualized/understood Hmong and English to integrate what Bee had suggested.

Another example of community knowledge is highlighted below during the discussion on weddings and siv ceeb. A siv ceeb is a black-and-white striped cloth that is usually adorned and layered on top of txoj phuam, the purple Hmong turbans/hats. The siv ceeb is usually worn only by Hmong women who were single and unmarried. Additionally, the siv ceeb also plays a part in Hmong weddings and is wrapped around an umbrella. Chao had shared with the class that initially she was not aware about the siv ceeb story between a Hmong couple and the practice of fi xov (sending a message to the bride's family) which involved a farmer. She shared that she heard the story from a Hmong community elder[6] in Fresno who told her the origin of the fi xov. The story dates back to ancient times where a Hmong couple was planning to elope and get married, but the Hmong woman was worried that eloping without letting her family know would worry them and they would assume she had passed away. Thus, the Hmong woman handed her siv ceeb to a nearby farmer and the Hmong man paid that farmer to send a message to her family. The farmer was instructed to give her family the siv ceeb and relay the message to them that she was getting married. This practice of fi xov has become a ritual in Hmong weddings even today. Chao shared that she had only learned about the origin of the fi xov and siv ceeb later on, she did not learn of this story from her parents. This origin story was where Bee's contribution to the discussion was really important in reminding Chao and her students that even within the Hmong community, variations exist among Hmong groups and clans. There is no one homogenous Hmong culture.

[6] Although Chao names who the Hmong elder is, I have omitted his name to protect his privacy.

Bee: I think that where your parents came from, and from where we came from, we don't have that [siv ceeb].

Chao: Ohh, okay.

Bee: Ahh, if you pull up the next slide . . .

Chao: [pulls up the next slide]

Bee: It's those people that wears the back [inaudible].

Chao: Oh, the Hmoob Xieng

In responding, Chao used the term Hmoob Xieng, to clarify her understanding. This term is the condensed version of Hmong Xiengkhouang, meaning Hmong people who lived in the Xiengkhouang province of Laos. It is also notable here that Chao did not use the English pronunciation for Hmong, but rather the Hmoob pronunciation. Additionally, since Chao is Hmoob Dawb (Hmong White) and speaks that dialect, then in the transcript, I spelled Hmong using Hmoob instead of Moob, which is the Moob Leeg (Hmong Blue/Green) dialect.

Bee then explained what the siv ceeb meant, where unmarried Hmong woman would have a siv ceeb on their outfit but married ones did not.

Bee: But you and I, we don't have it—

Chao: —We are different

Bee: Yeah.

Chao: —People.

Bee: The way that we are—because peb cov khaub ncaws (because our clothes) is different.

Chao: Yeah.

Bee: So that's why you don't know and we don't have it. […] That's why you were not aware of it because we don't have it. So it depends on which people you're coming from.

Chao: [with excitement in her voice] Seeeeee, that's why it's important you guys to know about your family origin, because its important when it comes to these events that there's certain ways that your family follows that is different from others. And so it's

> important to know your family origins. Even now we are still talking about who, what are you, who am I? We're still trying to figure out what is your way, what is my way, what happens when your son marries my daughter […] That's why I stress—I cannot stress enough how important to know about your origins […].

Drawing on AsianCrit, the example above connects with many of the tenets in this framework. For example, this origin about the fi xov and siv ceeb story exemplifies (*Re)Constructive History* (Iftikar & Museus, 2018; Museus & Iftikar, 2013) where the story not only centers in telling Hmong history but also analyzing why Chao might not have heard about it from her parents. This story also connects with *Transnational Context* which emphasizes on knowing the historical context beyond the United States that informs Hmong American experiences (Museus & Iftikar, 2013).

For instance, Chao, as a Hmong American woman, understands that the Hmong "khuab ncaws" (clothes) she wears does not have a siv ceeb, but did not connect the dots as to why she did not know about this origin story until Bee provided some context. Bee explained that Chao may not have heard of this origin story involving the siv ceeb because their families were not part of the Hmong Xiengkhouang province of Laos. The Hmong women from this province wears a siv ceeb while for them, they do not. Bee's knowledge of the context outside of the United States allowed Chao to understand why she may not have heard of this story before. Bee's explanation shed lights on the important of *Transnational Context* because it shapes the experiences and in this case, Chao's understanding of why she had never head of this story. Additionally, the diversity from the Hmong clothes to the types of stories (told and untold) de-essentializes Hmong as an homogenous ethnic group. As previously mentioned, *Strategic (Anti) Essentialism* of focusing exclusively on Hmong Americans highlights the differences among Hmong people to better understand the nuances that exist. This example from Bee and Chao reinforced Vue and Mouavangsou's (in press) assertions that Hmong people are also diverse and

not homogenous. Additionally, Bee and Chao were able to make these connections to unpack Hmong identity and clothes by drawing on their Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005),

