

'Why Would We Want Those Students Here?': Bridges and Barriers to Building Campus Community Partnerships. *

By

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Abstract

The Hmong American Studies Initiative (HASI) at our Midwestern university had the promise and potential to become one of the first comprehensive Hmong American, community-supported academic programs in the U.S. Through four years of work to start and develop this program (2002-2006), we have learned many lessons regarding bridges and barriers to building campus-community partnerships. Here we highlight the benefits of HASI and the underlying politics that, in our view, have determined funding decisions and influenced campus-community relations. Included in this discussion are insights gained from dozens of meetings with Hmong American community leaders and students, university faculty and administrators, as well as personal interviews and group planning sessions. Drawing on our experiences during this multi-year project, we will share what we have done, what we have learned and where we are now. In the process, we would like to raise a timely question: Is it possible to build an academic program that seriously, substantively takes into account the values and perspectives of an ethnic community?

Introduction

Hmong American studies is a very new and radical idea. Yet, interdisciplinary attention to this field is clearly on the rise, as indicated by the expanding list of M.A. theses and Ph.D. dissertations now available. Correspondingly, the number of scholars in

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this field – many of Hmong descent -- also is increasing. Across the country, we see widespread interest in exploring possibilities for developing Hmong American studies in higher education, a national movement with special significance for an ethnic group which has made outstanding progress (economically, politically, socially) in the U.S., but which is well aware of the need to continue moving forward. To us, this surge in interest represents an important aspect of the next phase in the adaptation of Hmong Americans to U.S. society. Having established themselves as entitled to the same rights and opportunities as other citizens in our undeniably multicultural society, Hmong Americans are becoming more visible and vocal in asking that community concerns be addressed in institutions of higher learning. In this article, we describe the breakthroughs and barriers that we experienced in bringing forward a proposal to add a comprehensive Hmong American component to a public university agenda for dealing with diversity.

Here we must acknowledge that for those of us who work closely with people in the community, the line between what is personal and what is scholarly is not always clear cut. In many situations, one blurs into the other, significantly influencing how we see issues in the community and on campus. Informed by the feelings, convictions, disappointments and ongoing struggles of the people we encounter, our work has become interpretive (rather than strictly reportorial) and autoethnographic (involved in rather than distant from the realities of people commonly marginalized in conventional academic discourse). In ways that we believe are both necessary and productive, we are affected -- intellectually no less than personally -- by those whom we meet in each of the two worlds we inhabit.

Speaking in support of community perspectives on the need for institutional

change, we realize that we have taken, in some instances, a positional stance that is “against the grain” of scholarly objectivity. Nonetheless, the questions that we raise are compelling within the broader context of critically examining the opportunities and limitations of a pluralistically changing America. Along with members of other ethnic groups who have been too long excluded from full representation and participation in higher education, we must ask: Are university educators and administrators willing to learn from the communities that they serve? Indeed, is academic knowledge capable of service to society? Can voices of enlightened reason among university administrators in particular speak out for political as well as educational change, so that campus-community partnerships can be built on a foundation of mutual respect? Overall, what is the role of institutionally-constructed knowledge and the responsibility of those who wield it in society? We readily admit that the full scope of campus-community politics is beyond our grasp. Instead of speculating too much on what we do not know, what we can do here is explain our efforts on campus and in the community to initiate a Hmong American studies program, including how that endeavor has given us new insights into the importance of Hmong American values and viewpoints.

Overview

To provide a clear view of this multi-year project, we have organized this essay into three main sections. In Part One, “Impetus for a Hmong American Studies Program,” we assess the need for its implementation. We also briefly review the development of the Hmong American community in southeastern Wisconsin, offering a glimpse of the “state of the community” as it enters the 21st century.

In Part Two, “From ‘Lost Generation’ to ‘Bridge Generation’: The Educational

Experiences of Hmong American Students,” we draw on the insights of students who often experience higher education as a complex process of both self-discovery and fulfillment of obligations to others. Each student responds to this demanding situation differently, as shown by vivid personal commentaries. Informed by their insights, we suggest a new model of generating and circulating knowledge, particularly in terms of how we can create purposeful and sustained interaction between students and community elders, whose cultural wisdom is a rich, yet largely untapped, educational resource.

In Part Three, “Institutional Barriers To Program Building,” we focus specifically on the hurdles – including outright prejudice and covert discrimination – that we have encountered in our attempt to establish a permanent campus base for HASI. Although no one has directly denied the potential benefits of such a program, its value adheres more in principle than in practice on campus. Institutional barriers remain the biggest obstacle to building equitable campus-community partnerships.

Part One: Impetus for a Hmong American Studies Program

Why is there a need for a Hmong American studies program? This has been one of the driving questions of our project from the start. One answer is to point to major community developments in the Midwest and across the United States during the past thirty years, changes suggesting that steps toward creating such a program are timely. Since 1976, when Hmong first arrived in the U.S. as refugee immigrants of the Vietnam War, the Hmong population in this country has grown to at least 180,000-225,000.¹ Initially, the majority settled on the West Coast. However, the past decade has seen a definite shift to the Midwestern states, specifically Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan – the three states where nearly 50% of all Hmong in the U.S. reside. Many factors have

been cited for this secondary migration, including economic and educational opportunities enabling Hmong American families to pursue a better life.

Wisconsin's Hmong population stands at 33,000-40,000. Of these, 8,000-12,000 live in Milwaukee County.² The Hmong American community in Milwaukee, as in other major cities across the country, is thriving with many small businesses (restaurants, grocery stores, video rental, laundromat and dry cleaning services, travel agencies, translation/interpretation companies, and more), Hmong language radio programs, a community newspaper printed in both Hmong and English, Hmong-owned and operated health clinics – dental, medical and chiropractic – and many social service organizations. As people in the community have emphasized to us, Hmong Americans are shifting their focus in an economically and socially significant way: they are making the transition from meeting basic survival needs – which necessarily preoccupied the first generation during the 1970s and 1980s – to pursuing and achieving an American dream of their own imagining.

Hmong Americans are making slow but steady progress toward full integration into U.S. society. From 1989 to 1999, for example, national statistics indicate that the percentage of Hmong Americans living under the poverty line decreased from 66% to 37%. According to the 2000 national census, Hmong Americans had the lowest average per capita income of any ethnic group, \$6,613.00. However, in our home state of Wisconsin, the employment rate for able-bodied Hmong residents is 91%; their median income is \$36,000; and their home ownership rate is over 50%. Across the state, men and women are contributing to the economy as entrepreneurs, artists, assembly workers, welders, doctors, police officers, lawyers, teachers, and in many other jobs. As people

carve a productive niche for themselves and become more firmly established socially, culturally and economically, how has their sense of community, identity and belonging changed? This is one of the profound questions regarding the assimilation of Hmong Americans that has yet to be explored in a systematic way.

