"Fuel To Complete My Degree": Hmong College Students' (In)Validating Advising Experiences

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Using validation theory as the guiding framework, this qualitative study explored the advising experiences of 16 Hmong college students. Most participants described instances of advising that were academically and interpersonally validating. Several participants also described instances of invalidating advising experiences. This study highlights how validating and invalidating advising experiences impact their persistence in college and graduation from college. Implications for future research and advising practice are provided.

[doi:10.12930/NACADA-23-35]

KEY WORDS: Hmong students, validation theory, persistence, graduation

College enrollment among Hmong Americans has increased by more than 5%, from 23.4% in 2010 to 28.6% in 2021 (U.S. Census Bureau). During this same period, there has been approximately a 2% increase in Hmong Americans aged 25 or older who attended college but did not earn a degree (an increase from 17.4% to 19.3%). This trend suggests that colleges and universities are struggling to support Hmong student progress towards graduation; therefore, increased scholarly attention to the factors contributing to their college success is warranted. Research indicated that engagement with advising contributes to college student success outcomes including persistence and graduation (Mayhew et al., 2016). However, the broader advising literature (Baber, 2018; Zhang, 2016) and literature on Hmong college students (Xiong, 2019, 2021a; Xiong & Lam, 2013; Xiong & Lee, 2011) have not specifically explored the advising experiences of this population. There is limited understanding about how advising impacts Hmong student persistence and graduation. Given the critical role of advising in college student success, understanding Hmong students' advising experiences is important if institutions are to provide the support this population needs.

This qualitative study used Rendón's (1994) validation theory to better understand this population's advising experiences. All students in the study were Hmong students who are persisting towards graduation or who have graduated. Two primary research questions guided the current study: (1) What are Hmong students' validating and invalidating experiences with advising? (2) How do validating and invalidating advising experiences impact the persistence and graduation of Hmong students?

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

This section briefly describes Rendón's (1994) validation theory and explores relevant literature on how validation theory allows scholars to understand student advising experiences. It also recaps literature on Hmong students' experiences with advising.

Validation Theory

Research suggests that validating experiences can positively impact student success outcomes in college (Nora et al., 2011; Rendón & Muñoz, 2011), including validating experiences engaging with advisors. Specifically, validation—as opposed to other constructs such as involvement (Astin, 1984) and integration (Tinto, 1994)—when gleaned from advising, contributes to persistence and improved graduation rates because validation can increase involvement and influence integration (Barnett, 2011; Xiong, 2021b). Rendón (1994) proposed two types of validation: academic and interpersonal. Academic validation occurs when institutional agents build student academic confidence; examples include actively seeking out students, providing them with academic assistance, and communicating their potential for successful. Interpersonal validation occurs when institutional agents engage in actions that support students' personal and social development; examples include offering encouraging words during challenging times or providing holistic support beyond academic needs. In this study, validation theory assessed the impact that validating and invalidating advising experiences had on Hmong students, particularly their persistence in and graduation from college.

Advising and Validation

While scholars have frequently used validation theory to understand student experiences with faculty (Acevedo-Gil et al., 2015; Alcantar & Hernandez, 2018; Zhang & Ozuna, 2015), fewer studies have used this theory to explore student experiences with advisors. Some scholars have explored advising experiences from the student perspective. Baber's (2018) qualitative study used validation theory to explore the advising experiences of urban community college students. Baber (2018) found that urban community college students experienced academic and interpersonal validation when professional advisors affirmed existing motivations, communicated high expectations, and provided proactive support. These validating actions positively shaped academic aspirations and confidence, contributing to student persistence and retention. On the other hand, Zhang's (2016) qualitative study used validation theory to explore the advising experiences of international students in community colleges. Zhang (2016) found that they encountered invalidating experiences when professional advisors were not equipped to address their needs or when they provided inaccurate or delayed information. Such invalidating advising experiences negatively impacted international students' academic confidence to complete their degree. These findings highlight how validating actions can positively impact the experiences and outcomes of students in college while invalidating actions can have a negative impact.