The parents' presence in the classroom shed light on how much this class meant for the students, and also for people outside of Sky University. Chao's student shared what she learned with her parents which sparked their curiosity to attend this class three times. Not only did both parents attend, they also invested in contributing to the learning of Hmong culture. Towards the end of this class, both parents spoke to Chao about how proud they were that this class was happening at Sky University. This course made visible what had been absent from university classrooms—community members, specifically parents, who also possess a wealth of knowledge that is valuable and important (Yosso, 2005). Parents were positioned as experts in the classroom even though they did not possess the "proper" documents (i.e., degrees/diploma from an accredited college/university indicating their expertise in a field). Moreover, to have Hmong parents share their expertise in a classroom that has been approved and legitimized by the university was powerful. Both parents attended the class again on May 24, 2017.

These various instances were examples of the transformation that Chao and her students brought to Sky University, which also transformed their educational experiences. Unlike Chi Meng's experience in Chapter 4, where his Asian American Studies course only included Hmong history, culture, and experiences as a one-week topic, Chao's course allowed her students to experience the university in a new and profound way that no other courses had been able to do. Specifically, these students had an opportunity to take a course that centered Hmong culture and history—again, legitimizing Hmong knowledge and experiences in educational institutions. These courses not only taught students about Hmong culture and history, but they transformed

them as students and individuals as seen in Chao's experience where she took on the role as the undergraduate student instructor.

Continuing the Fight for Hmong Space and Curriculum in the University

Chao's class honored and privileged learning Hmong history and culture which were transformational, but temporal. These student-initiated and student-taught courses were temporary institutional spaces in the university that momentarily centered Hmong history, culture, and experience that legitimized the important value and knowledge of learning about Hmong people. They were only offered if undergraduates took the initiative and responsibility to become the undergraduate student-instructor.

At the same time, the student-initiated and student-taught courses were providing institutional legitimacy even if it was temporary. The Hmong American students at Sky University understood the temporality of this Hmong course in the department and university. For them, these courses were the first of many steps in their continual fight for Hmong institutional spaces. There were many Hmong American undergraduates such as Chao and others who advocated, created, and fought for a Hmong space in the university. Chao shared her experience of being the undergraduate student teaching assistant to Chee, the first student to teach this course, and how that experience changed her perception about her education:

> **Chao:** And then I think adding a fifth year I've kind of stepped out and looked at other activities or opportunities for me and I—It was because of last year I was a T.A. to Chee Yang (pseudonym), one of the student instructors of the course and he really made me realize that really take advantage of what's really in the university. Back then I just kind of listened to it but I never really let it sit in and digest it. And I think it was really 'til this year that I really see that your college experience, it's really what you make of it and you just have to find it and I think I kind of found it this year . . .

Chee's encouragement to "take advantage of what's really in the university," sparked Chao's epiphany in digesting that "your college experiences, it's really what you make of it." She realized that she herself was the agent—the actor—the person in charge of charting her

university experience and gaining the most from it. This realization, in her fifth year, inspired her to continue Chee's legacy in maintaining the student-initiated and student-taught course, in addition to her many other projects.

In my interview with Chao, she explained the legacy that she and her predecessor, Chee, had built in their fight for Hmong courses in the university:

> **Chao:** Well just having a Hmong culture course [laughs] you know. The second time. The first was Chee, you know he left a legacy too. So I feel like I carried that on and me leading a course that's you know a legacy for me already . . . Just having the Hmong culture course out there when there's no course, where else in Sky University registry has this? And so I'm really proud that we—we as students you know, are able to put this out there for students and I just hope that this legacy also inspires other students and following students to you know come together, create a movement, to create a strong academia about Hmong culture or you know something that they want to have out there that Sky University isn't offering.

On July 24, 2017, one month after Chao's course had ended, Chi Meng shared that he would continue the Hmong course legacy in order to have Hmong history, culture, and experience included in the curriculum. In planning for his future class, he shared, ". . . I think it's important to set a good precedent for Hmong classes and it's something that I'd want to continue every year, too, because I do see the value in teaching Hmong classes." Both Chao and Chi Meng were cognizant of the marginality of their Hmong space in the university, similar to Vue's (2021) participants when they sought to make Hmong visible in the curriculum and their university. The course's lack of permanency in the university revealed that the fight for Hmong institutional spaces was only beginning. Relatedly, the continuation of these courses affirmed the students' commitment to social justice through their transformative resistance to sustain and create Hmong spaces on campus.