Hmong Americans in Higher Education

To comprehend how much ground Hmong Americans have covered in their educational pursuits over the last three decades, it is important to keep in mind two events pivotal to this story. First, as people familiar with Hmong history already know, the Hmong did not possess a written language until 1954. That manual script, based on the Roman alphabet, resulted from the collaborative efforts of two linguistic anthropologists from the U.S. and a French missionary. This system remains in popular use by Hmong all over the world today. Second, the first doctoral degree ever awarded to a Hmong was granted by the Sorbonne in 1972. The historical significance of both events deserves to be underscored. For the establishment of the written language not only helped to fuel a great desire for learning; it also marked the beginning of a slow transition from an oral culture to a written one. Moreover, in the eyes of many people, the Sorbonne doctorate defined the pinnacle of educational success.

Even so, formal public education for Hmong Americans did not become widespread until the mid 1980s.³ When teenagers from the refugee camps entered the U.S., they enrolled in middle and high schools, often at grade levels where they were older than their classmates. (An 18 year old, for example, could be placed in a freshman high school class because of his limited language proficiency.) A small number of this cohort, despite struggling with the English language, completed their undergraduate

education in the late 1980s and early 1990s. According to the 2000 national census, 30.8% of the general American population aged 25 or older hold bachelor's degrees or higher educational degrees. In contrast, that is the case for only 13.2% of Hmong Americans in the same age group. However, Hmong Americans have made substantial educational gains during the 1990s and into the present that should not be overlooked. For example, more than 3,000-4,000 individuals have earned B.A./B.S. degrees; at least 350 have received M.A./M.S. degrees; and more than 250 have completed Ph.D./professional degrees. Currently, an estimated 6,000-6,500 Hmong Americans are enrolled in undergraduate programs across the U.S. These achievements in higher education, which have accelerated during the past ten years, are extraordinary, especially given the fact that students' parents and grandparents may not have had access to any formal schooling. Yet, much more progress needs to be made for the community as a whole to continue moving forward. For example, according to the 2000 national census, more than 56.8% of Hmong American women have had no formal education at all, compared to 1.4% of American women in general.

Hmong American Students at a Midwest University

Hmong American students are enrolled in all of the major campuses in our Midwest state university system, but by far, the largest population is to be found on our own Milwaukee campus. In the mid 1980s, Vincent Her was among the first wave of Hmong Americans to enter this university. As a freshman, he was one of only a dozen students from his ethnic group on campus. Over the years, the Hmong American undergraduate population steadily has increased here, reaching nearly 500 in 2005. In fact, until a recent change in admission criteria, enrollment figures had been rising for

this group at a higher rate than for any other ethnic group on campus.⁴ Furthermore, enrollment, retention and graduation rates of Hmong American students indicate that they consistently have been surpassing the achievements of their peers.⁵ Their success reflects the presence of a large, vibrant Hmong American community in Wisconsin, in the Midwest and across the United States, reinforcing the reality that Hmong American voices should be welcomed into the university's dialogue on diversity and multiculturalism. Thus, as higher education entered the 21st century, we anticipated (with an optimism we now recognize as naivete) much more openness to community perspectives in the formation of university policies regarding access and equity. Had the time finally arrived for community representatives to be included in university decisions regarding its public mission? In our view, no one could doubt that Hmong Americans deserve the acknowledgement and respect accorded other ethnic groups in institutions of higher learning. (On our campus, a nationally known center for Hispanic studies and a thriving Africology program are evidence of the strides made by other ethnic groups in achieving full visibility. The total minority population at our university, however, is less than 15%, a significant indicator of the progress yet to be made in a city where approximately 50% of the urban population is African American.)

A Step Forward: The Hmong American Studies Initiative

At our university, the possibility of working for educational reform seemed completely realistic when the Milwaukee Idea became public policy. According to its mission statement, this new policy welcomed initiatives "to forge vital and long-lasting community-university partnerships that enhance the quality of life for all," specifically through "collaborative effort, the advancement of diversity and the creation of

fundamental change for the campus and the community.” Supported by the Cultures and Communities Program on campus – and encouraged by community leaders who took a keen interest in our plans – we envisioned HASI as the groundwork and framework for developing a permanent Hmong American Studies Program. From the start, we were convinced that HASI could play a central role in strengthening and expanding the educational partnerships between our university and the Hmong American community. Furthermore, we intended our work to support the university mandate to “increase institutional accountability for achieving diversity and improving the campus climate” (Milwaukee Commitment).⁶ Within that context, its main goals were:

Curriculum Development: Cooperate with community organizations, campus departments and programs in the development of undergraduate courses that can contribute to the formation of a Hmong American Studies certificate program. For the benefit of the wider community, expand opportunities for teacher-education and professional development focused on Hmong American history, culture and contemporary issues.

Interdisciplinary Scholarship: Promote community-based, interdisciplinary scholarly research on issues of social, religious and cultural change and adaptation that define the Hmong American experience. Aid in the recruitment of community experts, faculty, visiting scholars and research associates who can contribute to such scholarship at the undergraduate and graduate level.

Student Recruitment and Retention: Work with campus offices, community organizations, two-year colleges and local schools to enhance the recruitment, retention and graduation rate of Hmong American students, including co-planning

of activities to be held on and off campus. In partnership with the service learning center, expand opportunities for students to participate in community-based volunteer work and research projects.

Community Engagement: Establish long-term, collaborative relationships with organizations serving the Hmong American community, including sponsorship of presentations and public forums, on and off campus, that address both contemporary and traditional issues influencing the lives of Hmong Americans.

From the initial stages of its development, HASI earned the endorsement of all the major Hmong American community organizations, including Hmong Educational Advancements, Hmong American Friendship Association, Hmong American Women's Association, Hmong Women's Professional Circle, Lao Family Community, Shee Yee Community, and the Milwaukee Christian Center. In 2003, leaders and representatives from these organizations met with the Deputy Chancellor of our university to voice their support for HASI. In 2005, these same representatives came forward again to ask the university not to cut off its funding. Consequently, the university made a three-year commitment to the program, mainly to give faculty and staff time to coordinate their efforts in curriculum development. The university stipulated that by 2008, a thorough external review of the program would be required to decide any future funding.

