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Environmental Factors for Motivation of First-Generation Hmong American College Students in Academic Attainment

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Abstract
This qualitative thematic analysis study examined the motivations of first-generation college graduate Hmong American students in their educational attainment. Currently, Hmong American students are facing cultural and institutional barriers which continue to impact access to and achievement in college. Although there is an educational disparity, for some within the Hmong American student community, there is resilience to overcome and graduate from institutions of higher education which is important to understand. Culturally Engaging Campus Environment Model underpinned the one-on-one in-depth interviews of purposively sampled first-generation college graduate Hmong American students who attended the University of California, Merced. The findings from the study highlighted ways family supports, role models, breaking culturally normed gender roles, Hmong Student Associations (HSAs), and intentional holistic campus supports are important motivational environmental factors in Hmong American students' higher education journey.

Keywords: Hmong American, First-Generation College Student, Educational Attainment, Cultural and Institutional Barriers, Culturally Engaging Campus Environment Model, Hmong Student Organizations, Model Minority Myth

1. Introduction

The Hmong people came into the United States as refugees in 1975 along with other Southeast Asian groups such as Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Lao (Ngo & Lee, 2007). According to the Pew Research Center (PRC, 2021) about 327,000 Hmong Americans are living across the 50 states, with four of the top 10 metropolitan areas in California. Specifically, California's Central Valley, including Fresno, Sacramento, Merced, and Stockton, are home to 75,000 Hmong Americans (PRC, 2021) who continue to live at higher rates of poverty and with lower rates of higher education attainment than other Asian Americans and Americans as a whole (e.g., Xiong & Lee, 2011; PRC, 2021). This disparity is especially concerning as Hmong families place great value in pursuing higher education for economic stability since many arrived in the US with nontransferable work experiences which plagued families with decades of poverty in the US (Mao, Deenanath, & Xiong, 2012; Xiong & Lam, 2013). This is only exacerbated with limited English language skills that lead to high drop-out rates from secondary school

(Ngo & Lee, 2007). Xiong (2012) found that even Hmong students who are born in the US with access to English from an early age are overrepresented as English Learners in K-12 public schools and are reported as the third largest limited English proficient (LEP) group in the country. These circumstances unfold into further institutionalized oppression as Hmong Americans are less likely to have advocating voices or involvement in civic issues at the local, state, or national levels (Museus, Yi, & Saelua, 2017).

Moreover, Hmong students have been racially stereotyped by educators in contradicting, but both equally as damaging, ways. An early study by Ngo and Lee (2007) uncovered teachers tended to perceive Hmong high school students as dropouts, gang members, and welfare dependents who did not deserve government assistance compared to other ethnic minority students (Ngo & Lee, 2007). In contrast, Hmong Americans are also held to the Model Minority Myth (MMM) which assumes all Asians are academically gifted and from wealthy "foreign" circumstances above other minorities where special assistance in not needed (Her, 2014; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Poon et al., 2016). The MMM negatively affects Hmong American students at all levels of education, who are not able to meet standards and left without supports to do so, as well as being tracked into lower-level courses, not preparing them for the rigor of college (Her, 2014; Kim & Lee, 2014; Poon et al., 2016). The MMM also opens the door for microaggressions, which Kwan (2015) illustrates, as Hmong American students being labeled as "exotic" and feel misunderstood by instructors, counselors and peers in higher education. Without disaggregated data to better understand the contexts of ethnic minorities within the Asian American population, circumstances are overlooked, and needs are denied (Takahashi & Nottbohm, 2019).

Cultural norms and traditional practices can also hinder a Hmong student's journey to educational success (Xiong & Lam, 2013). Since the Hmong culture is patriarchal, families hold higher educational expectations for their sons than their daughters (Cha, 2010; Her & Gloria, 2016). This reality has highlighted pressure for male Hmong students who feel they must carefully balance their education alongside their family's high expectations leading to increased dropout rates (Cha, 2010). In contrast, Hmong daughters, who are viewed culturally with lesser value than sons but critical to childbearing and maintaining the home, receive minimal family support for their educational attainment (Cha, 2010; Her & Gloria, 2016). Ngo and Lee (2007) estimated that 90% of Hmong females high school students dropout due to the practices of early marriage and early childbearing. Furthermore, Peng and Solheim (2015) found that the gendered role expectations within Hmong families can greatly impede Hmong female students' ability to access necessary extracurricular supports in college which can be a barrier to graduation. These intergenerational cultural rifts within the Hmong American population continue to increase, negatively impacting school satisfaction, performance, and attendance at all levels (Truong & Miller, 2018; Ngo & Lee, 2007).