Summary

Institutional spaces are messy, complicated and never perfect. However, both the Hmong Student Organization and the student-initiated and taught course demonstrate the powerful

potential of Hmong American students to create institutional spaces and transform their educational experiences. In alignment with Vue's (2021) call for liberatory perspectives of Hmong American students, this chapter illustrated the transformational resistance of Hmong American students where they strategically utilized HSO to support their education while nourishing their ethnic identity, culture, and experiences at Sky University. Through their efforts, HSO transformed the institutional space and the educational experiences of Hmong American students by creating a community in the university for Hmong American students and organizing workshops that centers on Hmong identity, culture, history, and experience. HSO also served as a platform for many Hmong undergraduate instructors to instill the idea for a Hmong undergraduate student-led course and to recruit students to take their course. Moreover, the course, *Introduction to Hmong Culture* emerged out of students' recognition of a lack of Hmong courses in the Asian American Studies department and at Sky University. Although Hmong American students recognize their efforts in creating these courses as temporary institutional spaces, they remain hopeful for a permanent presence within Asian American Studies and the university. Both of these different yet similar institutional spaces were imagined, dreamed, and created by students for Hmong American students' success.

Chapter 6: Summary, Implications, and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to understand Hmong American undergraduates' educational experiences and offer alternative discourses centering Hmong American students' strengths and resilience in pursuing and transforming higher education. This study also pushes us to consider what advocacy may look like when we draw on the strengths and assets of Hmong American students, in other words, their Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005). In general, some studies have constructed deficit and damaging discourses about Hmong American students, describing them primarily in terms of low socioeconomic status and educational attainment, even ideologically labeling them as Black Asians (Lee, 2005; Ong, 1996). The danger of such narratives is that they uphold Whiteness and simultaneously anti-Blackness (Kim, 1999; Park, 2006). Like many students, Hmong American students have been labeled and judged by the structures of educational institutions. To better understand the educational experiences of Hmong American students beyond these narratives, my study sought to explore these two questions in order to bring new ways of conceptualizing Hmong American students:

1) What are the educational outcomes and experiences of Hmong American undergraduates as they navigate the university?

2) How do Hmong American undergraduates transform their institutional spaces and educational experiences?

Drawing on Asian Critical Race Theory and Community Cultural Wealth, the findings highlight Hmong American students' educational outcomes and experiences at Sky University. Asian Critical Race Theory provided the conceptual framework to disaggregate educational outcomes of Hmong American students from Asian American students in order to understand Hmong American students' nuanced educational outcomes and experiences.

Accompanied with Community Cultural Wealth, both frameworks operate to reveal the assets that motivated, nourished, and enriched students' undergraduate experiences at Sky

University. In this final chapter, I summarize my findings to conceptualize Hmong American students through strength-based narratives and contextualize with relevant literature to answer my research questions. I also provide implications for research and practice, and discuss my limitations and directions for future research.

Research Question 1: What are the Educational Outcomes and Experiences of Hmong American Undergraduates as They Navigate the University?

In Chapter 4, I described the educational outcomes and experiences of Hmong American undergraduates which illustrates their challenges *and* Community Cultural Wealth in navigating Sky University. For example, the aggregated Hmong freshmen of 2010 and 2011 were predominantly in "Good Standing" from their first to their fourth/fifth year at Sky University. In particular, each year the aggregated 2010 and 2011 Hmong freshmen cohorts were on average, at least 95% in "Good Standing." However, their graduation percentage indicates that graduation was typically not achieved within four years. On average, 20% of the aggregated Hmong freshmen cohort 2010 and 2011 graduated within four years as opposed to 72% within six years. These educational outcomes among Hmong American students align with previous literature regarding their challenges and success in higher education (Xiong & Lam, 2013; Xiong, 2012). However, what was salient throughout surveys, interviews, and observations is the fact that these challenges did not stop them from continuing to pursue their education.

Despite the challenges Hmong American students encountered at Sky University, they continued to draw on their Community Cultural Wealth in order to thrive. The findings suggest that several factors impact Hmong American students' education such as their transitioning to college, finding academic support, and balancing between family, culture, and education. For example, Jason relied on his *Social capital* (network) to provide him emotional support in order

to balance his school and work. His experience aligns with findings from Vue (2013, 2021) on the importance of ethnic student organization and the positive impacts it has on Hmong American students. Meanwhile for Chao, the challenges she experienced—especially early on in her undergraduate education—were perhaps due to the lack of relevancy between the course materials and her Hmong identity. Once she was able to utilize her *Navigational capital* by learning to apply the course theories to her own Hmong community and herself, moreover, she continued to have positive experience throughout her undergraduate career. Both of these examples further support the findings of Xiong and Lam (2013) and Vue (2013, 2021) about the importance for Hmong American students to connect with the course materials and find a community within higher education.