Several scholars have explored validation from the perspective of individuals who deliver advising (Blakely, 2021; Floyd-Peoples, 2016; Xiong et al., 2016). Xiong et al.'s (2016) qualitative study, for example, used validation theory to explore counselors as validating agents for men of color's success in community colleges. Their study, which focused on Black, Latino, and Southeast Asian men, found that counselors provided academic and interpersonal validation by affirming to men of color that they are capable learners, providing active academic support and positive reinforcement, connecting them to faculty and staff with shared identities and background, and communicating a mutual partnership in the advising experience. Counselors perceived these validating actions as critical to creating an affirming and supportive environment for men of color to thrive and succeed in college. Floyd-Peoples' (2016) qualitative study provided similar validating actions that contributed to increased engagement and success of African American students attending Historically Black Colleges and Universities. These findings show how some advisors perceive themselves to be engaging in validating actions for student success.

Advising and Hmong Students

Despite these studies, scholars have not yet used validation theory to explore the advising experiences of Hmong students. However, research on Hmong students' interactions with advisors is considerable. For example, Lor (2008) conducted a qualitative study on the experiences that contributed to the success of 18 Hmong college students. They found that professional advisors and academic counselors who provided safe, supportive, and welcoming environments became key individuals for those transitioning to, thriving in, and graduating from college. Lor's (2008) findings underscore the significance of advising for the success of Hmong students in higher education.

Some scholars have examined the frequency of Hmong students' use of on-campus services including advising services. For example, Xiong (2021a) conducted a quantitative study to examine use of on-campus services among 605 community college students from Southeast Asian ethnic backgrounds. They found that academic advising/counseling services were the most frequently used services among Hmong participants (75%), far more than other services such as transfer (40.5%) and career (38.2%) services. Xiong (2021a) also found that Hmong students used academic advising/counseling services far more frequently than Cambodian, Vietnamese, and other Southeast Asian students. These findings indicate that Hmong students do use advising services often, likely more frequently than their Southeast Asian counterparts.

Other scholars have examined factors impacting Hmong students' use of advising services. Xiong and Lee (2011) conducted a mixed-methods study to examine 55 Hmong university students' experiences with services from academic support programs. Xiong and Lee (2011) found that Hmong students frequently used advising services from academic support programs. Additionally, advising services ranked in the top three most useful services academic support programs provided. However, findings from Xiong and Lee (2011) pinpointed factors impacting Hmong students' decreased use of academic support program services, including advising services. This study found that an unsupportive and unwelcoming environment contributed

to participants' reduced use of academic support program and advising services. Other studies confirm these findings and suggest that the quality of Hmong students' advising experiences impact their perception of the usefulness of advising and shape future engagement with academic advisors (Xiong, 2019; Xiong & Lam, 2013).

In summary, while the aforementioned studies suggested that students encountered both validating and invalidating advising experiences in college, there is no research to date that has explored the specific instances of validation and invalidation Hmong students encountered in their advising experiences. Moreover, there is limited understanding of how these experiences impact Hmong students' persistence in and graduation from college. Therefore, this study represents an important contribution to the theory of validation and to the broader advising literature.

Methodology

This study drew data from The Hmong College Student Success Project, a national qualitative study that a team of researchers conducted to explore the lived experiences of 137 Hmong students navigating their ways to and through college. According to Van Manen (1990), *hermeneutic phenomenology* describes the essence of individuals' lived experiences with the phenomenon of interest. This phenomenological approach is relevant to advising and can help advisors better understand advisees' lived experiences (Champlin-Scharff, 2010). The tenets of hermeneutic phenomenology led this study to focus specifically on Hmong students' lived experiences with advising to assess the impact of validating and invalidating advising experiences.

Participants

Three purposeful sampling techniques helped to recruit participants for the larger study (Patton, 2002). First, the research team sought potential participants through their social networks using the following selection criteria to identify information-rich cases (criterion sampling): (1) self-identify as Hmong, (2) are age 18 and older, and (3) have matriculated into an institution of higher education. Then snowball sampling identified additional participants beyond the research team's social networks by asking participants to share the study with individuals in their networks who meet the established selection criteria for participation. Lastly, maximum variation sampling ensured that the sample reflected a wide range of perspectives (e.g., age, gender, academic degrees, college majors).