During a four-year period (2002-2006), we carried out crucial preliminary work necessary for the long-term success of HASI. For example, we developed and taught two core courses – Hmong American Life Stories (offered through the English Department) and Hmong Americans: History, Culture and Contemporary Life (Ethnic Studies) – which filled to capacity whenever they were scheduled (once each year for each course).

Clearly, these courses funded themselves, which should have alleviated the anxiety of administrators who initially doubted whether these classes could generate revenue. Other support for HASI came from courses making Hmong American studies part of their content, including Transnational Migrations: Asian-, Arab-, Euro-American and Latino Identity (Ethnic Studies), Southeast Asian American Life Stories (English Department) and Multicultural America (taught alternately through several different departments).

With the groundwork for a solid academic program established, the next step we wanted to take was to add courses on a range of relevant subjects, such as religion and spirituality; women and leadership roles; Hmong Americans and their contributions to U.S. society. In the long run, we were confident that HASI would be a potential draw for prospective students, both Hmong and non-Hmong, from across the state, Midwest and U.S. (which indeed we had been told by students who met with us at Hmong National Development conferences). Furthermore, beyond engaging student interest, we were convinced that HASI could become a magnet for Hmong American scholars in diverse fields. At the First International Conference on Hmong Studies, held in 2006 at Concordia University (St. Paul, Minnesota), it became clear to us that Hmong and Hmong American studies constitute a solidly grounded, broadly interdisciplinary field. As scholars from the U.S. and around the world presented their research – ranging from archaeological evidence of Hmong history in China to the contemporary significance of traditional religious practices – their critical insights generated informed and intense discussion. Everywhere we looked, the momentum for further growth was abundantly evident. Thus, HASI was in the vanguard of those acting upon a creative, timely vision of educational progress, bringing to Hmong American studies the respect already given to

academic programs associated with other ethnic groups. (At our university, until HASI was underway, Ethnic Studies included virtually every other ethnic group on campus except Hmong Americans. We have found this exclusion to be typical at other schools too.) With campus as well as community support, HASI had strong potential to benefit everyone involved. Within this context, we were certain that our Midwest university was uniquely positioned to become one of the first to build a comprehensive program weaving together the study of Hmong history, language, culture and contemporary life.

Re-Envisioning the Undergraduate Curriculum

The growing presence of Hmong Americans on many campuses across the U.S. is a sign that soon Hmong American studies will be in serious demand. The discontentment among Hmong American undergraduates with the current curriculum already is undeniable on our campus. Many are becoming increasingly dissatisfied that meaningful courses on Hmong American studies are rarely made available to them during their four-to-six years of enrollment for a B.A. or B.S. degree (years representing considerable financial sacrifices for their families). Before they graduate, they would like to delve deeply into questions related to Hmong history and culture. For example, what conditions in Southeast Asia caused their parents and grandparents to emigrate to the U.S., and what life lessons have the older generations drawn from their transnational, transcultural experiences? Based on what we see happening on our own campus, we foresee that the concerns of these young Hmong Americans inevitably will reverberate nationally. As illustrated below, many student activists already have raised an important question: Why are the experiences of Hmong Americans virtually absent in the undergraduate curriculum?

We share their growing concerns and frustrations. Accordingly, the campus-community partnerships that we proposed as part of HASI were planned to create opportunities for hands-on, community-centered education. Universities already support anthropologists, cultural historians, sociologists, and other researchers who undertake investigations of a rich array of cultures within the U.S. For example, an anthropologist might conduct fieldwork on Hmong patrilineal clan systems, or a sociologist might report on how Hmong American social service agencies meet client needs; data gained in this way is used for publications that enhance the research profile of the investigators' sponsoring schools. However, if a university collaborates with a community in offering students (and their faculty supervisors) similar research opportunities, we believe that the university can benefit even more from what is learned, largely because access to and relationships within the community can be more meaningful and reliable. Moreover, while an anthropologist or other "outsider" is not likely to return or contribute to the community in any long-lasting way, Hmong American students can offer their services (as apprentices, mentors, tutors, program assistants, and so on) in the very same places where they and their families live. Building this version of service learning into HASI, we found that community leaders agreed with us that students who gain such experience – and have the opportunity to engage in guided reflection about its significance – consistently have a clearer idea of their own identity and purpose in school, for they develop cultural competencies far surpassing what an "outsider" alone can teach them.

In contrast, young Hmong Americans who are cut off from their roots – for a variety of social and cultural reasons – very often find that they have no clear sense of

direction when they enroll in higher education. Some are deeply dissatisfied with their education, directly questioning the approach that has largely emphasized the history of the dominant culture and society. Consider Panya Xiong, for example, as she comments on her experiences in an American history class. (All student names are pseudonyms.)

“What do you do when the professor doesn’t spend even one class session talking about the Hmong involvement in the Vietnam War? And what do you do when the same professor tells you not to get so upset about it, when she says you can ‘look it up for extra credit and report back to the class’? Am I the only one who should care about how the Hmong people fought for the U.S.? My classmates have no idea why the Hmong people came to Wisconsin. They don’t know who’s Chinese, Japanese, Korean – anything! All Asians look the same to them. Who are Hmong to them? We’re the people who can’t get off welfare, we’re in gangs, we’re not in school. Well, if that’s true, then why am I in school? I’m here to learn. Why do I have to prove it everyday?”

Many Hmong American students have informed us that they “feel out of place” and invisible at the university. Across academic majors, their education seems impersonal, disconnected from their daily lives. Intensifying their alienation is the common situation that their families do not understand school culture, while their teachers do not understand Hmong culture. Bridging this gap is an important responsibility that should be taken seriously by academic institutions. In our work, we have taken the imperative step of at least beginning to make Hmong American studies a respected component of the undergraduate curriculum. We are convinced that courses in Hmong history, culture, resettlement experiences and contemporary issues are not only

relevant and useful to Hmong Americans, but also will help others to overcome stereotypes about this community and increase cross-cultural understanding. (In fact, our courses in Hmong American Life Stories and Hmong Americans: History, Culture and Contemporary Life usually draw 25% non-Hmong students.)