This dissertation also revealed Hmong American students as critical agents in their educational outcomes and experiences. The Hmong American students in this study recognized that Sky University was not built for them; yet they were able to navigate their way towards graduation. For example, they participated in student organizations, such as the Hmong Student Organization, which served as their *home* within the university (seen in Chapters 4 and 5). This student organization enabled Hmong American students to maintain, advocate, and create Hmong spaces at Sky University. Findings suggested students in this study were actively aware of the broader racialized categories of their academic context: limited opportunities to learn about Hmong history, culture, experiences. Their experiences highlighted the invisibility of Hmong Americans at Sky University and the limited representation in the Asian American Studies' curriculum and department. In particular, this study demonstrated students' ability to identify opportunity gaps both within departments and also throughout higher education. As active agents of their own educational journey, their collective effort to continue the legacy of

the student-initiated and taught undergraduate courses were evidence of their transformational resistance to maintain their ethnic identity, culture, history in higher education. Drawing on Asian Critical Theory and Community Cultural Wealth shed light on many of these nuance experiences that speaks about Hmong American students' strength and resiliency in surviving and navigating institutions.

Research Question 2: How do Hmong American Undergraduates Transform their Institutional Spaces and Educational Experiences?

My findings show that in addition to the Hmong Student Organization (HSO) supporting Hmong Americans undergraduates to navigate Sky University, HSO was also pivotal in transforming their institutional spaces and educational experiences. This organization, especially through its members, aided the students in my study by creating a home and community within Sky University that they could rely on for academic and social support. HSO also played a vital role in sustaining the student-led and taught courses at Sky University since its inception. For example, the undergraduate instructors for these courses had been members of HSO. Also, specific to the *Introduction to Hmong Culture* class, all the students who registered or attended these courses had some affiliation with HSO.

Higher education was not built for Students of Color (Oakes et al., 2018), and the existence of HSO and the undergraduate student-led and taught course were evidence of the opportunity gaps students recognized and thus created for themselves. A key transformational aspect of the *Introduction to Hmong Culture* course was the emphasis and legitimization of Hmong knowledge as pertinent to Hmong American students' development, teaching and learning. Additionally, the course made access to a classroom in higher education possible to

community members (e.g., the parents) who may not have had the opportunity to sit in and share their knowledge with students who were invested in learning Hmong culture.

These two institutional spaces created by students to center Hmong was a way to reimagine success and support for Hmong student education *and* experiences in higher education. Similar to Vue's study (2013), ethnic identity was salient for Hmong American students in higher education. Specifically, in my study, students' Hmong identity was instrumental to their construction and desire to cultivate and maintain these Hmong institutional spaces in higher education. Both of these institutional spaces demonstrated Hmong American students' transformational resistance to Whiteness and the limited representation of Hmong Americans in Asian American Studies, and simultaneously positioned these students as agents of change.

Theoretical Implications

In using Asian Critical Race Theory as a conceptual framework to understand Hmong American students' experiences, I recognized that this framework could benefit from an inclusion of an asset-based approach. While Asian Critical Race Theory (Museus & Iftikar, 2013) has a commitment to social justice and helped clarify how race, racism, and Whiteness operate through learning about Hmong American students' educational experiences, this theoretical framework can still produce damage-centered research. I am participating in a paradigm shift that was inspired by Tuck (2009), where she urges researchers to not produce damage-centered research that focuses on the pain and suffering of communities. My research adopts this approach and demonstrates a shift from considering Hmong American students as "educationally lacking" or "Black Asians" (Lee, 2005) towards focusing on their strengths and agency. Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005) provided one avenue in making that

paradigm shift that Asian Critical Race Theory was missing. As such, my hope in incorporating Community Cultural Wealth was to understand Hmong American students from a place of desire and dignity—their strength and assets.

Using the conceptual frameworks above situates Hmong American students within a place of power that humanizes and honors them. Exploring Asian Critical Race Theory and Community Cultural Wealth in this approach has theoretical implications for how research in education and related fields conduct research and advocacy, especially with and for Communities of Color. As shown in Chapter 4, Hmong American students possessed Community Cultural Wealth that enabled them to navigate the university. It was through their ability to navigate that they were able to identify a glaring institutional inequity—a lack of Hmong courses. As shown in Chapter 5, by creating an undergraduate student-led and taught course, the students in this study made Hmong culture and history visible in the curriculum which transformed their educational experiences to one of empowerment. Both of these chapters present Hmong American students from a place of strength and enacting transformation, in contrast to previous deficit or damage-centered literature that strips these students of their dignity (see Chapter 2).

