



HMOOB STUDENTS AT UW-OSHKOSH:

**A LONGITUDINAL STUDY ABOUT
NAVIGATING PURPOSE,
BARRIERS, AND BELONGING**

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Our HMoob^[1] American College Paj Ntaub is a student-led activist team of researchers at the University of Wisconsin-Madison dedicated to examining the experiences of HMoob American college students at predominantly white institutions (PWIs), with particular emphasis on structural inequities affecting underrepresented minorities in higher education. The UWO College Paj Ntaub serves as an extension of this initiative, centering on the academic and social experiences of HMoob undergraduate students at the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh. Supported in part by the National Science Foundation (NSF) grant, this collective works to deepen the understanding of HMoob students' experiences in STEM and non-STEM fields at PWIs, centering on the institutional gatekeeping mechanisms that shape access, sense of belonging, and STEM pushout, whereby institutional barriers and biased practices contribute to the redirection of students away from STEM majors and into non-STEM related fields or secondary academic pathways. In alignment with these study goals, the UW-Oshkosh site contributes a distinct institutional and community-based perspective expanding these primary objectives.

Literature Review

Existing literature on HMoob college students have primarily focused on measuring their success through academic performances and graduation rates (Her, 2014; F. Lee, 2013; J. Lee & Green 2008; Lor & Hutchinson, 2017; Pfeifer, 2008; Y. Xiong, 2012); however, a growing body of scholarship has also explored how other factors such as social, professional, and personal life influence HMoob students' higher education experiences and successes (Mouavangsou, 2018; Museus & Vue, 2013; Ngo, 2006; Vue, 2021; C. Xiong & Mouavangsou, 2023; S. Xiong, 2023; S. Xiong, 2024). This literature review synthesizes existing research on HMoob students' experiences in higher education, focusing on themes of advising and mentorship, financial and familial pressures, identity negotiation, and institutional belonging. As HMoob students navigate attending predominantly white institutions (PWIs), they also are balancing collectivist family expectations, racialized experiences, and institutional barriers.

Advising and mentorship function as central mechanisms that shape HMoob students' educational pathways, persistence, and sense of belonging. Rather than relying on a singular source of guidance, HMoob students draw on a network of relationships including parents, siblings, educators, and college-preparation programs to navigate the complexities of higher education (S. Xiong, 2023; S. Xiong, 2024). Advising and mentorship are fundamentally relational, permitting students to access opportunities, cultivate self-assurance, and make informed decisions (S. Xiong, 2023, 2024, 2025). As HMoob students learn to navigate higher education while carrying cultural, familial, and intergenerational responsibilities, they benefit from advising and mentoring that

[1] The more common spelling is "Hmong" or "Mong", but we follow Ariana Thao (2019) in spelling "HMoob" to capture the two different dialects Hmoob Dawb (White) and Moob Leeg/Ntsuab (Leng/Green) and accurately represent the tonal pronunciation. All names of programs are spelled utilizing their original spelling e.g., Hmong Studies Program.

recognizes these lived experiences and provide support beyond academic planning (S. Xiong, 2023, 2024, 2025). Our 4-year, longitudinal study expands these studies to examine how advising and mentorship functions as an expansive network of relationships facilitating HMoob students' development, and progression through college.

Professional self-developments are not individual endeavors but are shaped by the interplay of institutional structures and interpersonal relationships that provide access to knowledge, resources, and encouragement (Xiong & Lee, 2011; S. Xiong, 2023). Many HMoob students enter higher education with limited familiarity with college systems and career pathways, which can restrict their ability to envision and pursue long-term professional goals (Xiong & Lee, 2011). Connections with professors, peers, tutoring services, and counseling are integral to both personal and professional growth (Xiong & Lee, 2011; S. Xiong, 2023). These supports expand students' awareness of potential career options and enhance their capacity to make informed decisions about their futures. While institutional resources and mentoring relationships influence students' academic and professional trajectories, HMoob students must also navigate broader questions surrounding cultural identity, belonging, and self-understanding throughout their college experiences.