Although these challenges exist in the community, many Hmong American students overcome these circumstances and pursue higher education with success (Takahashii & Nottbohm, 2019; Vang, 2018; Lee & Author, 2020). For example, at Fresno State, a large minority serving public institution within the California State system, Hmong student enrollment increased 32% from 2012 to 2018 (Takahashii & Nottbohm, 2019). Similarly, at a sister university, Sacramento State, Vang (2018) reported at 602% increase in Hmong student enrollment from 153 in 2005 to 1,075 in 2016. Additionally, Hmong American female's graduation rates at these universities have increased steadily over the past 20 years (Ngo & Lee, 2007; Takahashii & Nottbohm, 2019; Vang, 2018;). These statistics indicate that Hmong American students can find educational success despite institutional barriers. Lee and Author (2020) suggest that, along with self-advocacy, Hmong American students can achieve academic success in college with access to student organizations, an inclusive and culturally responsive campus environment, and academic supports. The small body of literature available on academically successful Hmong students also highlights the critical need for scholars to further uncover educational and societal inequities to unearth positive contexts in which these counter-narratives exist to change future realities.

1.1 Conceptual Framework–Culturally Engaging Campus Environment (CECE) Model

In order to understand what drives these successful Hmong American students in their educational attainment, it is essential to uncover the supports and motivations accessed to overcome the aforementioned barriers. This need

was met through the Culturally Engaging Campus Environment (CECE) Model (Museus, 2014; Museus, et al., 2017), as it conceptually frames the campus environment along with internal and external factors which impact a student's college education. The CECE Model is underpinned by the belief that culturally engaging campus environments directly and indirectly relate to a higher likelihood of student persistence to succeed. Furthermore, the more institutions foster and maintain culturally engaging campus environments, the more likely their environments will allow their diverse student populations to thrive in college (Museus, 2014; Museus, et al., 2017). The nine characteristics organized into two subgroups of Cultural Relevance and Cultural Responsiveness outlined in the CECE Model framed the study's initial inquiry into the participants' narratives, and the external influences, pre-college inputs, and individual inputs framed the second analytic phase (see Figure 1).

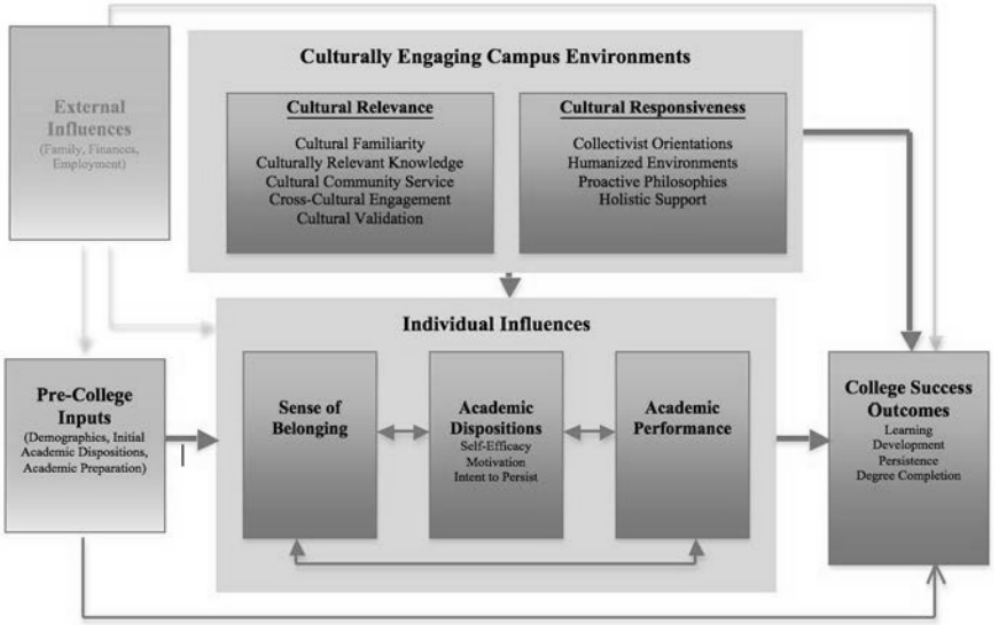

Figure 1: *The Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) Model of College Success.* Source: Museus, et. al (2017, p.193) © John Hopkins University Press. Adapted from Museus (2014) ©Springer Nature. Reprinted with permissions.

