

Our HMoob American College Paj Ntaub

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Summary

"Our HMoob American College Paj Ntaub" is a qualitative research study conducted by the Center for College-Workforce Transitions (CCWT) in partnership with the HMoob American Studies Committee (HMASC), a University of Wisconsin-Madison (UW-Madison) student activist initiative, to examine the sociocultural and institutional factors influencing HMoob American college experiences at UW-Madison. We found that the HMoob American students who participated in our study often reported feeling unwelcome or excluded at UW-Madison. Participants stated that they felt the campus community did not have any knowledge of HMoob history and culture, which put HMoob American students in the position of educating their peers and professors on who the HMoob are. Additionally, participants reported experiencing macro- and/or microaggressions in classrooms, residence halls, and on the streets near campus. Our participants also reported feeling unwelcome in certain schools, buildings, and professional student organizations, which has significant implications on HMoob American students' academic majors, future career plans, and professional social networks. In contrast, the spaces in which our participants stated that they felt most comfortable, safe, and welcome were student support programs, race-specific student organizations, and HMoob specific classes. Participants described these spaces as places where they were able to cultivate their ethnic identity and find mentorship and other support systems.



What is Paj Ntaub?

Paj ntaub, one of the HMoob's most well-known cultural artifacts, is a colorful, geometric, and intricate embroidery traditionally created to decorate clothes and to communicate short messages. After the U.S. wars in Southeast Asia, HMoob people started producing a new form of paj ntaub in the refugee camps. These paj ntaub depict the trauma, displacement, assimilation, and resilience HMoob refugees experienced during these wars. Rather than a physical story cloth, *"Our HMoob American College Paj Ntaub"* is a symbolic way to continue this art form and pay homage to our families. The paj ntaub project draws on the experiences of HMoob American undergraduates to sew our collective story about higher education—a different but paralleled story of trauma, displacement, assimilation, and resilience in the United States.



Why the spelling "HMoob"?

We spell the ethnic group of focus in this study - *HMoob* - in lieu of Hmong (the more common spelling, particularly in the United States). The capitalization of both H and M are intended to be more inclusive of various HMoob dialects because Mong Green/Leng is pronounced without the aspirate "h." Additionally, capitalizing H and M challenges the history of White HMoob dominance in the United States. Borrowing from the Hmong Romanized Phonetic Alphabet (RPA), our spelling HMoob rejects the Americanization of our ethnic group name and demands for respect for our mother tongue. At the same time, "HMoob" allows us to reclaim and embrace our HMoob identity, history, and heritage.