Chao, the undergraduate student instructor, provided a prime example of Hmong American students in this study enacting transformation within Asian American Studies and Sky University. She described the undergraduate student-led and taught courses as "a legacy [that] also inspires other students" for them to "create a movement." Her recognition of both the previous Hmong undergraduate instructor, herself (the current instructor), and the future students positioned them—Hmong American students—as possessing power and hope for the future. This recommendation aligned with calls from a range of scholars over the last two decades to change

the discourse on Hmong American students, and other Students of Color, in order to humanize and present them with dignity. As scholars seeking and producing knowledge, we must be cognizant of the power we give and take through our positioning of students in our research. Specifically in education research, we as scholars must push the boundaries of static paradigms to elucidate student experiences through the lens of their strengths, in a way that not only acknowledges institutional harm/barriers but just as importantly maintains their dignity.

Implications for Practice

The experiences of Hmong American students from this study, has important practical implications for people within higher education institutions and the community (more broadly). First, educators, researchers, advocates, and community members should perceive and position students from an asset-based lens. As demonstrated through Chapters 1 and 2, deficit and damage-centered discourses have often been a strategic move to advocate for resources and opportunities. According to Yi et al. (2020), strategic framing of communities will look different based on the audience/field receiving the information. While I agree with Yi and colleagues about strategically framing communities for specific audiences and fields, this perspective may be problematic. Strategically framing communities could mean highlighting structural inequities but attributing these issues to problems within the group itself, or even presenting the group as irremediably injured by the inequities can lead to negative consequences. Tuck (2009) has emphasized that in particular, education research has been prone to position communities in such a fashion. Often such positioning can come from both the community leaders/advocates and the members themselves, who have been accustomed to portraying themselves in that perspective. The possibility of securing resources and opportunities from a perspective that honors the community's dignity is possible (as seen in Chapter 1 and more broadly in this dissertation).

Second, a deeper understanding of the diversity within Asian American sub-groups both at the local, state, and national level are crucial for equity work. Frequently, Asian Americans are portrayed as the model minority and therefore, monolithically denied access to resources and opportunities that are pertinent to the advancement of diversity, equity, and research. At the same time, Hmong are also portrayed as "low in poverty" and "least educational attainment" in order to disrupt the Model Minority Myth and advocate for resources. Hmong is among many of the Asian American sub-groups that are impacted by such limited understandings of Asian Americans as either/or. At the political level, there is a need for advocacy that positions communities within a place of power when leveraging and advocating for resources.

Third, this study has demonstrated the importance of utilizing university programs like the Undergraduate Student Initiated Program (USIP) as a leverage to demonstrate a desire to learn about a topic that their respective university is not offering. For example, Chapter 4 showed that while there was an Asian American Studies Department at Sky University, access to Hmong courses was sorely lacking. Instead, as demonstrated in Chapter 5, it was students themselves who identified and created access for many of their peers and themselves to take Hmong courses. However, as shown through this study, such courses created by students with support from university student organizations are temporary and unpromised. These undergraduate student-led and student taught courses are contingent on securing a faculty supervision, approval from that department, and the number of enrolled students. Additionally, I had also taught two specialized courses on Hmong Americans as a graduate student at Sky University, both of which were also on a temporary basis. For a long-term impact, I would encourage students to continue utilizing these programs strategically to garner interest for a course that is missing (e.g., *Introduction to Hmong Culture* and *Hmong American Experience*). As a follow up, it will be important to

document the number of times these courses were created, the number of enrolled students per course, including those who attend but did not register, and lastly, the impact it has on students. Students can then effectively advocate for institutions to adopt these courses permanently.

Moreover, I would encourage students who create these courses to also cast a broader net to make connections between their topic and the larger community. For example, *Introduction to Hmong Culture* may be more appealing to Hmong American students to learn about their community; however, students who do not identify as Hmong can also benefit. With our current sociopolitical climate in the United States of Anti-Asian hate and violence, such courses as shown in this study is a step towards anti-racism in the United States. These courses make visible how Whiteness operates in higher education, while exploring the collective, yet distinct racialized experiences of Hmong and many communities who have been homogenized in the United States. I would encourage the student-instructors and previous students who have taken the course to publicize these courses beyond the Hmong ethnic student organizations, such as other ethnic-specific student organizations on campus. Additionally, I would encourage the student-instructors to work with the program coordinator (in this study it would be the program coordinator in the Asian American Studies Department) to share their course flyer with other department program coordinators to disseminate to their students.

Fourth, this study also demonstrated that there must be collaboration between students, faculty, and departments in order to sustain and implement courses that are not readily available within the department and at the university. While short-term collaboration is clearly possible as such with the *Introduction to Hmong Culture* course, however, to have these courses officially listed in the department/university catalog will take time and investment from the university—namely by hiring faculty who can teach these courses. At this point, it is up to students to

leverage the USIP program to continually offer their course of interest, while faculty and departments must continue to support students' efforts in these courses and more. To move forward, faculty and departments, especially the faculty supervisor of the courses, should strategize with students on how to have a course listed in the department catalog. While undergraduate student-led and taught courses may be initiated by students, it is important to remember that faculty must be part of the movement to institutionalize courses. Faculty has the power to influence their department, and they have a better understanding of the policies within higher education.