1.2 Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative thematic analysis was to understand the motivational factors first-generation Hmong American students have which motivated them towards educational success through college graduation. Implications from this study will be used to understand ways to consider supporting other Hmong American students in reaching their educational goals in an effort to find equity for this Asian American ethnic minority. The following research questions guided the study exploration:

(1) *What are the environmental factors which motivate first-generation college graduate Hmong American students in their educational attainment?*
(2) *How have these Hmong American college graduates leveraged environmental factors to overcome institutional barriers and achieve educational success?*

2. Method

This study followed a qualitative thematic analysis using individual in-depth semi-structured interviews of purposively sampled volunteer participants. Researcher reflexivity as was central to the design, particularly for one Hmong American researcher to quickly establish rapport with participants and provide an analytic lens in which only someone with lived experience can provide.

2.1 Researcher Reflexivity

Growing up as a child of refugees, researcher one understood the struggles of obtaining a higher education for the Hmong community. Many of the researcher's peers and family members also had challenges navigating the educational system as first-generation students. However, the researcher grew up as a second-generation Hmong American college graduating woman, so she did not experience as many struggles as her first-generation college going family and peers. Despite that, the educational challenges of the researcher's community motivated her to conduct this study to discover a resolution to the problem. By comparing their experiences with hers, the researcher was able to identify the inequities and privileges that were perpetuating the educational system. Since the researcher had previous knowledge on the educational challenges first-generation Hmong students encounter from prior experience, this may have led the participants into a particular answer or idea depending on how the researcher asked the questions. Also, all of the participants and the researcher attended UC Merced together were each a part of the Hmong Student Association. This was helpful to gain close to instantaneous rapport during each of the respective interviews.

The second researcher, as the research advisor, is a white female ally with close to 20 years of experience teaching and leading in public K-12 schools and higher educational settings. She is an advocate for research and programs involving empowerment of marginalized communities, finding intersectionality in overcoming barriers to education as the oldest child of a single-mother who, after years of working in the service sector, completed her higher educational goals later in life. This positionality allowed for analytic checking and probing of the data and initial findings at each step of the analytic process with researcher one who was so closely connected to the study purpose and outcomes.

2.2 Participant Characteristics

Participants were selected based on purposeful sampling (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017) with criteria for inclusion as follows: first-generation college graduate from the University of California, Merced (UC Merced) identifying as Hmong. This campus was selected from which to draw participants as UC Merced has one of the highest first-generation college student rates (73.2%; University of California, Merced, 2019) and one of the largest Hmong student populations in the University of California system (University of California, n.d.). This study obtained six first-generation college graduate Hmong identifying participants in total. Gender was balanced with three women and three men and the age range for this group was between 25 to 28 years. All attended UC Merced between 2010-2017 earning a Bachelor's Degree.

2.3 Recruitment Procedures

For recruitment of the six interviewees, researcher one made initial informal requests to alumni from the UC Merced Hmong Student Association to be contacted formally with an email invitation to participate in the study. Potential recruits were asked to send interest via email to this researcher before formally being invited to participate in the study. After the responses were received, individual one-on-one interviews were scheduled with each participant. The interview questions and protocol were given to each participant ahead of time via email to allow for preparation of the answers and comfort in the process. The interview protocol informed them of the purpose of the study, and reasons why they were invited to participate. The participants were also provided with a copy of the informed consent for their reference and to sign and discuss upon interviews. Compensation of a $5 Starbucks gift card was also offered to every study participant.

2.4 Data Collection – Individual Interviews

The data was collected through individual interviews. Each interview took approximately 30 minutes in a safe location where the confidentiality of the participant and study was protected. The interviews were audiotaped with permission from the participant and later submitted through an online transcription service. Field notes were also taken to make note of any observations about the researcher's thoughts or ideas (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). The

audio files and transcripts were securely stored in a password protected computer hard drive. There was a master list of each participant with their pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. From there on, the assigned pseudonyms were used to identify the participants.