HMoob students frequently confront tensions between sustaining ties to HMoob language, traditions, and community or adopting the norms and expectations of mainstream American society (Lo, 2017; Mckenzie et al., 2024). Such processes require students to continually negotiate their identities and modify their self-presentation across diverse social and institutional settings (Gloria et al., 2017; Mckenzie et al., 2024). While negotiating their identities across cultural contexts, HMoob students often seek spaces that affirm their sense of belonging. HMoob student organizations serve as important spaces where students strengthen their cultural identity, build supportive peer relationships, and develop a stronger sense of belonging (Vue, 2021). Likewise, culturally relevant coursework can provide opportunities for students to explore HMoob histories and experiences that have historically been underrepresented in traditional curricula, contributing to greater cultural affirmation and inclusion (DePouw, 2020; S. Lee, 2022; Ngo, 2024; Vue, 2023). Together, these spaces support students' identity development while fostering meaningful connections to both their cultural communities and their institutions.

As part of a historically collectivist community, many HMoob American students place a strong emphasis on family responsibilities, which can significantly influence their educational experiences and academic pathways (S. Xiong et al., 2013). Many students take on extensive caregiving and emotional support roles within their families, yet these contributions are often undervalued, leading to increased stress and negative self-perceptions (Cho et al., 2025). The expectation to prioritize family well-being can also limit the time and energy students devote to their academic and social lives, which may negatively impact their overall college experience. In addition to these family obligations, financial barriers such as rising tuition costs and household financial responsibilities often

shape students' educational decisions. Some HMoob students viewed entering the workforce as a more practical option than attending college because they felt responsible for contributing to household income and reducing financial strain on their families (Chiang et al., 2015). Although financial aid programs are available to support students in higher education, increasing educational costs and ongoing family financial obligations often make this assistance insufficient for many low-income HMoob students (Yang & Vang, 2023). Our project builds on these studies, by exploring how HMoob American undergraduates describe balancing their educational goals with family expectations and financial responsibilities.

Taken together, the literature suggests that HMoob students' experiences in higher education are shaped by the interconnected influences of advising, professional development, identity negotiation, financial stability and familial responsibilities. Examining how these factors evolve over time remains critical for understanding student persistence, belonging, and success, which is a central focus of the UW-Oshkosh College Paj Ntaub longitudinal study. While previous scholarship provides insight into educational persistence and access, fewer studies examine how belonging, identity, and emotional connection evolve longitudinally throughout students' college experiences for underrepresented minorities. In doing so, this review situates our longitudinal study within broader conversations regarding HMoob student persistence, cultural identity, and inclusion within PWIs.



UW-Oshkosh students at UWO Paj Ntaub Event. 2025

Methods & Research Sample

Institutional Profile of UW-Oshkosh

This research employed a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach to identify the challenges HMoob American students experience in higher education. PAR emphasizes collaboration between researchers and community members, allowing a better understanding of issues affecting their academic, social, and institutional experiences. The HMoob American College Paj Ntaub project is a mixed-method, 4-year longitudinal study at four campuses across the Universities of Wisconsin: UW-Eau Claire, UW-Madison, UW-Milwaukee, and UW-Oshkosh. Our prior study has documented how HMoob American college students experience institutional invisibility and racialized marginalization on

predominantly white campuses (Smolerak et al., 2021). Additionally, participatory methods such as autoethnographic journaling and collective storytelling have been shown to center student voices, support critical reflection, and link research to advocacy and institutional change (Smolerak et al., 2021; Smolerak et al., 2022). In the duration of the research study, participants were recruited through mass emails and snowball sampling strategies, leveraging personal networks and HMoob student organizations to reach individuals for participation. Data was collected through 75-minute semi-structured interviews. Researchers then recorded their experiences from interviews and relevance in autoethnographic journaling. The interviews were then transcribed and analyzed to examine participants' experiences on a longitudinal scale.