Service learning gives students further opportunities to gain new views of community life. We have learned through our own students that experiences such as tutoring, mentoring and participating in oral history projects can be eye-opening for many young people, Hmong and non-Hmong. Together, coursework and community service prepare students to formulate informed answers to far-reaching questions, such as "What does becoming 'American' entail?" Or more specific to our case, "How is the Hmong American experience similar to or different from that of other immigrant groups?" Surely it is in a university's best interests to reconceptualize and revitalize its undergraduate curriculum, particularly in light of the accelerating trend of campuses becoming more diverse than ever before.

Part Two: From 'Lost Generation' to 'Bridge Generation': The Educational Experiences of Hmong American Students

University Education as a Process of Self-Discovery

In addition to opening a door to career opportunities and professional advancement, a university education for Hmong American students is a process of self-questioning, self-discovery and self-determination, but always within the larger context of commitments that must be fulfilled to others. Consequently, success in school depends not only on figuring out how to study, but also how to overcome personal obstacles, deal with family expectations, maintain family and clan respect, and relate individual ambitions to community goals. Moreover, we are convinced that learning

Hmong history and culture is essential to figuring out the role an individual most capably and appropriately can play in the family, clan or community. In this respect, a Hmong American student is visibly an agent of continuity and change. Change in that she does not want a life that is akin to her mother's or father's – harsh and without upward mobility, as most Hmong parents cannot read or write, not even in their own language. Continuity because she wants to remember their past, to use their struggles to inform her own growth and education. Thus, for each and every Hmong American student who walks onto campus, the stakes are high. Parents and grandparents expect these young people to become “the bridge generation,” the connecting hearts and hands between the values of the past and the opportunities of the future.

Yet, before they can successfully do that, students must first find themselves. Referred to as the “lost generation,” their journey of self-discovery is paved with deep scars of sacrifice, heartache, and mixed emotions. As their personal stories have dramatized for us, male and female students face strikingly different circumstances. For example, Mai Vue, the first in her family to attend college, has offered this view on the burdens of being a young Hmong American woman:

“Why did I have to be born a girl? It makes everything harder, everyday, everywhere. Good daughter, good wife, good daughter-in-law – it feels like my whole life is already laid out for me. But nobody is going to stop me from going to school. That's going to be my way out, my way to be myself and be free. I'll find my own road – or I'll build it. Education can change my destiny.”

Attentive to stories such as this (told to us many times by students in and out of our classes), we were motivated to help Hmong American students develop a deeper

understanding of their own history and heritage – including how to act responsibly within their own families, clans and communities – thus making it much more likely that graduates would be not only models of academic success, but also culturally and socially competent in society. As we consistently emphasized in program planning, educational priorities cannot be separated from the long, rich history of the Hmong as people who know their identity – and their guiding direction in life – through their obligations to each other (a history extending from the mountains of China to the highlands of Laos and the urban streets of America).

What Does It Mean to Be Hmong?

In *Grandmother's Path, Grandfather's Way*, Lue Vang and Judy Lewis (1990:8) have observed: “To be Hmong means that you speak the language, observe the customs and roles, live in patrilineal groups, and identify yourself as Hmong. If you were born in a different ethnic group, and adopted by a Hmong family, you would be Hmong if you speak Hmong, act like a Hmong, and call yourself Hmong.” Yet, today when we ask Hmong American students, “Do you consider yourself to be Hmong, American, or Hmong American?,” the answers vary widely:

Nou: “I’m thoroughly American, but my heart will always be Hmong.”

Kathy: “I’m Hmong at home and American at school. It’s hard.”

May: “I could dye my hair purple and still be Hmong! I don’t speak Hmong ...

But I grew up in a Hmong family. That’s who I am....”

Mailia: “People say I’m not ‘really Hmong’ because I’m too outspoken, most of my friends are from other groups, I don’t look ‘Hmong enough,’ [Yet], I’m an American, and I’m always Hmong.”

Kellie: “What if we stop learning the Hmong language and customs...history and culture? What if we say we’re just born into it and that’s enough? It’s not enough!”

These voices suggest a Hmong American cultural identity that is growing in complexity. It does not fit neatly into a single category as an essence – not any more; it comes in various shades, hues, and points of identification. Yet, when examined carefully, each claim of identity includes memory of home (place, belonging), family, community or culture.

We acknowledge that a Hmong American cultural identity, like a valuable coin, has two sides. On one side, there are collective and shared qualities, perpetuating a notion of the “enduring self,” stable and externally encompassing. This makes similarity and continuity possible, constituting a common frame of reference. Obviously, there is difference and rupture, as revealed by the voices above. As in many other ethnic groups, both views exist in the Hmong American community. Which side is dominant depends on many factors, such as age, immigration and resettlement experiences, and social affiliations in the U.S. While older generations tend to subscribe to the stable and the collective as being most important, young Hmong American students tend to see identity from a more individualist perspective.

What particularly intrigues us is the dynamic interplay between these two sets of views: they are not entirely exclusive. For example, from Vincent Her’s own experiences, he has learned that Hmong elders are not as rigid or uncompromising as they often have been portrayed. Yes, they may be the voice of authority in the community,

but more often than not, they are willing to listen. They welcome constructive ideas from the young generation of educated Hmong Americans, including how the culture can be made relevant to the circumstances of life in postmodern America. They encourage young people to participate in family, clan, and neighborhood decision-making, to learn from doing so in order that both generations can contribute to ongoing discussions of what should be maintained and what may need to be reformed in the culture.

Students as Agents of Change

Hmong American students’ success or failure in school cannot be predicted according to their families’ economic situation or their parents’ level of formal education. Many Hmong American students come from families subsisting close to the poverty line; many have parents who cannot read or write English (or Hmong). However, more important influences on academic achievement often include their sense of responsibility within their families; their relationships with positive role models in their families, clans, churches and/or schools; and their ability to connect personal goals with community advancement. Consider, for example, the situation of Blia Yang, who at the age of 19, already is married with a one-year-old son:

“As a Hmong woman, your needs are expected to be the last on the list. This is a sign of being humble. . . You are expected to follow what the elders and your husband says. This is a sign of being obedient. You are expected to raise your children, cook and clean. . . This is a sign of being loving, patient, and caring. If you are a Hmong daughter, these ideas are embedded in you for future use. If you are not a good daughter, Hmong say, you are of use only to the Americans, who will take you out to a restaurant everyday, but drive you there in an old rusty car.”