2.4.1 Interview Protocol

During the interview, participants were first given the letter of consent to read and sign. Next, if consent was obtained, the researcher asked 13 open-ended questions about their educational experiences from primary, intermediate, secondary, and postsecondary education. As framed by the characteristics of the CECE Model (Museus, et al., 2017), the participants were also asked to share stories on personal environmental factors which they believed influenced their decision to attend college and success to graduation. The factors centered around topics of socio-economic backgrounds, academic experiences, challenging circumstances, and other notable life experiences as adapted from Lor (2008). The purpose of these inquiry questions was to explore and understand the environmental factors which both contributed to and created barriers with which to overcome in their successfully navigation of the public schooling through to college graduation. The interviews were semi-structured to provide the researcher the flexibility to conduct the interview conversationally and to allow for follow up as needed (Korstjens & Moser, 2017).

2.4.2 Data Analysis

The interview audio files were transcribed with an online service to expedite the process and to ensure the participant's exact words were accounted for prior to analysis. After the data had been transcribed, the interviewing researcher developed initial analytic ideas (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017) in association to their field notes and based on the CCEE Model characteristics (Museus, et al., 2017). Memos were utilized to record analytic ideas and emerging findings from the transcriptions. From there, the data was analyzed by using descriptive codes which lent to sorting into categories where assigned meanings about their relationship, differences, similarities, or interactions were determined (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). Lastly, common emerging patterns and themes in alignment with the research question were identified until saturation of data has been reached. At each stage in the process, the second researcher provided analytic cross-checking with follow-up discussion to increase trustworthiness of the findings (Moser & Korstjens, 2018).

3. Findings

To answer the research questions, participant narratives were coded and grounded in the CECE Model (Museus, 2014; Museus, et al., 2017). The researchers first focused on the indicators related to culturally engaging campus environments – *cultural relevance* and *cultural responsiveness* – for initial thematic analysis. Next, the extended CECE Model indicators were utilized respective to participant narratives – *individual influences, external influences*, and *precollege inputs* – to complete the analyses.

3.1 Thematic Analysis by CECE Sections of Cultural Relevance and Cultural Responsiveness

To understand how the participants' experiences with their institution fostered and maintained culturally engaging campus environments to thrive in college (Museus, 2014; Museus, et al., 2017), the initial thematic analysis was guided by the two campus factors within the CECE Model: *Cultural Relevance of the Campus Environment* and *Cultural Responsiveness of Campus Supports*. After initial categorizing using the nine indicators within these two sections, the responses related to six indicators, three in each factor. The responses were coded and then considered in association to one another to allow the theme to emerge. Table 1 delineates the indicators with their codes and the respective emergent themes by CECE section.

Table 1: Codes, themes, and example statements for indicators within the primary CECE sections

CECE Sections	Indicator # and Title	Code	Theme	Example Statements
Cultural Relevance of Campus Environment	(1) Cultural Familiarity	peer support	positive sense of belonging	- *I was part of the Hmong Student Association over there and for a really long time they were the friends that I considered as my support throughout college…*
	(2) Cultural Relevant Knowledge	co-curricular opportunities		- *...I joined the Hmong Student Association the following semester and I participated in that organization until I graduated. I think being a part of that organization just helped me to be able to socialize a lot more, especially with Hmong people, and not only that but create an academic support system as well.*
	(3) Cultural Community Service	opportunities for students to give back		- *I was involved in the Hmong student association at UC Merced. And we did a lot of stuff, engaging with high school students and the Hmong community.*
Cultural Responsiveness of Campus Support Systems	(7) Humanized Educational Environments	care and commitment to student success	holistic supports foster belief in academic success	- *I did really well, and I think it was because of a teacher. He really encouraged me to learn and he walked me through the steps, and he made sure that I understood what I was doing within each step of solving problems.*
	(8) Proactive Philosophies	proactive in connecting students with supports		- *I had a counselor, he was pretty supportive too. He would call me in once every few months or so, and he would talk to me how I was doing. He would look at my grade, and if he saw that I was failing in one subject, he would offer help.*
	(9) Holistic Support	providing support beyond academics		- *My dad had a stroke and it really took a toll on me...being able to talk to all my advisors about it, they helped me. They helped me get through a hardship that I probably couldn't have by myself.*
CECE Sections	Indicator # and Title	Code	Theme	Example Statements
Cultural Relevance of Campus Environment	(4) Cultural Familiarity	peer support	positive sense of belonging	- *I was part of the Hmong Student Association over there and for a really long time they were the friends that I considered as my support throughout college…*
	(5) Cultural Relevant Knowledge	co-curricular opportunities		- *...I joined the Hmong Student Association the following semester and I participated in that organization until I graduated. I think being a part of that organization just helped me to be able to socialize a lot more, especially with Hmong people, and not only that but create an academic support system as well.*
	(6) Cultural Community Service	opportunities for students to give back		- *I was involved in the Hmong student association at UC Merced. And we did a lot of stuff, engaging*

