

## **Hmong Students in Higher Education and Academic Support Programs**

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**Hmong Studies Journal, Volume 12, 20 Pages**

### **Abstract**

Student awareness, usage, and perception of academic support programs were examined among 55 Hmong college students at a large, public western university. Twenty-eight students had participated in one or more ASPs while 27 students had not participated in any ASPs. Those who had participated found the programs to be supportive with an average rating of 7.39 out of 10 (10 being most supportive). The majority of students who did not participate in ASPs reported that they were not aware of ASPs and their services. Results also show that the majority of Hmong college students perceived a lack of time to study, poor study habits, lack of money, lack of motivation, lack of direction on career goals, and poor time management to be obstacles for them in higher education. Based on the findings, it seems ASPs were not able to reach some Hmong students with their outreach efforts. However, those that they were able to reach found academic support services helpful, especially with financial concerns and direction on career goals.

**Keywords:** Hmong, postsecondary education, higher education barriers, academic support programs

## **Introduction**

Asian Americans have had more than a 50% increase in college enrollment since 1991 and have the highest number of college graduates of bachelor's degrees among minority groups with nearly 50% of the population over 25 years old holding a degree (Harvey & Anderson, 2005; Asian American Center for Advancing Justice, 2011). However, these numbers may be misleading because there are subgroups of Asian Americans that are not performing well academically including the Hmong. The Hmong population has a lower higher education attainment than most Asian groups. In terms of educational attainment with a bachelor's degree, the Hmong proportion according to the 2008-2010 American Community Survey was only 11.3% (Reeves & Bennett, 2004; U.S. Census, 2011).

Many Hmong college students are first generation college students. Hmong students, like other first generation college students, are either the first or one of the first in their family to pursue a higher education, have limited knowledge about postsecondary education, and lack some of the necessary skills to excel at postsecondary institutions. These and other obstacles are barriers to the educational advancement of Hmong college students, which have not been adequately addressed by academic support programs (ASPs) at post-secondary institutions or in the current literature.

While in academia, Hmong students face numerous challenges and responsibilities. In addition to adjustment difficulties while transitioning from high school to college, they also face heavy family obligations and family conflict as a result of cultural and generational gaps (Lee et al., 2009). Although Hmong students encounter many issues that other minority students may have, they face challenges stemming from their unique historical and cultural background. For example, other students may have expectations set forth by themselves or their family, but

Hmong students have expectations from themselves, their families, their clan, and the Hmong community. Since the Hmong American community is relatively small and expectations for children are high, Hmong students have multiple pressures to do well culturally and academically. Furthermore, Hmong students may be among the first of many Hmong to attend college, not just the first in their family to attend college as with other minorities.

Hmong American college students are also presented with family conflicts due to intergenerational differences in acculturation between parents and children (Su, Lee, & Vang, 2005). Differences in cultural values, traditions, and lifestyles between parents and their children often lead to misunderstandings (Lee & Liu, 2001) and stress. Although social support was found to buffer negative effects of family conflicts for Hmong American college students, self-blame by Hmong American college students for family conflicts often led to a higher level of distress (Su et al., 2005).

In addition to intergenerational conflict, Hmong college students receive limited support from their parents to excel in higher education. Even though Hmong parents do encourage their children to obtain higher education, they lack the knowledge to provide adequate support (Vang, 2004-05). Many of Hmong parents have no formal education, may not understand the English language, and lack knowledge of the educational system. Many Hmong adults lack formal schooling. Data from the 2008-2010 American Community Survey show that nearly 40% of Hmong adults over 25 years of age possessed less than a high school diploma (Hmong National Development and Hmong Cultural and Resource Center, 2004; U.S. Census, 2011). Therefore, the types of support many Hmong students receive from their parents are limited to encouragement, childcare, emotional and spiritual support (Lor, 2008). Guidance in how to excel

in higher education such as help with study skills, academic advising, balancing school work, and where to seek assistance may be lacking.