Blia's circumstances seem to hem her into a narrow set of choices. In contrast, Elaine Vang, who has been active in student government and intends to open a social service agency one day, emphasizes that social progress is necessarily a long-term process for herself and other women:

“We are at a crossroads. I think many women feel it, and it makes us work hard to succeed. We have to take the lead in showing Hmong people the way to a better life for us all. That's why I'm active in student government. That's why I'm on the road, going to the state capitol to protest financial aid cuts, going to DC to march for affirmative action. It's what I have to do because that's how politics works. My mom worried that I would lose my reputation when I went away to college. She raised me and my sisters very traditionally. But now she's happy to see that I'm making something of myself – and she won't let anyone in the community criticize me for it. She always tells people, 'You watch. She's doing this for us!' ”

Hmong American students are growing up in interesting times, and as shown, they are afforded myriad opportunities, educational and professional. In many ways, they are privileged and feel strongly obligated to the generation before them. As Elaine Vang underscores:

“Think of what our mothers suffered and sacrificed to give us the opportunities that we have in this country. They didn't bring us up only to be good daughters, wives, and daughters-in-law. They brought us up to be good people. That's how I learned to be honest and reliable, to think of others, not just myself. Our

mothers gave us everything they could. Now we have to do everything we can for them and the generations to come.”

Thus, more and more, Hmong American students are looking inward and questioning their roles. In doing so, many have come to realize that their successes do indeed shape the pace of progress of their families and communities. For these individuals, a university education is a truly whole-person experience; it involves more than just developing their intellectual capacities. It is about learning to live a balanced and responsible life. Our goal – and responsibility – is to make sure that they can achieve this by linking their classroom learning to community concerns.

Knowledge Construction in a New Context: Linking “Kev Txawj” and “Kev Ntse”

Ideally, we envision campus-community partnership as a new model for generating and circulating knowledge, based on the ethical and social as well as intellectual necessity of linking “kev txawj” and “kev ntse” (book knowledge and social interrelationship). In this context, the participation of community agencies is vital. With community consent, we hoped at our campus to use our research backgrounds (in the humanities and social sciences) to develop a curriculum that would expand educational opportunities for students, including conducting fieldwork research in the community and gathering life stories from Hmong American elders, cultural practitioners and community leaders.

Hmong elders generally evaluate the depth of understanding a person has achieved – hence, his or her assimilation or integration into community life – based on the type of knowledge he or she possesses. “Paub,” to know (awareness of day-to-day routines) differs from “txawj,” applied expertise, know how. The former does not imply

the latter. “Txawj” is contrasted with a third form of knowing, “ntse.” “Ntse” encompasses formal education (schooling) and cultural dexterity. In the minds of many people, such an individual is the pinnacle of success: he or she is the all-around, ideal modern Hmong. That person is seen as multidimensional, able to move back and forth from one realm of his or her social world to another with ease. Thus, “txawj” may be viewed as learning that comes from the classroom, but “ntse” combines book knowledge with experience and practice. The latter, “ntse,” which should be the ultimate goal of all students, can only be achieved by “being in the community.” We believe that a university can – and should – responsibly support students’ holistic development as concerned members of their community, while concomitantly providing them with multiple opportunities to develop intellectual and scholarly capacities. Again, this is an important step in preparing young Hmong Americans to act as the “bridge generation.” As they gain more knowledge of the culture and its practices, they will be better prepared to engage their elders in constructive dialogue regarding the challenges of bicultural life.

Community Perspectives in Cultural Programming

Until 2001, cultural programming at our Midwest university did not include any significant recognition of Hmong or Hmong American cultural traditions – a situation that many students (across ethnic groups) wanted to change. Community agencies agreed to work with HASI, the Hmong Student Association, and various campus offices (such as Cultures and Communities, Sociocultural Programming and Southeast Asian Academic Student Services) to bring Tou Ger Xiong, a well-known educational activist and entertainer, to campus for an SRO performance. Our next collaborative event also drew a big audience: a screening of “Split Horn” during Asian Awareness month, followed by a

Q&A session with one of the youngest shamans in the U.S. Subsequently, we organized a successful series of public forums on eye-opening topics, including “Challenges to the Hmong American Community Today” (2002); “Celebrating Our Success: A Gathering of Hmong American Students and Their Parents to Share Their Stories of Struggle and Success” (2003); “Bamboo among the Oaks: Hmong American Voices Today” (2003); “Changing Roles and Responsibilities of Hmong American Women” (2004); “Traditional Knowledge and Modern Medicine”(2005); and “Portraits of Hmong Women” (2006). All of these events featured Hmong Americans with extensive community experience and expertise – activists, creative writers, educators, social service directors, policy planners, and more. Not one of these people had ever before been invited to speak on campus.

Catalysts for Cross-Cultural Understanding

After four years of groundwork, we anticipated forming campus-community partnerships with an even wider reach, which we believed would catalyze cross-cultural understanding of many kinds, beneficial to everyone involved. For example, we envisioned a national research conference for scholars of Hmong and Hmong American studies on the theme of “Speaking and Writing Our Own History: Hmong in America at a Turning Point,” which could initiate annual meetings for presenting current research; sharing individual and collective contributions to community-based knowledge; and exploring the possibilities of collaborating on regional, national and international projects.

In cooperation with the Hmong American Friendship Association, Shee Yee Community, the School of Education, and other groups, we also started to explore possibilities for a Milwaukee Public Museum exhibition on continuity and change in the

dynamic development of Hmong culture from China to Laos to the U.S., an exhibition intended to enhance the cultural literacy of everyone participating. This would be the first exhibition in Milwaukee to present the creativity, complexity and contemporary vibrancy of Hmong Americans, an undertaking linking the talents of community experts, university teachers and students, and museum personnel.

We also met with faculty and community experts interested in the possibility of other curricular innovations related to Hmong and Hmong American studies, such as an intensive summer program for Milwaukee Public School teachers, offering graduate credit for introductory study of language, culture and contemporary issues; a study abroad program in language and culture, organized in collaboration with Thai universities; and a study abroad program focusing on international service-learning, incorporating volunteer work locally (at the Hmong American Women's Association) and abroad (at social service agencies for women in Laos and Thailand). By connecting local and global concerns, we believed that HASI could have an even broader impact.