This report focuses primarily on interview data from UW-Oshkosh. The following table includes the demographics of participants at the UW-Oshkosh site:

Table 1: UW-Oshkosh Participant Demographics

UWO Student Demographics				
	Survey	T1 Interview	T2 Interview	T3 Interview
	n=64	n=31	n=18	n=11
Gender				
Male	23	11	6	4
Female	41	20	12	7
Student Standing				
First year	16	13	0	0
Second year	14	1	5	0
Third year	6	9	3	1
Fourth year	14	5	5	1
Fifth year or more	14	3	1	1
Graduated	0	0	4	8
First Generation				
Yes	41	17	9	6
No	13	14	9	5

Longitudinal Analysis

Who are UW-Oshkosh HMoob Undergraduates?

Among the HMoob student population at UW-Oshkosh (fall enrollment averages 200 students), a large portion of these students are commuters. Thus, 67% of the UW-Oshkosh participants interviewed by the Paj Ntaub team were commuters. Commuting has been common practice amongst UW-Oshkosh HMoob students because they can save on housing costs, stay close to family, and continue interdependent practices such as providing caretaking support for their extended family members. Nonetheless, commuting does shape students' college experiences and sense of belonging on campus because the college culture prioritizes on-campus students. Leelas describes her experience as a commuter student:

*"I feel like if I had more time to engage in those extracurriculars, I would but again, **it's hard as a commuter**. By the time I'm **done with my classes**, I just **want to go home and rest**."*

HMoob students already struggle with belonging due to a lack of community and diversity on campus, but for students their efforts to create bonds with other students through HMoob events or the Hmong Studies program are further inhibited by travel time as a commuter. Commuter students often experience a very limited on-campus lifestyle which may make students continue to feel disconnected with their peers. They may also have caretaking responsibilities which may additionally limit their ability to stay on campus; it is not a lack of trying or desire to belong that is preventing this group of students from feeling connected.

Many HMoob American students view their ethnic identity as an important part of their personal growth while they are in college. While college is a place to gain academic knowledge and professional skills, this time period plays a significant part of students' life as they simultaneously figure out who they are professionally and personally. Self-identity is built upon individuals being able to understand their own values and goals and where these concepts may have originated from. One way that students understand their identity and place in the world is from their parents and families or what Yosso (2005) calls familial capital. As refugees, many HMoob parents have sacrificed their own opportunities to support and guide their children through these experiences and challenges in life. HMoob people were forced to become U.S. refugees after the Secret War, a war where the U.S. CIA recruited HMoob people in Laos to be proxy soldiers (Vang, 2021). When they arrived in the U.S., HMoob people had limited educational opportunities due to financial constraints of being resettled in some of the most impoverished communities (Tang, 2015) and the U.S. education privileging English

language skills. Leelas, a senior student majoring in Marketing, shares that formal schooling should include curricula about HMoob people such as language and history, so HMoob students like herself can learn, remember, and repay her family's sacrifices,

*"I **definitely thrive with my identity**. Being a HMoob person, I don't separate it from me. I think it's something that I'm proud of and that's not to talk about with the sacrifices our parents have made.... I don't think it's something... that deep. Honestly, **I think it's part of me**. HMoob is our first language, and it's something that **I want to keep** to my heart and something I want to hold on to. Also, it **makes me feel special to know that I'm HMoob** because there's such a small ethnic community of us."*

The HMoob population (N=3293) is only 1.9% of the total population in Winnebago County, but they make up 54.6% of the Asian population, making them one of the most visible racial minority groups in the area (U.S. Census 2020). Thus, for students like Leelas, embracing and learning about their own ethnic identity is critical for their self-development, sense of belonging, and commitment to social responsibilities. The HMoob immigrant story demonstrates how communities with historically collectivist practices influence resilience and social responsibilities in young people and society. Learning about and understanding their ethnic and heritage background is critical for developing HMoob students' individuality and helps connect not only their lived experiences to academic knowledge,

but also with their family's origins, community, and culture. HMoob American students' educational experiences, aspirations, motivations, and development are influenced by interlocking systemic oppressions that makes it difficult for students to identify what they truly desire. For example, racialization and racist practices, particularly in educational spaces, have framed HMoob and Asian communities, cultures, and families as a hinderance to students' educational successes (DePouw, 2012; Ngo & Lee, 2007). By creating a better understanding of their family origins and community, students can have access to culturally relevant curricula that shapes strong development of their sense of self, heritage history, and create meaningful relationships.