On a positive note, some students have found obstacles and negative life experiences to be a source of motivation. In a study of twenty-one Hmong American women who were currently attending college or had completed a four-year degree, Lee (1997) found that one of the main reasons they were pursuing a higher education was the belief that a college education would allow them to achieve financial stability. After witnessing their parents struggle financially, these women were motivated to continue their education in order to support their family. Gender inequality was also a motivational factor for them. The women spoke of the gender inequality that exists in Hmong families where male children were more “valued” than female children. They believe education is the key to gender equality because it will help them to obtain a good job and become an equal financial contributor to their families. Breaking free from gender inequality through a college education was also encouraged by other female individuals in their lives, such as their mother and sisters. The women in the study are proud of what they have achieved academically because they know of the obstacles Hmong women have faced pre- and post-migration to the United States. Overall, although the women face numerous challenges relating to culture, financial difficulties, and race, they motivated themselves to excel by attempting to overcome these barriers.

Even though some students are able to use obstacles and their families as motivators to excel in higher education, some students may need more to succeed as a result of their own lack of skills, awareness and resources. Additionally, although some Hmong students are able to excel, the Hmong still possess a low level of higher education attainment as a group. Therefore, current resources and self-motivating factors may not be adequate in addressing the needs of

Hmong students. Furthermore, second generation Hmong youths may not experience severe poverty like their first generation counterparts; therefore, they may not have the motivating factor to excel academically for financial gain. A review of the literature found that academic support programs (ASPs) are vital resources in assisting students to overcome obstacles and aid in student retention (Chaney, Muraskin, Cahalan, & Goodwin, 1998; Balz & Esten, 1998; McHatton, Zalaquett, & Cranson-Gingras, 2006; Reyes, 2007). ASPs could be of additional assistance to Hmong students as they attempt to obtain a higher education. However, there is a lack of literature on how they are assisting Hmong students in higher education and in addressing their educational needs. Additionally, there is a lack of information on Hmong college students' usage of ASPs.

Due to the limited information and research on Hmong American students and more specifically the work of ASPs with the Hmong, the goal of this study is to evaluate the effectiveness of ASPs with Hmong students by assessing students' perception and usage of ASPs. Challenges faced in higher education and the academic motivational level of a sample of Hmong students will also be evaluated to determine if ASPs provide services that are relevant to Hmong students and whether motivation is a factor in their usage of ASPs. The five main research questions that guided this study included:

1. What do Hmong college students perceive to be obstacles in obtaining a higher education?
2. What factors influence the participation of Hmong college students in ASPs?
3. Do Hmong college students perceive ASPs to be helpful?
4. Which ASP services are most helpful to Hmong college students?

5. Is the academic motivation level of Hmong college students related to their participation in ASPs?

### **Method**

Participants consisted of 55 Hmong college students (42 females and 13 males) enrolled at a large, public California State University. Participants' average age was 20.75 years (range=18 - 26 years). Most of the participants were seniors (n=20, 36.40%) and juniors (n=18, 32.70%), with the remaining being sophomores (n=8, 14.50%) and freshmen (n=9, 16.40%). The mean grade point average of all participants was 3.04 (range=2.0 – 4.0) on a 4 point scale. The majority of the study informants were single (n=53, 96.40%) with two participants reported being married. A large group of the participants were born in the United States (n=32, 58.20%) and in Thailand (n=20, 36.40%). Of those that were born outside of the United States, all of them had been living in the United States for more than 12 years. The majority of participants were either working between 11-20 hours per week (n=18, 32.70%), 31-40 hours per week (n=12, 21.80%), or were unemployed (n=13, 23.60%). Participants reported studying an average of 12.38 hours per week (range=3.0 – 30.0). Their mother's education level varied, including no education (n=41, 75.90%), elementary (n=3, 5.60%), middle school (n=2, 3.60%), high school (n=2, 3.60%), and college (n=6, 10.90%). Their father's education level also varied, including no education (n=26, 48.10%), elementary (n=6, 11.10%), middle school (n=4, 7.40%), high school (n=10, 18.50%), and college (n=8, 14.80%). A small group of participants reported being the first in their family to pursue a higher education (n=15, 27.30%) while the majority of them were not the first in their family to pursue a higher education (n=40, 72.70%). However, the majority of the participants were first generation college students although they may not have been the first individuals in their family to attend college.