Fifth, to sustain the course also entails having a professor or lecturer who would be able to teach it. Again, the collaboration between students, faculty, and departments are crucial for the longevity of courses not listed in the department's course catalog: in this study, Hmong American students have been teaching courses centering Hmong history, language, knowledge, and experiences for the past two years (and ongoing) within the Asian American Studies department at Sky University. The creation and hiring of a tenure-track faculty, or at least a lecturer, that specializes in the course topics that students have been teaching, and is capable of teaching and developing course courses listed and not in the department's catalog is a way to indicate institutional support for Hmong Studies courses. While I as a graduate student was hired to teach two specialized Hmong American classes as an Associate Instructor, the hiring of a lecturer to teach a specialized Hmong American course would be a step in the right direction, but still not enough. As shown with Amy's experience, for instance, it is not simply having courses for students, but a faculty who specializes in the field that would help them develop their own scholarly interest. Therefore, the Asian American Studies Department in collaboration with the university should create a tenure-track position specifically for a faculty whose research

specializes on Hmong Americans and who will contribute in developing Hmong American courses in the department.

Lastly, based on my findings, ethnic student organizations played a huge role in supporting Hmong American students socially and academically. Although there were official student-run programs that were offered (in the case of Chi Meng with the Coalition of Southeast Asian), the feelings he got from them was not the *home* he was looking for. As previously mentioned, Chi Meng felt the ethnic student organization was more authentic and dedicated in building the relationships with students that the student-run program was missing. It was the ethnic student organization where he found his community. Furthermore, my findings also showed that Hmong American undergraduates were mostly placed on academic probation, dismissed, etc. during their first and second year of attending Sky University.

Additionally, since many of the students in this study sought out HSO when they first arrived at the university, it would be effective to equip ethnic student organization with toolkits to support students during their critical transitions to the university. Perhaps a collaboration between student affairs professionals and ethnic student organizations would be an additive in enhancing the organization's members' skills and knowledge of the university to aid newer students. For instance, increased support from student affairs staff could help provide trainings, workshops, and resources to the newly elected ethnic student organization (e.g., president, vice-president, etc.) prior to the start of the academic school year so they are informed in leading their student organization for the duration of their term. Then, to strategize how to best support their members and provide them with the resources they may need, student affairs professionals and these student leaders could meet each quarter to check-in with the trends they are noticing within their organizations especially around academic challenges.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

While this study provides many insights to understand Hmong American students' educational experiences there are some limitations. First and foremost, this study is not a representation of all Hmong student experiences in higher education. The amount of data collected for each phase of this study was limited and constrained. Additionally, the amount of time I spent with each focal participant depended on our matched schedules and events we attended. Such variations resulted in more data on some focal participants than others. Time played an important role in the amount and frequency of data collection for each phase of this study. Future researchers seeking to strengthen this work should collaborate with a team of researchers to gather a larger sample size for each phase of this study.

A second limitation is the Hmong student data.[7] As I mentioned in Chapter 3, the data I received contained information for Hmong American students at Sky University from Fall 2010 to May 2015, meaning the dataset only had information up to those who *filed* for graduation by May 2015. There was no information on whether those students who had *filed* by May 2015 were *awarded* their degree. Had I requested and received the data at a later point in the academic school year, I would have had a more complete dataset. However, I was fortunate that Sky University had public data available regarding student enrollment and graduation by race and ethnicity. Future studies should consider the date when students are awarded their degree when requesting student data. Further, researchers seeking to explore the experiences of Hmong American students quantitatively can explore large governmental datasets that compile student data over many years. Doing so will allow researchers to gain a macro perspective on the

[7] Please note the Hmong student data obtained were anonymized which is important in ensuring the privacy of students' educational records. The issue here is not the anonymity of the data, but rather when I had received the data.

graduation rates of Hmong American undergraduate students across multiple years and institutions. This examination may provide future insights on whether institutions are supporting the educational experiences of Hmong American students so they can make progress towards and complete their degree.

A third limitation is the number of questions in the questionnaire. Although the questionnaire was peer-reviewed, after some reflection, I realized that some of the questions could have been combined or taken out in order to decrease the amount of time it took to complete the questionnaire. The length of completion may have had a potential impact in the number of responders. Future studies should consider the number of questions and length of time to complete the questionnaire. Further, researchers interested in understanding Hmong student experiences should increase the sample size in order to account for more varied experiences. In addition, researchers should consider soliciting student responses from more than one institution in order to gain a more comprehensive perspective of Hmong American students' experiences within their universities.