				with high school students and the Hmong community.
	(10) Humanized Educational Environments	care and commitment to student success		- *I did really well, and I think it was because of a teacher. He really encouraged me to learn and he walked me through the steps, and he made sure that I understood what I was doing within each step of solving problems.*
Cultural Responsiveness of Campus Support Systems	(11) Proactive Philosophies	proactive in connecting students with supports	holistic supports foster belief in academic success	- *I had a counselor, he was pretty supportive too. He would call me in once every few months or so, and he would talk to me how I was doing. He would look at my grade, and if he saw that I was failing in one subject, he would offer help.*
	(12) Holistic Support	providing support beyond academics		- *My dad had a stroke and it really took a toll on me...being able to talk to all my advisors about it, they helped me. They helped me get through a hardship that I probably couldn't have by myself.*

The emergent theme regarding *cultural relevance of the campus environment* as a factor of college educational attainment was a positive sense of belonging on campus. Six out of six participants mentioned having a campus space where they were able to connect with peers who understood their cultural backgrounds, identities, and experiences. For example, Participant 2 noted, "I was part of the Hmong Student Association (HSA) over there and for a really long time they were the friends that I considered as my support throughout college." Next, all of the participants mentioned being a part of a co-curricular activity such as the Hmong Student Association (HSA) at UC Merced to learn about their own cultural communities. For example, Participant 4 mentioned, "I think being a part of that organization just helped me to be able to socialize a lot more, especially with Hmong people, and not only that but create an academic support system as well. Moreover, all six of the participants were provided with opportunities to give back to their community. For example, Participant 5 stated, "I was involved in the Hmong student association at UC Merced. And we did a lot of stuff, engaging with high school students and the Hmong community."

Regarding *cultural responsiveness of campus support systems*, the emergent theme was proactive holistic supports foster belief in academic success. For example, five out of six participants mentioned having opportunities to develop a relationship with staff or faculty members who cared and were committed to the student's success which, in turn, provided a sense of ability to succeed in those courses. The opposite was also noted, when Participant 4 shared how, because of a previous negative high school experience with her AP Chemistry teacher leaving her feeling "unintelligent," she avoided seeking out professor support. However, supports were also experienced beyond self-initiated. Two out of six participants expressed having a staff member proactively seek them out about different opportunities or support services. For example, Participant 3 expressed how her counselor would call her into his office every few months to see how she was doing academically and inform her of available services to help her succeed. On the other hand, Participant 5 had the opposite experience. He discussed how he felt the professors were "too busy with their research or work with the university" to check in on their students' well-being or academic needs.

3.2 Thematic Analysis by CECE Sections of External and Individual Influences and Pre-College Inputs

To understand factors of the participants' life and educational experiences which motivated their college success, the subsequent thematic analysis was guided by the CECE Model (Museus, 2014; Museus, et al., 2017) extended indicators: *external influences*, *internal influences*, and *pre-college inputs*. Again, the responses were coded and then considered in association to one another to find the emergent theme (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017).

3.2.1 External influences

Related to the external influences which motivated these first-generation Hmong American College students' academic attainment, responses revealed the theme *family support to motivate success*. Table 2 delineates the codes, respective emergent theme, and example statements by CECE Model extended section indicators.

Table 2:Codes, themes, and example statements for external influences

CECE Sections	Code	Theme	Example Statements
External Influences	parents siblings role models significant other	family support to motivate success	- *My parents, even though they didn't have much education, always encouraged me…* - *…the sisters who were able to drop down everything and just helped me, whatever I needed, helped me get through.* - *I was involved in the Hmong student association at UC Merced. And we did a lot of stuff, engaging with high school students and the Hmong community.* - *My boyfriend was always my emotional support, always there to listen to whatever I had to say to get through things with school…*

Responses highlighted support from those participants considered as *family* which included parents, siblings, extended family-members role models, and significant others. For example, Participant 1 mentioned his parents as his "backbone that propelled [him] in [his] education." They were able to financially support him with as much as they can despite being financially unstable themselves. Most importantly, all of the participants mentioned having emotional support from their family members as an influence on their education. Participant 4, for instance, explained her significant other was "[her] emotional support…always there to listen to anything about school and encourage [her]." Participant 2, shared that even though his father "did not know how to support [him] in his homework, [his] father still reminded [him] to complete homework every day after school."