## **Procedure**

Five hundred Hmong students were randomly selected from an email database consisting of all of the Hmong college students on campus. Surveys with self-addressed and stamped envelopes were mailed and several surveys were emailed to a total of 500 Hmong college students. Only 55 students responded, resulting in a return rate of 11%. Each participant completed the Effectiveness of Academic Support Programs Survey A (EASPS-A) and the Academic Motivation Scale. Those who had participated in ASPs completed an additional questionnaire, the Effectiveness of Academic Support Programs Survey B (EASPS-B).

## **Instruments**

Both EASPS-A and EASPS-B were developed specifically for the current study. The first draft of the survey was administered to five Hmong college students during the spring 2007 academic semester to evaluate the mechanical aspects of the survey. Participants were given a draft version of the survey. They were instructed to complete the survey to the best of their knowledge. After completion, participants were given a quick face-to-face interview regarding the grammar, content, format, readability, and anything else that was confusing to them as they went through the survey. The surveys were then modified based on feedback from those five college students and the second author, who had prior research experience with the Hmong population. The purpose of the survey was to gather student perceptions of ASPs in meeting the needs of Hmong college students.

Survey EASPS-A consisted of twenty-one items, including demographics, students' participation and perceptions of ASPs. Demographic items consisted of gender, age, marital status, year in college, grade point average, place of birth, mother and father's education level, current employment status, and number of hours spent studying. All participants were requested

to complete Survey EASPS-A. Those who indicated that they had participated in one or more ASPs in Survey EASPS-A were instructed to complete Survey EASPS-B. Survey EASPS-B consisted of nine items and focused on obtaining feedback from students who had participated in support programs. Items included factors influencing student participation, the most valuable services provided by the programs, reasons for utilizing the programs, level of support from ASPs, reasons why they stopped using these services if applicable, and what they liked least and most about the programs.

Student motivation toward education was assessed by utilizing the college version of the Academic Motivation Scale (Vallerand et al., 1992a). This instrument was utilized to measure whether motivation toward education has an impact on students' involvement with ASPs. The reliability and validity of the Academic Motivation Scale has been validated in previous research studies (Vallerand, 1997; Vallerand et al., 1989, 1992b). The scale consists of 28 items; each item is followed by a Likert scale ranging from 1 (does not correspond at all) to 7 (corresponds exactly). The items include questions relating to three modes of motivation; intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, and amotivation.

Intrinsic motivation consists of three types: to know, toward accomplishment, and to experience (Vallerand et al., 1992a). "To know" describes the motivation when individuals participate for pleasure and satisfaction associated with learning something new (e.g., "For the pleasure that I experience in broadening my knowledge about subjects which appeal to me"). "Toward accomplishment" describes the motivation when individuals participate for the pleasure and satisfaction of the experience trying to accomplish something (e.g., "Because college allows me to experience a personal satisfaction in my quest for excellence in my studies"). "To experience" describes the motivation when individuals participate to experience stimulating

sensations associated with participating and whether they learn or did not learn something new (e.g., “For the pleasure that I experience when I read interesting authors”).

Extrinsic motivation also consists of three different types: identified, introjected, and external regulation (Vallerand et al., 1992a). “Identified” describes the motivation when individuals participate because it is important to them and will eventually lead to something better (e.g., “Because eventually it will enable me to enter the job market in a field that I like). “Introjected” describes the motivation when individuals participate because they are capable of it (e.g., “To prove to myself that I am capable of completing my college degree”). “External regulation” describes the motivation when individuals participate to avoid punishment or receive awards (e.g., “In order to have a better salary later on”).