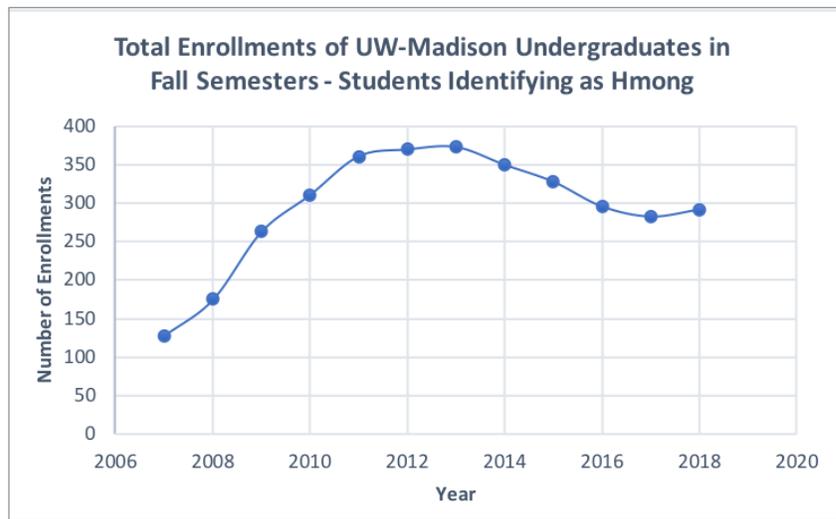
HMoob Americans in Wisconsin¹

- HMoob are the largest Asian-American group in Wisconsin at almost 50,000 people.
- The HMoob population in Wisconsin grew from 16,000 in 1990 to 47,000 in 2010.
- The top 5 Wisconsin counties with the highest HMoob population are: Milwaukee, Marathon, Sheboygan, Dane, and Brown.
- Wisconsin's HMoob population is relatively young – 43% of HMoob in Wisconsin are under 18 compared to 23% of Wisconsin's total population.
- Despite recent gains, HMoob in Wisconsin still have low educational attainment rates. In 2010, 38% of HMoob in Wisconsin who were 25 years or older did not have a high school degree compared to 11% of Wisconsin's total population

HMoob Americans at UW-Madison

UW-Madison does not publicly report any disaggregated data about its HMoob American students. The Data Digests and other reports produced by the Office of Academic Planning and Institutional Research (APIR) include HMoob American students as a “targeted minority,” under the category of “Southeast Asians,” which group HMoob Americans with Vietnamese, Lao, and Cambodian American students. However, while race/ethnic identification is not required in undergraduate applications, UW-Madison began offering “Hmong” as an ethnic category that students could self-identify on their applications beginning in 2006. APIR and the Center for Academic Excellence provided our research team with data disaggregated by ethnicity specific to HMoob American students but not individual-level data with identifying information.² While it is important to note that we are still missing various pieces of data and the data-sets span different time periods, we present below some of the most significant findings from the available data:

- An average of 294 HMoob American students were enrolled at UW-Madison per year from 2007-2018. There was a significant increase in HMoob American students between 2008 and 2011, but there has been a 22% decrease since 2013 (as shown on graph).



- 68% of the HMoob American cohorts matriculated from 2006-2011 graduated within 6 years.
- 58% of HMoob American students come from Dane, Marathon, or Milwaukee counties.
- 63% of HMoob American students identified as female.
- 79% of HMoob American students are first-generation.
- 63% of HMoob American students are affiliated with programs under Division of Diversity, Equity & Educational Achievements (DDEEA) and/or the Center for Academic Excellence (CAE).
- Each year since 2007, approximately 7-8 HMoob American students transfer to UW-Madison from another institution (the majority come from Madison College or UW-Marathon County).
- Top 5 most popular majors for HMoob American students are listed below with the number of graduates from 2007-2017 in parenthesis:
 1. Biology (71)
 2. Human Development and Family Studies (43)
 3. Social Welfare (28)
 4. Asian studies (26)
 5. Psychology (26).

Research Methods

Community-Based Participatory Action Research (CBPAR). CBPAR is a collaborative research approach that aims to understand and address relevant concerns of people in a targeted community by partnering with community actors to engage and make shared decisions in attempt to gain a more grounded understanding of a phenomena.³ In accordance with the CBPAR framework, our research team consisted of two academic researchers, one graduate student, and seven HMoob American undergraduate students who were HMoob American Studies Committee (HMASC) members. The research study was vetted by the UW-Madison IRB and all team members completed human subjects training and participated in additional training and discussions of the research ethics considerations particular to this study design. Student researchers were given collective ownership of this study throughout the entire research process from the design to dissemination. Guided by the PhD trained researchers, student researchers interpreted the data and made recommendations from their emic perspectives, increasing validity of research results and establishing equitable partnerships. The research team met weekly from September 2018-February 2019 to discuss relevant literature, data collection, emerging themes, and data analysis.

Conceptual Framework. We draw on literature from the sociology of education and ethnic studies to better understand how minoritized students, such as HMoob-Americans and other Asian-American groups, have experienced public education in the United States and the implications of these experiences on their future trajectories.⁴ This literature has demonstrated how social spaces, practices, representations, and social interactions in educational settings can structure student experiences, entailing institutional exclusion and invisibility, and setting conditions for identity formation and transformation as well as future life outcomes. In our research, we draw on this critical approach to understanding the educational experiences of minoritized students, by documenting and analyzing the institutional, social, and cultural contexts which influence HMoob American college students' lives.

Research Design, Data Collection, and Analysis.

Research Question: What sociocultural and institutional factors influence HMoob American college experiences?