Sustaining HMoob Identity through the UW-Oshkosh Hmong Studies Program

While there are limited infrastructure and institutional support for HMoob students at UW-Oshkosh, our findings suggest that the Hmong Studies Program is a repeated program that HMoob undergraduates identified as impactful to their college success. The establishment of the Hmong Studies program at UW-Oshkosh was driven by HMoob students who advocated for the inclusion of courses that reflected HMoob history, culture, and lived experiences within the university's academic curriculum. Their efforts responded to a racist incident on campus, which underscored the need for greater institutional recognition and support for HMoob students.

Through sustained student advocacy and collaboration among HMoob student organizations, faculty, and university leadership, the Hmong Studies program was approved as a certificate program in February 2022. Hmong Studies is a step towards helping HMoob students feel more connected with their identity through courses that “examines the historical, political, and socio-cultural experiences of the [HMoob] in the U.S. and globally” (Hmong Studies website). The program serves as a space for HMoob students to feel visible while deepening their understanding of HMoob history, culture, and identity. Furthermore, the program engages students in critical discussions of power, equity, and social justice, while providing opportunities to explore and apply HMoob perspectives, knowledge production, and the complex historical and contemporary issues shaping HMoob communities beyond the classroom.

Ally, a senior student majoring in Human Service Leadership, shares her thoughts on the significance of taking Hmong Studies courses:

“Well, for one, **I think, [we] should participate in Hmong Studies**, especially since..., a lot of HMoob kids these days or a lot of the younger generations are- if you're not born into a family that's really like OG in that sense, then, you **kind of lose the culture.**”

Like Leelas, Ally advocates for formal schooling to teach about HMoob people, so HMoob students have a chance to learn about themselves and retain their culture. Acknowledging that younger generations are losing their knowledge of the culture, Ally calls attention to the urgency to maintain HMoob history and culture through its inclusion in university curriculum.



UWO Paj Ntaub Team presenting at the Hmong National Development Conference in Minneapolis, MN. April 2025



Student researchers Seng Yeng Lee and Pangnra Yang pictured with their poster in the Rotunda at the Wisconsin State Capitol in Madison, WI, March 2026.

In addition to learning about themselves, the Hmong Studies program also provides opportunities for students to make sense of their commitment and responsibilities to their family and the larger community. Along with identity development, student participants

often express a strong sense of responsibility to give back to the HMoob community. This sense of responsibility comes in various forms such as choosing certain pathways with their majors, career jobs, family obligations, and living situations. While some students expressed high levels of pressure from these responsibilities, these pressures are also a source of motivation that drives students towards graduation. Junior student, Natalie, a double-major in Accounting and Finance, shares from her experience:



Hmong Studies courses offer opportunities for students like Natalie to connect their lived experience and familial obligations as a sense of pride rather than a hinderance in their educational journey. As HMoob students navigate through their college career, they are able to slowly find and understand their identity and community. Hmong Studies courses are the beginning of students' journey to develop their HMoob identity while moving forward in their personal life and career.

“Well, I mean, I feel like that's just the basic of it. Just like earning money to be able to sustain myself. Maybe not for a career goal, but just kind of a personal goal is to **just kind of help people in a sense.** ‘Cause, I have this weird urge to help people back in like Laos, and not ‘cause like they're a third world country. So, I have this urge to maybe **help them with money or help them with food.**”

- Natalie

Moreover, the Hmong Studies program also opens a gateway for non-HMoob students to learn about their HMoob neighbors. Ally also points out,

*"I also think that **[it's] important for other races** to consider taking Hmong Studies because you're learning about a culture that's not really talked about. Like, **we're not in history, regular history books.**"*

Ally notes that the HMoob culture not being taught in “regular history books”, arguing that courses offered by the Hmong Studies program at UW-Oshkosh and other institutions in the U.S. provides an academic gap to public education. As we strive to create public and academic knowledge about U.S. history, we also have to learn about U.S. imperialist and colonial history in Southeast Asia. With a large HMoob population in the Midwest for over 50 years, schools should have more courses that teach about the growing HMoob community.