Part Three: Institutional Barriers To Program Building

As community leaders pointed out to us, our university in the past had failed to give its full respect to Hmong American voices when it addressed issues of diversity and equity on campus and in the greater Milwaukee area. Some of these leaders were turned away in the 1980s and 1990s when they approached university administrators about possible collaborative ventures. Directly or indirectly, they were told that the concerns of the Hmong American community were outside the limits of the university's urban mission. Even though they were willing to work with us, past experience made it hard for them to believe a "university without walls" would ever be possible. (That slogan had

been widely used for several years in student and faculty recruitment.) In fact, during the past two years of program building, community leaders warned us repeatedly: “Dialogue is a fine place to start, but if it does not lead to action, it is meaningless.” They were right, of course, as evidenced by the deeply engrained attitudes which emerged in our conversations with university administrators regarding the growing presence of Hmong American students on campus. Here are some of the hardest lessons we have learned from such conversations:

1. Numbers matter more than (almost) anything else to administrators.

On a campus with more than 25,000 students, does it make that much difference if many of the 500 or so students in one ethnic group feel dissatisfied with their education? Our general impression is that while it matters very much to the Hmong American community, it is not a pressing issue to most administrators. Because Hmong American students represent only a small percentage of the total student body, they do not count for much in terms of generating revenue; consequently, their support for HASI did not add up – in revenue-driven budget decisions – to anything that could compel administrators to meet their needs. Their numbers are growing, but the campus is likely to remain approximately 85% non-minority for years to come (in one of the most racially segregated cities in the U.S.). From a strictly budgetary viewpoint, their presence does not carry much value.

2. Too often, cultural awareness and sensitivity does not extend to dealing with minority groups outside the familiar (i.e., officially recognized) categories of African American, Hispanic and Native Indian.

Personnel responsible for increasing diversity on campus frequently do not know how the Hmong came to the U.S., or how Hmong Americans individually and

collectively have struggled during the past twenty years for their civil rights in this country. Indeed, during our initial campus outreach meetings (to make a case for HASI), we met only one administrator who had visited any Hmong American community agency or who had any personal, first-hand knowledge of community concerns. This lack of knowledge directly affects administrators' willingness to include the perspective of Hmong American students and families in efforts to "increase institutional accountability for achieving diversity and improving the campus climate" (Milwaukee Commitment mission statement). What they do not know about is not relevant to them. Moreover, attempts to expand, correct, or clarify their existing knowledge may be resisted – largely because, in our experience, they do not want their basic assumptions challenged regarding what "minority" students need.

For example, we soon realized that administrators knew little about the heavy responsibilities held by the coordinator of academic services for Southeast Asian American students – even though the coordinator had been on the job for seven years. Apparently new to administrators was the reality that effective recruitment and counseling largely depend on extensive outreach activities. To gain community trust, the coordinator serves on community boards, is available to meet with students' families outside of the regular work day, and takes calls from students at virtually anytime. The line between personal and professional support for clientele is hard to draw – a common experience for educated Hmong Americans who provide essential community services and have access to powerful state and federal agencies (whether in education, employment or social services). As the enrollment of Southeast Asian American students has increased (doubling over the past five years), staffing has remained minimal. When

his office was named the most successful recruitment office on campus, the coordinator thought the timing might be right to ask for additional staffing. Ironically, the request was denied because the office had proved it could do well without additional staffing. Simply put, working hard in this setting only leads to working harder – without support, or equally important, without recognition of the true value of the services provided.

Furthermore, we have been told by more than one administrator that Hmong American students need to “take responsibility for themselves” if they are going to succeed. In effect, what works for the majority of students who earn college degrees (an overwhelmingly white majority to date in the U.S.) should work for everyone else. If students fail, it is their own fault for not being independent enough in their learning. From this perspective, the university has no reason to support innovations that we proposed, such as ethnic-specific mentoring (in which successful Hmong American upperclassmen could be matched with incoming freshmen) or ethnic-specific workshops on the social as well as academic demands of college (addressing, for example, the situations of young women students who are married with children). Apparently, students must learn how the university operates, but the university has no obligation to understand how complicated their lives can be – especially when they are the first in their families to enter the university gates. The basic message is: you enter (or leave) on your own.

3. University policies toward minority groups are directly affected by a culture of fear that operates beneath the surface of multicultural tolerance.

When we presented our program plans to an administrator who had the power to grant or withhold funding for staffing, we were unprepared for this objection: “If you get what you want, what will stop other groups from demanding what they want? Every

ethnic group on campus will be knocking on my door with a list of demands.” Upon hearing of this incident, an African American colleague (with a long activist history) told us: “That’s exactly what universities said in the 1960s and 1970s when we were trying to get African American Studies in the door. People in power are afraid of anything that might undermine their power. They want to decide what’s worth studying, and who’s worth hiring. Their reality is supposed to be everybody’s reality in their world. They don’t want anybody telling them anything different to shake up the power structure.” No matter how valid our arguments might have been for HASI, “giving in” to us may have been perceived as weakening university authority to decide how and when (or if) doors should be opened in institutions of higher learning.

The culture of fear also extends to apprehension about minority students’ evaluation of their own education. For example, when we arranged a meeting for Hmong American students to let administrators know why they backed HASI, we first had to assure the administrators that they would not be “ambushed” by angry students demanding new classes, new hiring, or other measures of access and equity. Similarly, with only one exception, promised meetings between Hmong American community leaders and top administrators never materialized. Instead, we were told that “conditions have to be right” for a “productive discussion.” The community has been waiting since the 1980s for such conditions to solidify. How much longer should they be willing to wait?

4. What people say and what they do rarely match in administrative decision-making.

Community models of decision-making include strict accountability for personal statements regarding actions to be taken. If an individual does not live up to his word, he

will not be trusted by anyone. This clearly contrasts the common university attitude that if a statement has not been put into writing (preferably, official and repeatedly revised writing), then it does not mean much of anything. For example, an administrator with a special interest in “multicultural partnerships” accepted a community invitation to visit one of its agencies, where she emphasized that “now is the time to let the University know what you need and how we can help” in partnership building. She publicly promised to set up a university recruitment office at a community agency, and she listed a number of other ways in which she would “make sure that the University follows through.” Pointing out that the agency needed a new sign board, she even offered to have a new one made at the university’s expense. “Without a new sign,” she said, “people will keep getting lost on their way here.”

Later, when we inquired about how to proceed in selecting the right location for the recruiting office, how to include Hmong American leaders in a new “multicultural community roundtable” that she had proposed, and in general how to “follow through,” she reacted with anger and accusations such as this: “You people expect too much. The University is not going to do everything for you.” Her memos left no doubt that “you people” referred to Hmong American community leaders who did not know their place, who were not grateful enough to the university for helping them. HASI did not receive one dollar from her budget, nor was even one community leader invited to her office. Of course, the sign board was never made.