Finally, amotivation is the lack of motivation to participate in something (Vallerand et al., 1992a). Individuals who exhibit amotivation toward education may say, “I once had good reasons for going to college; however, now I wonder whether I should continue.”

## **Results**

Of the 55 participants, 28 students had participated in one or more ASPs, while 27 students had not participated in any ASPs. Only four participants had participated in two ASPs, while the majority had only participated in one ASP. Results related to obstacles, motivation, and awareness of ASPs were from all 55 participants while results pertaining to specific ASP services were obtained from the 28 students who had participated in ASPs.

### **Factors as Obstacles in Higher Education**

Participants were instructed to put a check mark next to all life factors listed or write in other obstacles that they perceived to be challenges for them in higher education. As seen in Table 1, descriptive results showed that the majority of students found the following to be

obstacles in higher education: lack of money (n=39, 70.9%), poor study habits (n=38, 69.1%), lack of time to study (n=33, 60.0%), lack of direction on how to obtain career goals (n=30, 54.5%), and lack of motivation (n=29, 52.7%). On the other hand, only a few students found the following to be obstacles: lack of support from ASPs (n=14, 25.5%), a need to take care of younger siblings (n=14, 25.5%), and a lack of parental support (n=12, 21.8%). Those participants who wrote in other life factors reported that their social life, family relationships, and employment were obstacles.

**Table 1**  
**Percentage of Students Viewing Factors as Obstacles in Higher Education**

Factors	Frequency	%
Lack of money	39	70.9
Poor study habit/skills	38	69.1
Poor time management	31	56.4
Lack of time to study	33	60
Lack of self –confidence	24	43.6
Lack of motivation	29	52.7
Lack of mentors	25	45.5
Lack of parental support	12	21.8
Lack of support from ASPs	14	25.5
Lack of interest in college *	7	13
Lack of direction on how to obtain my career goals *	30	55.6
Influence of friends	14	25.5
Need to care for younger siblings	14	25.5
Health problems	5	9.1
Other	5	9.1

Note: n = 55 for each obstacle listed

\* n= 54

### **Factors Influencing Participation**

Participants were also asked to put a mark next to all factors listed or write in other factors that influenced them to participate in ASPs. The self-reported factors listed were feeling unprepared for college; I have friends already in the program; I needed financial assistance; I needed help with choosing my classes; I am the first in my family to attend college; and a

category of other reasons. Factors that many students perceived to be reasons why they utilized ASPs were financial assistance (n=20, 71.4%), assistance with class selection (n=15, 53.6%), and feeling unprepared for college (n=13, 46.4%). Fewer participants selected the following as influencing factors: Having friends in the program (n=7, 25%); being the first in the family to attend college (n=9, 32.1%); and other factors (n=9, 32.1%). Most of the students who wrote in other answers reported that needing guidance was a reason they participated in ASPs.

All of the participants were surveyed why they did not seek assistance from ASPs. Many students provided the following reasons as to why they did not utilize ASPs: lack of information on how to seek help from ASPs (n=19, 51.4%) and a lack of awareness of the ASPs available to them (n=29, 78.4%). On the other hand, fewer students reported the types of ASP services (n=1, 2.7%), lack of Hmong staff (n=6, 16.2%), and need for ASP services (n=8, 21.6%) as reasons for not seeking services.

**Awareness.** The lack of knowledge about these programs was evident throughout the students' qualitative responses. Many students were not aware of their existence. They remarked that not enough outreach had been done to provide students with the necessary information about these programs and their services. Samples of student comments included:

1. "I certainly don't know what programs are out there."
2. "To start off, lack of existing support programs isn't so much of an issue as the need to inform students that they exist and are available for all students who qualify for the support."

**Hmong staff.** Students' qualitative responses also showed a need for more Hmong staff to be working with these ASPs. The following are sample comments from students:

1. "I believe that the programs can have more Hmong students and staff working in these programs so that the students can relate to the services they are seeking. It also makes the program more approachable from my point of view. I would feel more relax to know that I'm getting help from someone I can relate to."
2. "By having more Hmong faculty members who will understand the culture/student's situation with family, friends, and career choices, it may encourage more Hmong students to seek advice."