This study analyzed trajectory analysis statements of 16 Hmong students (10 female, six male) from the larger study who described their advising experiences. Participant ages were 18 to 52 and consisted of currently enrolled students and college graduates. The highest degree completed or currently being pursued by participants ranged from associate degrees to professional and doctoral degrees. Participants are pursuing or have completed degrees from different types of institutions across the U.S., with 12 participants in public, two-year or four-year institutions on the west coast; one participant in a private law school; and two participants in public, four-year institutions in the Midwest; and one participant in a private, for-profit online institution. A detailed breakdown of participant demographic information is presented in Table 1.

Data Collection

Participants constructed individual narrative essays, known as trajectory analysis statements (Harper, 2007; Vasquez Urias et al., 2017; Xiong, 2023), which focused on their lived experiences navigating to and through college. These essays focused on critical moments, experiences, and individuals that positively impacted their educational trajectory. Specifically, participants wrote direct accounts of what happened in that moment, experience, and/or interaction, to describe in detail how these factors contributed to their success pre-college, during college, and post-college, respectively. Trajectory analysis statements were collected through a protocol writing process administered via Qualtrics.

Data Analysis

I downloaded the trajectory analysis statements from Qualtrics, assigned each participant a Hmong pseudonym, and used the free and open-source software QualCoder version 3.3 for analysis (Curtain, 2023). I used a combination of wholistic, detailed, and selective reading approaches to isolate thematic statements as described by Van Manen (1990) for thematic analysis. First, the wholistic reading approach allowed me to review each trajectory analysis statement as a whole and develop an overall understanding of the advising experience. I then read each trajectory analysis statement several times and used the selective reading approach to highlight statements and phrases that seemed essential to

Table 1. Participant Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Enrollment	Highest Degree	Major
Choj	18–24	Male	Current	Bachelor	English
Foom	18–24	Male	Current	Bachelor	Communication
Iab	25–31	Female	Graduated	Master	Counseling
Maiv Ntxawm	25–31	Female	Graduated	Master	Counseling
Maiv Ntxhoo	25–31	Female	Graduated	Master	Counseling
Maiv Tsheej	18–24	Female	Current	Bachelor	Psychology
Maiv Tsu	39–45	Female	Graduated	Associate	Child Development
Maiv Xis	39–45	Female	Graduated	Bachelor	Social Work
Maiv Xyooj	46–52	Female	Graduated	Master	Student Affairs
Maiv Zuag	32–38	Female	Graduated	Master	Counseling
Ntxawm	39–45	Female	Graduated	Master	Counseling
Tswb	25–31	Male	Current	Associate	Nursing
Tub	25–31	Male	Current	Associate	Nursing
Txos	25–31	Male	Current	Doctorate	Culture and Teaching
Yis	18–24	Male	Current	Bachelor	Public Health
Zaub	32–38	Female	Current	Professional	Law

understanding the advising experience. A detailed reading approach led me to examine pertinent statements and phrases for commonalities in their descriptions of the advising experience; these commonalities helped to discern thematic aspects of the experience. To ensure trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1986), I discussed the findings with a peer debriefer who has insider knowledge as a Hmong college graduate, academic counselor, and qualitative researcher.

Positionality

I identify as a Hmong American student affairs educator who has experience as a professional and faculty advisor at an Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institution (AANAPISI) on the west coast of the U.S. I have experience advising students from ethnically diverse backgrounds, including Hmong students, in a student affairs graduate preparation program and in programs designed to increase access and success of underrepresented students in higher education. I have also personally experienced the positive impact advising can have on Hmong students like me to persist and graduate college. These identities and experiences informed my study.

Findings

Three themes emerged from the data: (1) academically validating advising experiences, (2) interpersonally validating advising experiences, and (3) invalidating advising experiences.

Theme 1: Academically Validating Advising Experiences

Nine participants reported instances of academic validation in their advising experiences. These instances included advisors in a supportive environment who affirmed students' ability to succeed, valued their life story, recognized their cultural backgrounds, and provided proactive advising support. For example, Tub wrote about the academic validation he received from a community college counselor in the United Southeast-Asian American Academic (USEAA) program to successfully transfer from a community college to a university:

> I remembered how embarrassed I was about my first few years of college and how many C's, D's, and F's I had on my transcript. However, she made me feel good, positive, and most importantly believed in me. . .this was the critical moment in my educational experience that enabled me to get my foot into the door, to truly feel as if I belonged, to believe that I could make it just like everyone else, to not be ashamed of my bad semesters. . .it took me longer than the average student to transfer out of a community college to a four-year university, however, at the time it felt like the biggest accomplishment.