3.2.2 Internal influences

Intrinsic motivation to remain resilient emerged as a salient theme from responses regarding individual influences on the academic dispositions believed to increase motivation towards graduation. These academic dispositions included academic self-efficacy, academic motivation, and intent to persist. All six of the participants recognized intrinsic dispositions which influenced their motivation for educational attainment. Table 3 presents the codes, major theme, and example statements.

Table 3: Codes, themes, and example statements for internal influences

Internal Influences	academic self-efficacy academic motivation intent to persist	intrinsic motivation to remain resilient	- *I knew I could do [school] and if I wasn't doing well, I was just being lazy….* - *My own personal ambition, along with wanting to make sure that my family is well off in the future and so that in the future, I don't want my kids to face the same struggles.* - *My motivation was thinking, 'I can prove you wrong. I can graduate.'*

To illustrate the findings, Participant 4 expressed how being "placed in a special English class as a second language learner in High School" made her feel "different from other students" because she was "not as good as [the native English speakers]." However, she explained how she harnessed "the differences to motivate [her] to strive to do better in school in order to be placed in a regular English classroom" and she kept that skill with her into college.

Another example from Participant 2 highlighted a similar intrinsically motivated drive. In this case, Participant 2 shared how he had an epiphany when school became "hard," realizing he had "to push through with or without the support of anyone else" since "[he] was getting an education for [himself] and own goals."

3.2.3 Pre-college inputs

Responses surrounding the motivating factors of pre-college inputs revealed the *overcoming barriers* in the context of growing up in a marginalized community as the salient theme. Table 4 presents an overview of the codes, major theme, and example statements for pre-college inputs.

Table 4: Codes, themes, and example statements for pre-college inputs

Pre-College Inputs	race/ethnicity	Overcoming barriers of marginalized community	- *People would say, 'What are you? Are you Chinese?' and then you tell them your're Hmong and they're like, 'What's Hmong?'*
	socio-economic status		- *I was in a Title I school, you know, a school labeled for being in a poor area…and we didn't receive supplies for home like pens or pencils."*
	parent education level		- *My parents both have little education. My mom graduated high school, but my dad never did. He had to go to adult night school later.*
	academic preparation		- *I was put in classes that did not help me for college, like because I was Hmong, I might not even go to college so why would I need those types of classes…*

Responses were deeply personal yet commonly connected through illustrations of pre-college inputs as barriers related to race/ethnicity, socio-economic circumstances, limited parent education, and an overall lack of feeling academically prepared. Overcoming these barriers seemed to be a driving force, however, for attaining education. To further explain, three out of six participants expressed experiencing race-related discrimination as a child and into college. For example, Participant 2 "moved around the Central Valley a few times during childhood" and "treated differently because of being Hmong and the lack of awareness about the Hmong [people] due to the small population at that time." After seeing and interacting with more Hmong students from middle to high school, he was able to "develop a sense of belonging, which helped [him] persist in education."

Two out of six participants mentioned low socio-economic status as a "disadvantage" in their upbringing that became a motivation for continued school success. Participant 6, for example, expressed how she "attended a poor school where there were too many kids per each teacher…students had to share desks and were crammed together in tiny rooms" so she wanted to experience "something more." Another participant shared how they "had limited supplies and things compared to other kids" which "felt like a constant disadvantage to beat."

Although each participant, due to the study selection criteria, had parents with little to no formal education, only three out of six participants noted their parents' lack of education as a pre-college input barrier to overcome. Participant 5 specifically mentioned how "[his] dad attended school for a short time in Laos" while "[his] mom did not attend school at all" and this context meant he had to "navigate school on [his] own." Another participant (4) shared that "since [her] parents didn't go to school in the US, they couldn't really help me figure things out like other kids' parents could…but this made [her] want to try harder in school, for [her parents]…and for [her family]" overall. Participant 1 expressed how "because [he] was the first in the family to attend college, [he] had to navigate the educational system [on his own]." He felt the challenge was being "unaware of what [he] wanted in terms of a major or resources available at school" which became "a motivation for [him] to learn and seek out." Lastly, five out of six participants shared feeling unprepared academically for college rooted in a lack of access to college-going supports or class placement in high school due to being Hmong and from a lower socio-economically serving school. For example, Participant 6 explained that "being at a high school where it's very low income, the graduation rate is really low too, and a lot of staff and faculty attention is more on sports…is really tough as a student who really wanted to go to college. There was no time where the school provided…a time to

sign up to go to a college to view the campus and everything like that" but she persisted anyway because she was set on going to college. Participant 2 shared how the high school education he received with the courses the counselors put him in "didn't help transition us to this post education, in a sense" because "college is such a faster pace." He also recognized that other students did seem prepared for the rigor college and that it seemed he was put into less challenging courses in high school because he "was Hmong." Realizing this as a pre-college input as barrier to overcome was a motivating factor to make college graduation a reality.