Additional directions for future research that expands beyond these limitations may include a study that integrates Asian Critical Race Theory and space to theorize about institutions like higher education. While in this study, Hmong spaces were constructed by students through HSO, my focus was on students' experiences and their strengths and therefore it was beyond the scope of this dissertation to theorize space in this way. However, future research should consider the usage of space, place, and politics through scholars like Massey (2004, 2005). Intertwining Asian Critical Race Theory and space provides an explicit linkage to the construction of spaces in higher education specifically for Hmong and many Southeast Asian communities. Another future researcher may want to investigate the relationship Hmong American students have with

their respective Ethnic Studies/Asian American Studies Department and vice-versa. This future study should consider the perspectives of people (e.g., faculty and staff) in Asian American Studies departments and how they perceive their support for Hmong American students, in comparison to how Hmong American students perceive them. Another line of research inquiry would be to investigate how Hmong American students understand and perceive their own Hmong community, and themselves, as Hmong individuals in comparison to the scholarship on Hmong education. These are only a few suggested approaches for future research regarding Hmong American students in higher education.

Conclusion

As this study comes to the end, I offer once again an alternative narrative that centers Hmong American students' educational experiences by building on their strengths and resilience in pursuing and transforming higher education. The lens we use to view them creates the discourse that is told about them. I am honored to witness Hmong American students claiming their education, creating space, and nourishing themselves through staying grounded in who they are—Hmong. As I reflect on this dissertation, much has changed for the students involved in this study and the Asian American Studies Department itself. Many of my focal participants have graduated from Sky University and have gone onto pursue their careers. As of Winter 2022, Chi Meng has returned to Sky University, working as an analyst as he waits to receive news of his acceptance to graduate school. Similarly, Ntsab Lias is waiting to hear back from the graduate programs she applied to. She is working in the social service sector. As for Chao, she went on to obtained her teaching credential and is working as a K-12 teacher. The Asian American Studies Department in 2021 hired a lecturer to teach a specialized upper-division Asian American culture course with an emphasis on Hmong American culture. The department's hiring of a lecturer for

Hmong culture indicates small recognizable changes. However, there has not been a call to hire a tenure-track professor who specializes on Hmong Americans. As for the Hmong student-led and taught Hmong courses, even after I had stopped collecting data in 2017 they have continued to occur year after year through the sponsorship of the Asian American Studies Department.

The study highlights Hmong American students' transformative resistance and their strengths, reminding us to move beyond the deficit and damage-centered discourses that have been placed on them. A mere examination of the educational outcomes of Hmong American undergraduates does not adequately illustrate how they, as students, are bringing critical awareness and imbedding a sense of ethnic history, culture, and identity in their university, themselves, and their peers. This dissertation's focus on Hmong American students' contributions shows how they counteract their existing marginalization within the university. Most importantly, this study calls attention to Hmong American students' active transformational agency and resiliency as critical to institutional efforts towards inclusion and equity. This research contributes to scholarship on race/ethnicity, education, and ethnic studies by illuminating the experiences of marginalized groups that are often invisible within the dominant U.S. racial categories (i.e., Asian, Black/African, Hispanic/Latinx/Chicanx, Indigenous Studies). This study also asks us to consider what support looks like institutionally when we support students from non-deficit and damaging perspectives, especially through their strengths and assets.

Appendix A – Questionnaire

1. Which gender identity do you most identify with?

    A) Female

    B) Male

    C) Transgender Female

    D) Transgender Male

    E) Genderqueer/ Gender Non-conforming

    F) Not listed (fill in the blank)

    E) Prefer not to answer

2. What sex were you assigned at birth on your original birth certificate?

    A) Female

    B) Male

    C) Prefer not to answer

3. How old are you?

4. What is your major (s)?

5. When did you enter [redacted] as a student? (Include quarter and year)

6. When do you expect to graduate? (Include month and year)

7. Are you the first in your family to attend college (i.e., father, mother, siblings)?

8. Did you transfer from a community college? Yes/No

9. What is your current cumulative GPA? (Select the best option that describes your cumulative GPA)

    A) 4.0 – 3.5

    B) 3.49 – 2.0

    C) 1.9 – 1.5

D) 1.49 and below

E) This is my first year at [redacted] so I don't have a cumulative GPA yet.

10. Please check all that applies if you've ….

    a) been on Academic probation at [redacted]

    b) been on Subject to academic dismissal at [redacted]

    c) been Academically dismissed at [redacted]

    d) never been on academic probation, subject to academic dismissal, and academically dismissed

11. In your opinion, [redacted] Hmong students who are placed on academic probation, subject to academic dismissal, or have been academically dismissed may be due to ----- (fill in the blank)

12. Please specify **your top 4 formal campus resources** you've used to help you in college **and how you've used it**. Formal campus resources are services that you paid which are included in your tuition: [redacted], Financial Aid Services, [redacted], Academic Advisors, Teaching Assistants, Professors, [redacted] Health and Counseling Services, Library, Programs in the [redacted] such as the [redacted] etc.