5. The Hmong in America are still widely perceived to be refugees, even though they have settled here long enough to send second and third generations to college.

Consequently, university personnel can imagine that English as a Second Language

(ESL) or “heritage” language classes answer any need for culturally-informed education. Furthermore, the Hmong then are contained within the category of “foreign” rather than “minority.” They are regarded as perpetually in the process of adjusting to a new country; it is not ever their country to claim. This attitude blocks any serious consideration of what Hmong American studies could encompass or offer the campus as a whole. As a coordinator of international studies told us: “The only pure Hmong are back in Laos. The Hmong in America have nothing except a diluted culture that is fading into nothing. There is no use in Hmong students learning about their culture because there isn’t any culture to study anymore.”

We have been surprised more times than we can count by people (always non-Hmong) making such statements with complete conviction in their accuracy. Misconceptions abound across departments. For example, a graduate student in Linguistics contacted us to learn more about the “dead” Hmong language (which thousands upon thousands of Hmong Americans use in daily life), while a graduate student in Sociology asked us how she should undertake learning about the “extinct” Hmong people (no matter that she was asking this of a Hmong American man who was very much alive). As part of their research for Hmong American Life Stories, students conduct interviews across campus to gauge general familiarity with Hmong American history and culture. Semester after semester, fewer than one in ten people have known the following: how to spell the word “Hmong”; where the Hmong lived before they came to the U.S.; what language they speak; where they live now; or how they support their families. Instead, people have assumed that Hmong are from “somewhere overseas”; most of them do not speak English; they are having a hard time “getting used to the way

things are here”; and they “still need a lot of help” with adjusting to American life. Clearly, the Hmong are still perceived as foreigners, whether they have been here for three generations or they have just arrived from a Thailand refugee camp. Foreigners may be treated with benevolence, but they are not accepted as full citizens. And a university campus – like the rest of society – always puts the needs of its citizens first.

Crossing Barriers

In one of our last meetings to try to solidify support for HASI on campus, we reported that Hmong American students are overcoming the odds to succeed at the university, despite what many would call their “disadvantaged” backgrounds. Their families may have incomes below the poverty line, their parents may have no formal schooling, their scores on pre-college tests may be low, but that does not stop them from becoming the first in their families to attend college. As we explained, strong parental and community support – combined with university resources such as advising and tutoring – can make a decisive difference in “at risk” students remaining in school. The administrative response was stunning: “Why would we want those students to come here?” From this perspective, any student needing “extra help” to succeed inevitably becomes a drain on university resources. Thus, it would be preferable to raise admission standards and “keep the expectations high for everyone.” To us, this assumption echoed one of the main arguments made against “open admissions” in the 1960s and 1970s: Without minority students (except for those who can “make the grade” on the same terms as everyone else), the whole university would be better able to offer a quality education. Hmong American students, of course, have the same potential for success as other students across ethnic groups. But like other groups, their progress is impeded by

prejudices inseparable from campus politics.

Is Campus-Community Collaboration Practical?

We must report that campus-community relations are at an impasse as we prepare this paper for publication. HASI has effectively been ended because community leaders do not trust that the university has the best interests of Hmong American students and their families in mind, nor do community leaders believe that the university fully respects their values and views on the need for educational reform. This turn of events has forced us to re-evaluate the usefulness of our work: Is an educational partnership based on mutual respect and genuine campus-community collaboration ever possible? Here, we shall “read” into the situation and offer our tentative understanding of what underlies the current rift in campus-community relations.

When we began formulating ideas for the Hmong American Studies Initiative, the phrase “campus-community collaboration” was the talk of the university. To us, its meaning and intent were clear: campus and community agencies would come together to work on projects that would benefit not only the students they both serve, but also each other. Each partner would have equal voice in the decision making process, although the expertise of each would necessarily differ. In coming together, the partners also would agree to make their respective boundaries more permeable. The power differential which had separated them previously was not to be a part of the “collaborative” equation. Transparency was to be the guiding principle of operation. The painful questions we must now ask ourselves are: Were we wrong in our assumptions? Were we unrealistic in placing practical interests ahead of political agendas?

During four years of program development, we held onto the belief that

community input and participation are vital to every step of the program-building process. If any such program is to be mutually beneficial, we remain convinced that it is imperative for both campus and community to contribute to its establishment, operation and evaluation. However, to our deep disappointment, Hmong American leaders who were vocal and supportive of HASI, and who insisted on being included in the decision-making process regarding its future, arbitrarily were deemed by university administrators to be “not representative” of the whole community – and therefore were dismissed as unauthorized to bring forward their concerns about university policies. At the same time, they were excluded from taking any meaningful role in program planning, and they were told, in effect, that their absence made no difference. This happened when our university for the first time in its history was considering hiring a Hmong American faculty member. What prompted the university to distance itself from community leaders at that moment? When people on both sides could have collaborated in strategic planning for curricular reform related to the new hiring, the university instead made it clear that no community input was necessary or appropriate. In making this move, were university officials reasserting their authority as the only ones qualified to determine how institutional reform would take place? As it had done in the 1980s and 1990s, was the university preparing to blame the community for being “uncooperative” and “too demanding” in seeking reform? Does this situation further suggest that the university will only work with those who do not speak as community representatives, but instead as “cooperative” fellow academic citizens? Many answers are possible, but we have seen a disturbing pattern of disrespect toward community leaders – and by extension to the Hmong American community itself – that we do not think the university would venture to

display toward other ethnic groups.

Some administrators contend that the university was doing all the “heavy lifting” for HASI in its initial stages of development, while the community contributed little. Such an assertion depends on disregarding extensive evidence to the contrary, including the many presentations made on campus by Hmong American community members to undergraduate classes; the countless hours invested by the community in helping us to plan and present public forums; the unique research opportunities made available to university researchers in the community; and the many forms of service learning offered to university students. For example, during the time when these events were unfolding, four Hmong American social service organizations were serving as service learning sites for our students. During one semester alone, these organizations voluntarily devoted more than 450 hours of combined staff time and resources to accommodate thirty student learners. What constitutes contribution in a collaborative partnership? Is this an issue to be worked out in detail by the partners before they enter into a joint project?