4. Discussion

The CECE Model (Museus, 2014; Museus, et al., 2017) framed this qualitative study and grounded the thematic analyses to understand participant experiences as academically attaining first-generation Hmong American college students. By understanding the factors which motivated these students towards educational success through college graduation, implications from this study alongside previous research findings and the CECE Model can provide institutions of higher education considerations when supporting other Hmong American students in reaching their educational goals in an effort to find equity for this Asian American ethnic minority.

Overall, the results of the study highlighted that access to familial support along with self-advocacy were environmental factors with a positive impact on the motivation of these Hmong American students to persist in higher education. The findings also suggest that these Hmong American students leveraged culturally relevant and responsive college campus environmental factors to overcome institutional barriers and achieve educational success. The most salient campus factors in this context are the Hmong Student Association and intentional holistic campus student supports.

4.1 Encouraging and Supportive Family Network

According to the study findings and in alignment with the Hmong cultural values (e.g., Xiong & Lam, 2013), these student participants deeply appreciated the role of family in motivating their educational attainment. The results from a higher education context extended similar findings from Lor's (2008) research on the benefits of a supportive family in Hmong children's educational experience. Additionally, all participants had parents with little to no formal education in the US or otherwise. Their parents, none-the-less, encouraged and supported each of these participants in ways which motivated success in higher education. This finding corresponds with the Vang (2005), who concluded that supportive family behaviors, such as showing interest and encouragement towards education, are the most critical contributions a family can make in helping Hmong American children find success in school. Furthermore, similar to the findings of Mao, Deenanath, and Xiong, (2012) and Xiong and Lam (2013), many of the participants mentioned parents instilled the vision of higher education as being the key to financial stability and social mobility to increase opportunities for the entire family.

4.2 Finding Aspirations in Family Role Models

Another important motivating factor in persisting through higher education for these Hmong American participants were role models. Seeing other family members and friends attend and graduate college, particularly for Hmong American females, also emerged as an inspiring factor. Female participants noted how they viewed these women as trailblazers in shifting traditional cultural norms and mindsets making college graduation a concrete reality. This finding is consistent with Lee's (1997) research on the ways nontraditional Hmong American women impacted young Hmong females as role models especially for continued education and achieving other life aspirations beyond cultural gender-normed roles. Neither female nor male participants, as Hmong college graduates, mentioned intergenerational rifts or traditional expectations as challenging their educational journey, which suggests that the inverse of previous research (Cha, 2010; Her & Gloria, 2015; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Peng & Solheim, 2015; Truong & Miller, 2018) on these topics may also be true–family support with acceptance of potential traditional cultural shifts through the educational experience of female and male Hmong American students was important in persisting through school, even under the most challenging and marginalizing contexts.

4.3 Break from Traditional Gender Roles

Traditional cultural norms can create educational barriers for Hmong Americans, in particular to women (Lee, 1997; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Peng & Solheim, 2015). Typical gendered roles for women include maintaining only aspirations of becoming a childbearing wife (Lee, 1997; Ngo & Lee, 2007) and, thus, educational support going to sons more so than to daughters (Cha, 2010; Her & Gloria, 2016) increasing barriers to graduation from high school and even attending college (Peng & Solheim, 2015). However, in this study, female participants did not mention these types of gender role struggles. Instead, female participant responses highlighted the ways in which parents encouraged their pursuit of higher education. These findings are similar to Vang's (2018) study on the ecological factors in Hmong American students' educational success and a shift in the numbers for Hmong females versus males enrolling in higher education as well as the work of Takahashii and Nottbohm (2019) illustrating a significant increase college graduation rates for Hmong females as compared to their male counterparts. These study findings do not, however, illuminate how Hmong American male college graduation attainment was impacted by respective gendered expectations.