    Example: #1) [redacted]. I use it on a daily basis to get to and from campus.

    1. _____

    2. _____

    3. _____

    4. _____

13. Please specify **your top 4 informal resources** you've used to help you in college **and how you used it**. Informal resources are services not included in your tuition such as friends,

family, your [redacted], YouTube, student organizations such as the [redacted], [redacted], etc.

Example: #1) [redacted]. He helped me select my classes and tutored me.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

14. In your opinion, what qualities must a Hmong student have and do in order to graduate from [redacted]? (open-ended)
15. Based on what you know and have experienced, who do you believe struggles the most academically at [redacted]?

    a) Hmong sons

    b) Hmong daughters

    c) Both

    d) Not listed: Specify

16. Who do you believe excels the most at [redacted]academically?

    a) Hmong daughters

    b) Hmong songs

    c) Both

    d) Not listed: Specify

17. What do you believe the university should do to support Hmong students at [redacted]? (open-ended)

18. If you come across a stranger who have never heard of Hmong. What would you tell them about your people? (open ended).

19. Would you like to receive a copy of the information sheet for this study?

    a) Yes, I would like a pdf copy

    b) Yes, I would like a hard copy

    c) No, I do not want a copy

If you would like to be entered into Part 1 [redacted] **then please include your name and email. The Winner of this raffle will be notified by email.**

First Name and Last Name: _____

[redacted] Email: _____

Part 2: Would you be interested in a follow up interview (approximately 30 minutes)? Yes/No

Part 3: Would you also be interested in allowing a researcher to shadow your student experience? (Please note that in order to participate in Part 3, you will also need to participate in Part 2). Yes / No

If you select yes for Part 2 and/ 3, then please include your contact information below.

First and Last Name: _____

[redacted] email: _____

Phone number: _____

Thank you for your participation in this study. Your response has been recorded.

If you are interested in participating in the remaining parts of the study, then you will receive an email from Kaozong Mouavangsou.

Appendix B – Interview Protocol for Part 2

Sample Questions for Semi-structure Interview Script

Part 2: Interview (Give the interviewee the '[redacted]Consent to Record form' to fill out first)

Student Background

1.) Tell me a little bit about yourself and your family (i.e., how many siblings you have, are you the oldest, youngest, if you were born in the United States – how your family came to the United States.)
2.) What motivated you to pursue a higher education?
3.) Throughout your education, when did you first learn about Hmong history, culture or language in school?
4.) When do you plan on graduating from [redacted]?
    a. (If student is graduating this year/quarter) What do you believe contributed to your achievement?

[redacted] *Student Experience and Perception*

5.) What has been your understanding of the [redacted]system as it relates to graduation requirements?
6.) What have your experience as a Hmong [redacted] student been so far? (i.e., first year, second year, third year, fourth year).
    a. When was the most challenging quarter/year for you? How was it challenging?
    b. When was the most positive quarter/year for you? How was it positive?
7.) What has your experience been like as a Hmong son/daughter and a [redacted] student?
8.) How would your [redacted] education be different/similar if you were a Hmong male/son or female/daughter?

9.) To what extent does your family play a role in your education? What about your friends? Partner? Student organizations?

10.) What is something you wished you had done differently at [redacted]?

11.) What are some helpful tips you would give to any incoming first year [redacted] Hmong students?

12.) Is there anything you would like to add to what we've discussed so far?

13.) Would you be interested in participating in Part 3 of the study? This will allow me to observe you in your class, student organization meetings you attend, etc. in order to understand what your college experience life is like. **If yes, then reread page 3 of the Information Sheet to make sure the participant understands what their responsibilities are for Part 3, and get their contact information.**

14.) Would you like to be entered into a [redacted] for participating in Part 2 of this study? The Winner [redacted] will be notified by email.

Appendix C – Focal Participant Interview Protocol

Current quarter

1.) What are your goals for this quarter?

    a. How do you plan on meeting those goals?

2.) What are you looking forward to the most this quarter?

3.) What activities or student organizations events are you involved in this quarter?

Last quarter

4.) What was your highlight of last quarter?

5.) Last quarter, who or what provided you the most support?

6.) Tell me about a time during last quarter where you felt that your gender identity greatly impact your education.

7.) Tell me about a time during last quarter where you felt your Hmong identity greatly impacted your education.

8.) What is something you wished you had done different last quarter? (Ask for examples and explanations)

9.) What was most challenging for you last quarter?

10.) Is there anything you would like add to what we've discussed so far?

Please note that questions will be slightly tweaked according to the varies quarters that I will be interviewing them so that it makes sense

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