Participants. Student researchers recruited 27 HMoob American undergraduates at UW-Madison to participate in this study using snowball sampling techniques in which the student researchers drew on their social networks to recruit a diverse sample of HMoob American students who come from different backgrounds, study a wide array of subjects, and engage in diverse social networks and activities (see Participant Background Table). All the participants were second-generation Americans, except for four students who came to the United States as young refugees after the closing of the last refugee camps in Thailand in 2004-2005. Participants ranged in ages from 18 – 23 years.

Data Collection. Data collected for this study included interviews, observations, and artifacts.

Interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all research participants that discussed students' social and educational backgrounds, cultural identity, and social, academic, and professional experiences and networks on campus. The interviews lasted approximately 1-hour, were audio-recorded, and were later transcribed by the student researcher who conducted the interview.

Observations. Participant observations were conducted with 14 of the 27 participants in public spaces on the UW-Madison campus; the observations were often conducted in locations or at events where other HMoob American students congregate.

Artifacts. Text and online documents and images related to HMoob American students and organizations at UW-Madison were collected, such as journalistic and institutional representations of HMoob students, HMoob-themed course content, and online and policy documents related to campus climate, diversity management, and bias incidents on campus.

Researcher reflections. Student researchers maintained auto-ethnographic journals which included personal reflections and research memos throughout data collection and analysis.

Data Analysis. After all interviews were transcribed, the research team collaboratively developed a coding system deductively derived from our conceptual framework and supplemented by inductively derived codes produced through a process of open coding and analytical memoing. The transcripts, observations, artifacts, and auto-ethnographic journals were coded accordingly. After the raw data was coded, the research team looked for significant categories and emerging themes, and produced a series of analytic memos to develop and contextualize our research themes. Four of these themes are presented in our Findings section below.

Limitations. The limitations of this research include the limited sample size, representing approximately 10 percent of the current HMoob American-identified students on campus. While our findings were rich, they also suggest that more extensive, ethnographic observations and participant-observations would enhance our understanding of the factors that influence HMoob American college students’ experiences. Lastly, our sample is limited to current college students; in our future research we plan to include alumni in order to gain a better understanding of the college-workforce transition experience.

Participant Background (n=27)			
Background Characteristic		Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
Self-identified Gender	Female	17	63%
	Male	9	33%
	Did not identify with a gender	1	4%
Home state/county	Minnesota	1	4%
	Wisconsin	26	96%
	Milwaukee County	11	41%
	Dane County	5	17%
	Marathon County	4	15%
	Eau Claire County	2	7%
	Winnebago County	1	4%
	Fond du Lac County	1	4%
	Outagamie County	1	4%
	Wood County	1	4%

Participant Background (n=27)			
Background Characteristic		Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
Class Standing	Freshman	6	22%
	Sophomore	6	22%
	Junior	7	26%
	Senior	8	30%
Involved in a student support program (CAE, CeO, Chancellor's and Power's Knapp, PEOPLE)	Yes	19	70%
	No	8	30%
Transfer Student	Yes	3	11%
	No	24	89%
First-Generation College Student	Yes	19	70%
	No	8	30%

Findings

Invisibility and Misrepresentation

“A lot of people don’t even know who HMoob people are...so a lot of people are just like, ‘Oh what is that?’ ‘Where are you from?’...and it’s really difficult because a lot of people aren’t aware of who HMoob people are.” (Maria, Freshman).

Many of our participants also reported feeling disappointed by the lack of knowledge on the university campus about HMoob culture and history and/or upset by the ways in which HMoob people are portrayed in “mainstream” (i.e. non-HMoob specific) courses. Participants explained that they are often made responsible to educate their peers and teachers on who the HMoob are because many of them know nothing or very little about HMoob people. When HMoob history or culture was included in mainstream courses, participants typically reported it being done in overly simplistic and/or offensive ways that framed HMoob solely through the lens of U.S. Cold War history.