Tub's comments show how having a genuine belief in a student's ability to be successful, and authentically communicating this belief, can be crucial in increasing Hmong students' sense of

belonging and academic confidence to persist toward degree completion.

Similarly, Maiv Tsheej discussed the academic validation she received from an academic counselor to thrive in college and pursue graduate school:

> I remember my first year of college I would see her all the time because I was unsure and lost with my classes. She reassured me that there were many resources for me to use on campus. She made sure that I got the help I needed. . .she was great at answering my questions through email in a timely manner. Which was very awesome to have someone that you can count on for help. . .she recommended that I gain some experience that would help me apply for graduate school- . . .she also helped me out with my personal statement. . .she helped me with any questions I was confused about on my graduate application. . .she definitely went out of her way and provided me with all the important information needed.

Maiv Tsheej's comments emphasize the importance of advisors who are available, accessible, and responsive to student needs—including advisors who proactively provide Hmong students access to information, resources, and support critical to their success during and after college.

Several participants discussed the academic validation they received from professional advisors and academic counselors who were also Hmong. Maiv Ntxhoo, for example, described the academic validation she received from a Hmong academic counselor in the Educational Opportunity Program:

> My counselor came from the same ethnic, religion, and similar background. . .Being Hmong, we both came from a relatable background. It was easier to open up to him because he was more likely to understand my challenges, my adversities, my beliefs, and factors that influence my education and decisions. During our first meeting, I immediately felt like we connected. We discussed my academics, goals, aspirations, hopes as well as family, relationships, and life in general. After our first session, I continually returned to meet with him and reached out to him for support. . .aside from academics, he provided motivation and emotional support.

Maiv Ntxhoo's comments highlight how advisors with shared identities, backgrounds, or common experiences, can contribute to Hmong students feeling more comfortable in trusting, seeking, and receiving support from advisors. This example also shows the critical act of investing time to learn about Hmong students' aspirations, goals, and life story—all important elements for relationship building and finding points of connection and relatability.

Theme 2: Interpersonally Validating Advising Experiences

Six participants reported instances of interpersonal validation in their advising experiences. Participants experienced interpersonal validation when navigating academic and personal difficulties. For example, Maiv Xis discussed the advising experience with an academic counselor when she was contemplating returning to college as a married mother of two who worked full-time:

> I walked out of the appointment with so much more confidence than before. During the appointment, I expressed how I felt, and the counselor listened to me. What I learned from this meeting was that his wife did not pursue her educational goals until she was 40 years old. . .just hearing this story made me realize it's not about how fast or the age you graduate that matters. It's about setting your own goals and how you'll accomplish those goals using a roadmap that'll best fit your situation.

Maiv Xis went on to describe the words of encouragement she received from her academic counselor at the end of their appointment: "I am so proud of you for making the decision to come back because I know it wasn't an easy choice for you, but by you returning, it tells me you are determined." The academic counselor's words of encouragement and use of self-disclosure were critical to building the academic confidence of Hmong students like Maiv Xis who hold multiple roles while navigating competing responsibilities outside of school. Her comments also illustrate the importance of feeling heard in their interactions with advisors.

Iab echoed the same sentiment in describing her interaction with a professional advisor when

she was academically dismissed in her first year of college. As the first in her family to move away for college, and coming from a family where honor, culture, and education were highly valued, she felt an immense amount of pressure not to fail:

> I was repeatedly on academic probation and was dismissed by my third quarter. . .I cried in the shower and held myself as if any second I could fall apart. I had thoughts of suicide because I would rather face death than failure. But I had one person who never judged me and listened to my challenges. That person was my academic advisor. She listened to my story, provided me with guidance, showed genuine empathy, and was nonjudgmental. She did not create additional pressure; instead, she provided a safe space for me to express my setbacks and progress. I felt as if I was no longer alone or judged for my academic performance. . .without her, I may not have graduated.