In the case of HASI, collaboration became contentious because the community insisted on being fully included in a decision-making capacity, while the university refused, saying that it had not operated that way in the past nor would it do business that way in the future. Politics inevitably shape the dynamics of campus-community relations. We now see that if community voices are to be substantively incorporated in the decision-making process, the rigid power structure which has for so long defined the boundaries between campus and community can no longer be safeguarded. This is likely to make university administrators feel vulnerable and destabilized in their authority, keenly aware of how they might have to contend with extensive criticism of how they

have done business in the past. At the same time, they are likely to be wary of the inroads that community leaders could make once inside the door of policy-making. Instead of creating new models of collaboration, university officials then step back from partnership with the Hmong American community, even as they recognize many of the benefits that could be reaped by the campus in the long run.

While HASI has ended, community leaders remain adamant that their voices be heard and respected on basic issues such as curriculum development, service learning objectives, and research aims. Because the university is reluctant to grant this authority, community leaders perceive that they have been dismissed as not important enough to be taken seriously. Furthermore, they are convinced that when the university proposes a “partnership,” it actually will continue to conduct “business as usual” to reinforce its own power over those trying to enter its gates. Consequently, community leaders have withdrawn their participation from all current and future projects to be undertaken by the university. University officials have responded to this gravely serious protest with silence. They claim not to understand what has gone wrong. Cross-cultural misunderstanding could be part of this picture, but only part. More influential, we believe, is the university’s inability to think outside its own box of who deserves to be heard inside its walls.

Although we are certainly glad that the university has hired its very first Hmong American assistant professor, we regret that such an important change has occurred without community input into its implications for campus-community relations. Before the present impasse, community leaders said that they would welcome the opportunity to sit in on the search committee. They readily accepted that an assistant professor must

have the necessary academic credentials; they also wanted that person to have strong values, to be a respected “face” of the community. In the context of historical and social realities as well as educational values, they wanted to know that he or she would care about the community and be willing to contribute to it in a visible way. Their concerns reflect the fact that the first Hmong American assistant professor at our university is bound to play a major role in educating the “bridge generation,” the young Hmong Americans who will become future leaders in American society. However, university officials would not yield on their position that it would be counterproductive to include community representatives in a “strictly academic” search committee. Communication between campus administrators and community leaders is now in such deep disrepair that it may take years for the rift to heal.

Conclusion

When we began brainstorming ideas for HASI back in 2002, we were idealistic to the core, and hence very optimistic of what we could achieve. The introductory paragraph to our mission statement boldly reads:

“The guiding purpose of the Hmong American Studies Initiative (HASI) is to establish the groundwork and framework for developing a permanent Hmong American Studies Program . . . Sponsored by the Cultures and Communities Program, HASI will play a central role in the implementation of the Milwaukee Idea by strengthening and expanding the educational partnerships between (the university) and the Hmong American community. HASI is committed to the integration of university and community interests through cross-cultural education across a wide range of projects. Serving as a gateway to and from the university,

HASI intends to bridge the institutional barriers of the past and earn the trust of the community by being open about its aims and policies. Through a community-centered approach that encourages the inclusion of many different voices, HASI is committed to forming university-community partnerships based on respect for tradition as well as the pursuit of knowledge. Most importantly, HASI will contribute to the progress of the Hmong American community through the advancement of understanding about its history, culture, and the social changes that are influencing its growth in urban America.”

As we write, we are uncertain if any program along these lines can succeed, mainly because community involvement appears to be out of the question. As one university administrator put it, “the boundaries between the university and the community . . . must be respected.” Even so, we cannot give up believing that social justice and educational reform are possible. For Hmong Americans, the struggle to become integrated into mainstream society, to be visible, heard and respected, to have their story included in the curriculum of a university, is real and remains compelling.⁷

Notes

1. The *Sacramento Bee* has devoted a special issue, “Orphans of History,” to the Hmong American experience; a succinct timeline of Hmong history is included. This article is available at <http://www.sacbee.com/static/archive/news/projects/hmong/>. For more details on the Hmong role in the U.S. war in Southeast Asia, see Quincy (2000) or Hamilton-Merritt (1993).
2. These figures are our own estimates based on the 2000 census. Community leaders believe the Hmong population is actually higher than the census indicated. Many families did not return their census forms.
3. Starting in the 1960s, Hmong children were granted minimal access to schooling in Laos; however, girls were rarely afforded this chance. It was not until the Hmong arrived in the U.S. that both boys and girls had equal opportunities to attend school. Now, more Hmong American women than men are pursuing a college education.
4. Previously, admission required a ranking in the top 50% of a high school graduating class **or** an ACT score of 21. Admission now requires both a ranking in the top 50% **and** an ACT score of 17. Students who do not meet these standards still can apply through the Academic Opportunity Program for minority students. However, enrollment of Hmong American freshman students on our campus has dropped by more than fifty students for 2006-2007, at least partly because students with low ACT scores do not believe that they have much chance of being admitted, and so they have applied instead to two-year schools or other campuses. This will be the first year that Hmong American freshman enrollment has noticeably dropped on our campus. Enrollment also has dropped for African American and Native American students.

5. For example, graduation rates after six years of enrollment for the Fall 1991-1996 cohort groups show an increase from 17.1 % to 45.7% for Hmong American students, but only an increase from 15.1% to 16.8% for other “targeted” (minority) groups. For “non-targeted groups” (other than students of color), the graduation rates increased from 32.8% to 41.4%.
6. The Milwaukee Idea originated in 1998 under a chancellor who has since left the university. Proponents of the Milwaukee Idea (as it developed from 1998-2004) underscored the importance of our Midwest university as the “premiere urban university” in the state, often describing its potential to become a “university without walls” through its connections to community agencies, including agencies serving minority populations. While it is still promoted in advertising, the future of the Milwaukee Idea is uncertain under the new chancellor, who has made known his strong interest in attracting more highly qualified undergraduates, securing research dollars and improving graduate programs across campus. The Milwaukee Commitment specifies actions (through 2008) to be undertaken by programs and departments on campus to meet goals related to educational equity.
7. Anyone writing a critique of his or her own university undertakes a risky venture, especially when it comes time for hiring or promotion decisions. Another challenge is that community work does not readily fit into criteria for academic merit, as activist colleagues in other areas have cautioned us. Our experience with the Hmong American Studies Initiative involves an additional twist. On the one hand, we remain accountable to the institution employing us as we carry out our teaching, research and departmental duties. On the other, we are seen as individuals who can make a

difference in the community, and so we are expected to contribute in any way possible to advance its causes. For any mutually beneficial partnership to succeed, meeting this double demand is necessary, and may even be obligatory.

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