4.4 Importance of Hmong Student Associations to Foster Cultural Relevance

Each of the study participants emphasized their participation with their University's Hmong Student Association (HSA). Findings suggest that experiences and time within HSAs are valuable in providing a sense of belonging which is a key component of fostering cultural relevance within the CECE Model (Museus, 2014; Museus, et al., 2017). This included participants feeling motivated to persist in college as the HSA provided a space to connect with like-minded peers with similar values, struggles, and life goals. The HSA also provided participants with mentors with whom they felt comfortable to discuss challenging situations related to school and the Hmong student experience. For some participants, this mentor relationship kept them from dropping out of college entirely. Furthermore, being of Hmong descent, they understood the struggles of their community and HSA empowered them to contribute to the community by working with local Hmong high school students and the campus by hosting cultural events for increasing overall awareness of the Hmong culture and people. In these ways, the HSA also cultivated cultural relevance through the areas of cultural community service and familiarity which again led to a deeper sense of belonging which motivated these students in reaching their educational goals in higher education. The inverse was also emerged as true for these students throughout campus. In other campus contexts, these Hmong American students, in alignment with the Model Minority Myth (e.g., Her, 2014; Kwan, 2015; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Poon et al., 2016), felt marginalized, misunderstood, and overlooked when other students and faculty seemed unaware of the Hmong culture and language or how their experiences and needs may be different from other Asian American groups. The findings of this study, then, suggest that the HSA provided a level of cultural relevance to motivate these Hmong American students when cultural responsiveness was lacking; however, this is noted with hesitance since it is not suggested that campuses only need an HSA, or similar organizations, to meet the needs of marginalized students without working to cultivate an overall more inclusive environment across campus. Instead, it should be understood that the HSA is an important component to an overall system of support in a culturally engaging campus environment to motivate student such as the ones in this study to persist through to college graduation.

4.5 Culturally Responsive Holistic Campus Supports

The study findings highlighted the ways in which the campus environment, when culturally responsive holistic supports are provided to students, can assist Hmong students greatly in overcoming barriers to education. Along with the availability of the HSA, participants noted a range of campus supports, from counseling social-emotional needs and guiding academic decision making as critical to their educational attainment in higher education. Furthermore, students also expressed how campus spaces without a culturally responsive environment created additional barriers which had to be overcome through previously mentioned external and internal factors. These findings contribute to the small body of literature which illustrates how campuses can shape environments which positively impact Hmong American enrollment and graduation rates (Takahashii & Nottbohm, 2019; Vang, 2018)

when fostering a sense of belonging and providing accessible and welcoming academic supports (Ngo & Lee, 2007; Lee & Author, 2020).

While the HSA was one way campus environments cultivated a sense of belonging for these Hmong American students, the responses also suggest that increasing access to Hmong staff and faculty would also aid in deepening cultural relevance of the campus environment. These findings are supported by the work of Takahashi and Nottbohm's (2019) where Hmong student sense of belonging on campus was positively associated with intentional efforts to increase number of Hmong faculty and staff from entry-level to administrative leaders on its campus over the years. Thus, campuses with Hmong American populations should not only work to institute a thriving HSA but also consider how to develop cultural relevance through hiring practices for increasing Hmong staff and faculty.

5. Conclusion

The results of this study were consistent with previous literature regarding the relationship between support systems and educational barriers with the academic attainment first-generation Hmong American college students. As illustrated by Lee (1997) and Vang (2005) having a supportive family, role models, and a sense of belonging on campus impacted student motivation to persist in school (Vang, 2005; Lee, 1997). While barriers such as poverty, discrimination, and family education level can impede educational attainment for these traditionally marginalized students (Paik, 2007; Lee, 1997; Xiong, 2012), the academically attaining Hmong American students in this study used intrinsic and extrinsic factors to overcome these barriers (pre-college inputs) and graduate from college. Specifically, participants drew upon academic and personal dispositions along with family support networks to remain resilient and motivated during their academic journey through higher education. The study findings reinforce the importance of internal and external factors–supportive family, seeing success through family role models, breaking gender roles–in the educationally attaining Hmong American students' higher education journey. The results also highlight the continued marginalization of Hmong American students through various pre-college inputs and campus experiences which continue to reinforce the MMM and create institutional barriers to educational attainment. Hmong Student Associations (HSAs), and intentional holistic campus supports emerged as important motivational campus environmental factors for these first-generation Hmong American college graduates and could have potential to provide the same support for similar students in other higher educational contexts. Further research into successful Hmong experiences in education would continue social justice advocacy for this Southeast Asian community within the US and globally.

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Notes

Note 1. This is an example.

Note 2. This is an example for note 2.