Iab's comments reflect the characteristics of advisors who Hmong students perceive to make them feel heard. This included advisors who are nonjudgmental, empathetic, and can create a safe space for them to process and reflect on sensitive, challenging, and difficult topics impacting their academic progress.

For Maiv Xyooj, her professional advisor from the Student Support Services program supported her in navigating a death in the family. As she noted,

> While in college, one of my brothers passed away from suicide. Through this difficult time, [my advisor] worked with the Dean of Students office to notify my professors and did everything possible afterwards to help me through this painful period. I learned that a good advisor helps you find important things when you lose them, like your smile, your hope, and your courage.

Through this validating interpersonal experience, Maiv Xyooj shared: "I felt welcomed, that I mattered, and that I was meant to be in college. They are committed and dedicated to seeing students succeed. Without their relentless guidance and mentoring, I would not have completed my undergraduate degree." This example demonstrates the importance of providing proactive and holistic support for Hmong students as they navigate personal and academic difficulties, and of maintaining continuous support afterwards to reinforce their sense of belonging in college and academic confidence to persist toward graduation.

Theme 3: Invalidating Advising Experiences

Three participants reported invalidating experiences with advising. Maiv Ntxawm described an instance of interpersonal invalidation that she encountered with an academic counselor from the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP):

> I also had a not-so-great experience with an EOP counselor who singled me out as "passive" because "it's how Asian women are." I remember leaving his office crying and wished no one else would feel that way. I had to attend therapy to address the issue as it was very detrimental to my daily functioning. After completing therapy, I felt better and understood why I felt the way I did and how his comment was incorrect.

Maiv Ntxawm's comments show how interpersonal invalidation can impact the mental health, including emotional, psychological, and social well-being, of Hmong students.

Maiv Ntxawm was not alone; another student, Txos, also shared an invalidating experience with his professional advisor:

> I did not like my advisor, so I only went when I needed confirmation on my academic plan. This meant I figured out what I needed on my own and sent it in to get it looked over once before I registered for my classes. I felt my advisor was not welcoming, did not have my best interest, and also did not want to meet with me. I remember my advisor would not sign off on one of my classes and made me walk to the registrar to get the signature. I asked the registrar if my counselor could have signed off on it and they told me yes.

Txos' comments illustrate the impact of academic invalidation on a student's perception of whether or not their engagement is desired and how that perception impacts their engagement with advisors. Similarly, Tswb also described an invalidating experience with an academic counselor from the nursing program. The academic

counselor told him his 3.6 grade point average was not good enough for the nursing field:

> Never in my life had I ever felt like I wasn't enough or told I wasn't cut out for something until I met that nursing counselor. I still remember her telling me my grades were not cut out to be a nurse. . .She went on telling me that I should consider changing majors and that I wasn't meant to be a nurse. That sense of discouragement that day was something I didn't expect, and it really made my time at [university] a difficult experience. . .That nursing counselor made a dent in me that took many years for me to recover from.

This exchange caused Tswb to switch his major multiple times in the next two years and later withdraw from that university completely. However, determined to become a nurse, he went on to complete all nursing prerequisite coursework at a different institution and was accepted into that nursing program. He will graduate this semester and never forgot what that academic counselor told him: "I remembered to take that nursing counselor's message to heart and used it as fuel to complete my degree in nursing." This example shows how academic invalidation can create barriers that impact the academic behaviors, choices, aspirations, and achievements of Hmong students like Tswb.

Discussion and Implications

Findings from this study illuminate the validating and invalidating advising experiences of Hmong students and have important implications to help build the capacity of advisors in supporting the success of Hmong students. These findings provide further support for Lor's (2008) study, which indicated that advising can be a positive contributor to the success of Hmong college students. Indeed, previous research has also identified advising services as the most frequently used campus services among Hmong college students (Xiong, 2019; Xiong & Lee, 2011). However, these studies did not examine factors that contribute to the increased use of advising services. Findings from the current study show that academic and interpersonal validation may contribute to increased use of advising services. This study also highlights how invalidating advising experiences can contribute to a decreased use of advising services among Hmong students, as demonstrated in previous studies (Xiong & Lam, 2013; Xiong & Lee, 2011). What this study adds to the literature is that Hmong students have experienced both validating and invalidating advising experiences. In particular, this study adds empirical evidence of how validating and invalidating advising experiences impact their persistence and graduation.