Spaces and Experiences of Exclusion

“I lived in Sellery freshmen year and it was [sigh]. I just felt like I didn’t really fit in. For example, I introduced myself to my neighbors and they would talk really slow to me like, ‘Hello, it’s really nice to meet you’ in a slow tone. I just felt like, I was born here; why are you acting like this to me?” (Lee, Senior).

The majority of our HMoob American student participants reported feeling excluded at UW-Madison. Many of our participants identified physical spaces on or near campus, such as Grainger Hall, residence halls, and Langdon street, that they avoided because of feeling unwelcome. Participants gave accounts of macro- and microaggressions that occurred in these spaces. These accounts ranged from the vandalization of the Multicultural Learning Center in Witte Hall, to receiving unwelcoming stares, to being asked to speak HMoob as a novelty. The majority of these incidents were not reported to the university. Reasons participants provided for not reporting these incidents included: believing that the incident did not meet the university's definition of a bias report, feeling the incident was not severe enough to report to the university, or feeling as though the university would not take action. Those who did report macro- and microaggressions often had direct support from university staff or faculty. The bias incidents that were reported involved university students, staff, faculty, and UW police.

Spaces and Experiences of Belonging on Campus

“Since I’m in PEOPLE [the UW-Madison Precollege Enrichment Opportunity Program for Learning Excellence], I take this counseling psychology class with other PEOPLE students, and it’s all college students. It’s a space for us to talk about our experiences here so far on campus. Every month, we have that space to talk about all the negativity and all the positivity...” (Lisa, Freshman).

In contrast to the general feeling of exclusion and not belonging, our HMoob American student participants also described spaces on campus where they felt welcome and supported. Participants noted the importance of these spaces in acquiring academic and social wellbeing. In general, the spaces participants most identified as welcoming included spaces explicitly affiliated with students of color, student support spaces, and ethnic specific spaces. Our participants reported feeling welcome at the Multicultural Student Center within the Red Gym as well as various racial and ethnic student organizations such as the Hmong American Student Association (HASA), the Korean American Student Association (KASA), the Vietnamese Student Association (VSA), and Asian specific Greek organizations. Participants also reported feeling welcome by student support programs - UW-Madison Precollege Enrichment Opportunity Program for Learning Excellence (PEOPLE), Center for Academic Excellence (CAE), Center for Educational Opportunity (CeO), Diversity, Equity, and Educational Achievement (DDEEA) which they stated offer them friendship and mentorship and well as resources (e.g. tuition, tutoring, printing).

The Role of HMoob Specific Classes in Identity Formation

“It helped me learn more about myself because I feel like I’ve waited 20 years to take courses that are about my people, courses that I do really care about. I think that I’ve just learned a lot about who I am and who the HMoob and HMoob Americans are” (Aaron, Junior).

A prominent space of belonging discussed by participants was HMoob specific classes. Classes such as Asian American Studies 240 (Hmong Refugee History), Asian American Studies 540 (Hmong Americans’ Social Movements in the 20th and 21st Centuries), and HMoob language courses in the Southeast Asian Studies Department, were some of the courses that our participants reported enjoying most. Of our 27 HMoob American student participants, 18 had taken HMoob specific courses. All of these participants reported positive experiences, and many expressed the value of these courses in developing an affirmative ethnic identity. The remaining participants who did not take HMoob specific courses expressed interest in taking these courses, but found it difficult to fit them in their schedules due to inflexibility in their course requirements (e.g., some STEM majors). Despite participants’ high praise of HMoob specific courses, many also expressed disappointment in limited amount of courses offered and expressed a desire for the university to offer more HMoob specific courses with greater consistency.