### **Helpfulness of ASPs**

A ten point Likert-scale was used to measure how supportive participants perceived these programs to be, 1 meaning not very supportive and 10 meaning very supportive. For the 28 participants who had participated in these programs, ASPs overall were perceived as being supportive ( $M=7.39$ ,  $SD=2.22$ ). Seven students (25%) scored the programs very low ( $M=4$ ). For those that stopped using ASPs, the results showed that many students stopped utilizing services due to a lack of time ( $n=9$ , 64.3%) and not needing the assistance anymore ( $n=7$ , 50%).

**Support and guidance.** Positive common themes found among the written comments of those participants utilizing ASPs emphasized their role in providing support and advising/guidance. The following are examples of positive written comments from study participants:

1. "The support in school. Just a person to ask how I am doing and how I will reach my goal. Just a little reminder of the reasons why I am in college."
2. "I like how they guide you onto what classes you need to take in order for you to actually get where you want to go."

**Lack of time and a negative environment.** Some negative common themes extracted from the students' written comments were associated with their own lack of time and a perceived negative environment at ASPs. Many students found it difficult to attend the required meetings, advising sessions, and workshops. Additionally, some students felt that there was an unsupportive and unwelcoming environment. Some examples of these types of comments included:

1. "I thought the mandatory [meetings] with advisors were redundant & pointless because it was the same thing every time; my schedule was pack yet I had to go; it was a hassle."
2. "The counselor that I was assigned to was rude and a waste of my time. I went to see him two times and we ended talking about the same thing. He didn't even answer my question. He put me down by telling me I'm wasting my time here at the college. He mentioned a lot more that just made me fed up with the program."

### **Most Helpful/Useful Services**

The perceived usefulness of ASPs was evaluated to better understand Hmong student needs. Students were asked to select the ASP services that were beneficial to them. They were given a list of services common to most ASPs. See Table 2 for a list of services that were provided to the students. The top three academic support services that many Hmong students selected as beneficial were financial assistance (n=14, 63.60%), peer advising (n=13, 59.10%), and academic advising (n=12, 54.50%). The services that many students did not select as beneficial were job search assistance (n=0, 0.00%), scholarship information (n=1, 4.50%), orientation to the university (n=2, 9.10%), and personal development (n=4, 18.20%).

Students were also asked to select three services from the list that they used most often. The top three services that the most students selected as beneficial were also among the top services that many students utilized from the programs. As seen in Table 3, academic advising (n=18, 69.20%), peer advising (n=18, 69.20%), and financial assistance (n=12, 46.20%) were services that most participants say they utilized the most. Services that fewer students utilized included scholarship information (n=1, 3.80%), job search assistance (n=2, 7.70%), internship information (n=2, 7.70%), and tutoring (n=9, 34.60%). For the services that were most often utilized by students, 72% of the students stated that mandatory attendance for those services was required. Although required, they reported that they needed these services and found them to be helpful.

Table 2  
Percentage of Students Perceiving Services as Helpful

Services	Frequency	%
Financial Assistance	14	63.6
Peer Advising/Mentoring	13	59.1
Academic Advising	12	54.5
Tutoring	8	36.4
Career Advising *	4	19.0
Personal Development	4	18.2
Leadership Development	3	13.6
Orientation to the University	2	9.1
Internship Information	2	9.1
Scholarship Information	1	4.5
Job Search	0	0.0

Note: n = 22 for each services listed

\* n= 21

**Financial assistance, advising, and exposure.** In their responses to the qualitative questions, students indicated that they found many services to be helpful or useful, similar to the findings in the quantitative portion of the study. Many academic support services such as financial assistance, guidance provided from counselors, and peer advisors were found to be very

helpful to the students. Some of the qualitative responses in regards to the usefulness of the ASP programs were as follows:

1. "The assistance they provided (financial)."
2. "They had both peer advisors & counselor meeting, helps with choosing classes."
3. "They were very informative about new events related to my career goals and helped with getting us involved with something similar to it."