The first implication relates to academic and interpersonal validation. The findings from this study indicate that validating advising experiences can positively impact Hmong students' academic confidence and personal and social development, which in turn also contributes to their persistence and graduation. Advisors working with Hmong students need to understand the importance of an academically and interpersonally validating advising experience for Hmong student success and incorporate that understanding into their interactions. To be perceived as academically validating, for example, advisors should communicate genuine commitment to student success and an authentic belief in their academic abilities to succeed. Advisors can do this by communicating validating messages to Hmong students such as, "I am here for you," "I want to see you succeed," "You belong in college," and "I know you will be successful in college." Advisors should also actively reach out to Hmong students and communicate that their engagement is both welcomed and desired. This message can include proactively sharing information about the advisor's availability, where to schedule an appointment, and how they can work collaboratively to achieve student goals.

To be perceived as interpersonally validating, advisors should invest time to learn about Hmong students' cultural background and life stories. Such information can help advisors understand the cultural context that shapes the decision-making process of Hmong students and allow advisors to provide proactive, continuous, and holistic support for them as they navigate academic and personal challenges. To create the conditions needed for Hmong students to feel comfortable disclosing and processing academic and personal difficulties, the findings from this study suggest that an advisor should be an active listener, nonjudgmental, empathetic, and encouraging. Advisors should also consider how having a shared identity, background, or common understanding of Hmong student experiences, and using appropriate self-disclosure to share that information, can contribute to validating advising experiences for Hmong students.

The second implication relates to academic and interpersonal invalidation. This study indicates that invalidating advising experiences can negatively impact Hmong students' mental health, help-seeking behavior, and time to degree completion. Advisors must understand the detrimental impacts of an academically and interpersonally invalidating advising experience and make efforts to limit such experiences. For an advisor not to be perceived as invalidating, for example, they should avoid biases in selecting who they want to work with or support. Specifically, advisors should avoid verbal and nonverbal communication suggesting that they do not want to interact with or support Hmong students. Advisors should also avoid racial and gender stereotypes that create self-doubt, lower self-esteem, and decrease confidence in the academic abilities of Hmong students. Advisors should also avoid acting as gatekeepers to certain academic majors or career choices for Hmong students. Although the students in this study who reported instances of invalidation persisted and graduated, advisors should not create additional institutional barriers and challenges for Hmong students to navigate during their time in college.

The third implication relates to professional growth and development. Advising administrators and institutional leaders should provide access to professional growth and development opportunities that build the capacity of advisors to effectively validate Hmong students. Based on the findings of this study, advisors could benefit from training on topics such as validation theory, welcoming engagement messages, microaggressions, explicit and implicit biases, and cultural considerations in advising Hmong students. While most of these training topics can increase the effectiveness of advisors to validate all students, it may have an intensified benefit for Hmong students specifically as identified by participants in the current study. As such, advising administrators and institutional leaders should consider introducing these topics as part of the onboarding process for new advisors. They should also allocate sufficient financial resources to support the ongoing professional growth and development of current advisors so they can provide validating advising experiences.

The final implication relates to limitations of the current study. This study only focused on Hmong students who are currently enrolled or have graduated from college and their advising experiences with professional advisors and academic counselors. As such, future studies should explore the advising experiences of Hmong students and their interactions with peer advisors and faculty advisors as well. I encourage future studies to also include Hmong students who have stopped out or dropped out. Findings from such studies would provide advisors, advising administrators, and institutional leaders with greater insights on how student advising experiences may vary by status (e.g., current student, college graduate, stop out, drop out) and advisor type (e.g., peer advisor, faculty advisor, professional advisor, academic counselors) and consider these collective experiences when creating a validating advising model that supports the success of Hmong students.

Conclusion

This study explored Hmong students advising experiences. It underscores the importance of validation on their college success, and shows that validating advising experiences contribute to persistence and graduation of Hmong students; conversely, invalidating advising experiences may delay their persistence toward graduation. Hopefully this study can lead to more validating advising experiences for Hmong students in college, and in turn contribute to their increased persistence and graduation.

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