Discussion

At UW-Madison, HMoob Americans are physically seen as Asians and categorized by the university as Southeast Asians. HMoob American students are racialized as perpetual foreigners and “failed model minorities” when categorized as “targeted minorities,” “Asians,” “Southeast Asians.”⁵ This racialization of HMoob Americans informs the types of services for, and interpersonal and institutional treatment of, HMoob American students. Thus, HMoob American undergraduates are rendered *institutionally invisible* and further marginalized when the university cannot provide sufficient opportunities to educate about HMoob Americans’ racialized experiences. Specifically, the lack of publicly available disaggregated data makes it difficult for the university to provide critical and inclusive educational services and programs for HMoob American students. This lack of institutionally disaggregated data mirrors the campus’s general lack of knowledge of HMoob people, history, culture, which was commonly reported by our participants. Moreover, our participants reported that when HMoob people, history, and culture were discussed in “mainstream” (non-HMoob specific) courses, it was done so in often overly simplistic and biased ways. As a result of this climate, many HMoob American students were pushed to educate their professors and peers on who the HMoob are and forge their own creative spaces of belonging.

Our HMoob American undergraduate participants shared that they continuously negotiate their racial and ethnic identities. On the individual level, participants expressed the challenges of relating to their HMoob family and mainstream American life. Institutionally, many of the participants reported that they often had to adjust their personal behavior to fit into predominantly white spaces. As illustrated in our findings, the spaces and experiences of exclusion reported by the participants also have significant implications on the career development of HMoob American students. Our participants reported feeling unwelcome in certain schools and buildings (e.g. Grainger Hall) and in professional student organizations. Feeling unwelcome in these spaces limits HMoob American students’ academic majors, future career plans, and professional social networks. In contrast, our participants listed several academic and social spaces of inclusion, support, and mentorship (e.g. student support programs and ethnic-specific student organizations). Participants iterated the importance of these spaces to their academic success, personal confidence, social networking, and general sense of belonging.

UW-Madison prides itself as an inclusive and welcoming space for all students, as foregrounded in its Mission Statement, and highlighted in the current Diversity Framework, which promotes policies for inclusion and improved institutional access for diverse students, faculty and staff.⁶ Yet, our research demonstrates that HMoob American students remain institutionally invisible and face various forms of racism and racial segregation on campus. Therefore, we concur with other scholars⁷ who have suggested that the diversity framework emphasizing integration across racial and cultural lines overlooks racial inequities. While the diversity framework celebrates social differences, it is evident that this framework does not adequately address the racial inequities faced by many HMoob American students at UW-Madison. Furthermore, our research demonstrates serious concerns regarding UW-Madison’s current bias incident reporting system. While many of our participants discussed encounters that they or someone they know experienced that would be considered a “bias incident” by university definition, the majority did not report these encounters. This finding suggests that many bias incidents experienced by HMoob American students go unreported and indicates a need to improve bias incident reporting mechanisms.

Policy Recommendations and Future Research

Based on our research we propose the following recommendations to improve HMoob American college student experiences at UW-Madison:

- UW-Madison should support more student-led CBPAR research, which provides a critical method to assess and refine diversity and inclusion policies on campus.
- UW-Madison should recruit more HMoob American students from the state.

- UW-Madison should fund a new tenure track faculty hire focused on HMoob and HMoob American studies, and support the development of a HMoob American Studies Certificate with a dedicated space for students, staff, and faculty that are part of the program and with program support funds. The successful candidate should be tasked with developing and implementing the certificate program and cultivating positive outreach to the HMoob communities in Wisconsin.
- UW-Madison should continue and expand student support programs such as PEOPLE, CAE, CeO, and other Division of Diversity, Equity & Educational Achievement programs.
- UW-Madison should recruit and employ academic and career advisors with backgrounds in HMoob history and culture to advise and support the mentorship of HMoob American students; especially for departments and colleges that serve large numbers of HMoob American students.
- UW-Madison's Office of Academic Planning and Institutional Research should disaggregate HMoob students in their publicly available Data Digests and other publications.
- **Plans for future research:** Possible avenues of future research include (1) documenting with interviews and observations the career development and preparation of HMoob American students and documenting the post-college transition to work for recent HMoob American alumni and (2) developing curriculum materials to help educate the campus about HMoob people, culture, and history.

The Paj Ntaub, CCWT Research Team (in alphabetical order)

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The mission of The Center for Research on College-Workforce Transitions (CCWT) is to conduct and support research, critical policy analysis, and public dialogue on student experiences with the transition from college to the workforce in order to inform policies, programs, and practices that promote academic and career success for all learners.

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