Table 3

Percentage of Students Seeking Certain Services

Services	Frequency	%
Academic Advising	18	69.2
Peer Advising/Mentoring	18	69.2
Financial Assistance	12	46.2
Tutoring	9	34.6
Career Advising	7	26.9
Job Search	2	7.7
Personal Development	2	7.7
Leadership Development	2	7.7
Internship Information	2	7.7
Scholarship Information	1	3.8
Orientation to the University	1	3.8

Note: n = 25 for each service listed

### **Motivation and Participation**

Motivational levels of Hmong college students were evaluated to assess the relationship between academic motivation and participation in ASPs. The majority of students scored high on all three aspects of extrinsic motivation, identified (n=27, 49.1%), integrated (n=21, 38.2%), and external regulation (n=29, 52.7%). Students scored the lowest on intrinsic motivation and amotivation. However, there were no significant differences in the correlation between motivation and participation between all motivational levels assessed.

## **Discussion**

Findings from this study indicated that the majority of Hmong college students who have utilized ASPs found them to be helpful. The majority of participants utilized academic and financial services more than any other services. Additionally, they also thought academic advising and financial services were more helpful than other services, such as tutoring, scholarship, and leadership skill development.

Based on the findings, ASPs should be commended for the success they have had with the Hmong student population in relation to academic and financial assistance, but should also be assessing different strategies to strengthen other services. Motivation or a lack of academic motivation was not correlated with the use of ASPs. Other factors that influenced the usage of ASPs were perceptions of whether participants would feel welcomed by the program staff, the range of needs felt by the students, and their general awareness of ASPs.

The services that ASPs should look into providing to Hmong students should be based on their needs. More than half of the participants found a lack of study time, poor study habits, and poor time management to be obstacles in obtaining a higher education. Although this study did not assess whether these three obstacles were addressed by the academic and peer advising sessions, ASPs should look into assisting students with poor study habits and time management skills. These Hmong students may need to learn how to manage time in ways that take both their school and home responsibilities into account. Ngo (2006)'s review of the literature found that the education of Hmong and other Asian youths are "very much intertwined with the needs and demands of their parents and families" (p. 62). Therefore, ASPs need to go beyond just providing services for Hmong students. ASPs need to also reach out to parents and educate them in order for families to better understand the demands associated with obtaining a higher education.

Although Hmong parents are supportive of their children in terms of emotional and financial support, they may not know how else to be supportive, this is something with which ASPs could be of help.

The results of this study should be interpreted with the following limitations. Results were obtained from only one university and included a small sample size of 55 Hmong college students. Furthermore, self-blame was not assessed. Therefore we were not able to verify whether the students themselves play a part in not knowing about or using existing programs. Lastly, although the purpose of the EASPS-A and EASPS-B were to capture self-reported obstacles that may inhibit their level of motivation or help-seeking behaviors, other factors may have impacted the experiences of students in higher education. Additional influential factors to keep in mind are the relative difficulty of individual courses, abilities of instructors, English reading abilities of students, or the K-12 educational experiences of students. Additionally, although the surveys allowed the participants to write in answers, some students may not have realized or may have forgotten other issues that have served as obstacles in higher education or that have influenced their attitudes toward utilizing ASPs.

Although this study has limitations, it investigated a topic that is lacking in the current literature - Hmong students in higher education, their academic needs, and their perception and usage of support programs. Hmong college students reported many obstacles in higher education, including a lack of awareness of ASPs. Therefore, ASPs need to go beyond current efforts to outreach to Hmong students and as suggested by some of the participants, hire more Hmong staff so that they may feel more connected to these programs. More research is also needed to evaluate ASPs and their services to better support first generation college students, such as the Hmong, who already confront many challenges when they enter college.

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