Misconceptions about the Hmong Studies Program

While the Hmong Studies Program has helped some students reflect on their personal, cultural experiences and increased their sense of belonging on campus, there are still barriers to enrolling in the Hmong Studies Program. In particular, students reported difficulties signing up for Hmong Studies courses due to institutional structures (i.e., availabilities, schedule conflicts, work, etc.) or personal reasons (i.e., misconceptions about the program’s curricula and purpose). Andrea, a Biology major and alumni, explains why it was difficult for her to take Hmong Studies courses:

*“I don't know, because I'm just **kinda scared taking it [Hmong Studies]**. I don't know why I think like when it was opened, you know how like I told you like, I just **don't feel like included with the HMoob people or the HMoob community**. And that was like one of the big reasons why I didn't wanna take it. But now I am considering it with the new courses that are available for us. Now, I think it's something with the Hmong history or something like that.”*

Andrea’s fear of being excluded or not feeling “HMoob enough” stems from the historical processes of racialization and racism (Khang, 2019). Growing up in America,

many HMoob students are expected to conform to an American norm that privileges an American identity, English language, and mainstream popular culture. HMoob language, cultural traditions and beliefs, and heritage practices are often devalued, erased, or not prioritized (Vue, 2021). This may create an identity for students of not being “HMoob enough” and may discourage students from taking a course which has proven to be highly impactful, specifically for HMoob students. There are no requirements or prerequisites to these introductory HMoob courses, yet students like Andrea still chose not to enroll in the courses out of fear of judgement or exclusion. Her fears are similar to what Xong Xiong (2018) discussed as the shame rooted in internalized racism that students feel about their HMoob language fluency.

Theo, a Medical Laboratory Science major, speaks about an additional obstacle to HMoob Studies attendance and how it related to his academics:

*“I **already completed, my culture and my lit stuff.** So, at the time I felt like it **wasn't necessary for me** to take Hmong Studies because I didn't need those requirements. So, I just kind of **went to the classes that I needed** to take and learn lighter load.”*

Students like Theo are excited and willing to take courses that may reflect their experiences, but the availability and advertisement of Hmong Studies Program make it difficult to plan these courses as part of their academic program. This is especially relevant for STEM programs which, firstly, are encouraged by HMoob families out of a desire for financial stability, and secondly, are notoriously individualistic and competitive. This combination of circumstances makes it difficult for Hmong Studies to be included in students’ course planning due to the intense pressures of rigorous STEM courses and conflict in schedule availability. STEM students often find themselves more isolated when focused on academic success and less on relationships with peers. Smolarek and the College Paj Ntaub (2026) found that HMoob students in STEM historically struggle with belonging on campus. Even though the Hmong Studies Program now exists, students still struggle to find opportunities to take these courses.

The Hmong Studies Program is fairly new (only four years old), and continual promotion and institutional support can allow for higher impact. Students deserve an increased presence of HMoob Studies promotion and advertising on campus through staff, events, and organizations. There should be additional attention and resources focused on HMoob Studies, especially pertaining to its availability, project and research opportunities, and programming. The issues that HMoob students face are ones of visibility. Students are unable to enroll in classes largely due to misunderstanding or structural barriers which could be fixed through clearer communication about the program’s mission and history. Given the positive impact, the Hmong Studies program is vital to maintaining HMoob student belonging, recruitment, and retention.

Student's Relationships with HMoob Community: Normalizing HMoob-ness

Students further report that they also find community through HMoob-related student clubs and extracurricular activities as a way to navigate their place of belonging at PWIs. By joining HMoob student organizations, HMoob students can connect with other peers who share a cultural identity and familiarity. Natalie shares her experience about joining HMoob clubs,



Additionally, Ally echoes,

*“HSU [Hmong Student Union] is a space where HMoob students can go and just enjoy their college experience. But also, **[HSU] be an outlet for HMoob students who are like, ‘hey, I actually don't like what the university is doing like, are you guys able to help me talk to the Dean or the director or whatever’**”*

Natalie and Ally's experiences of participating in HMoob student organizations demonstrate the importance of building connections and fostering a sense of belonging on campus. Their involvement highlights how the HMoob community creates a safe space where students feel empowered to share and speak upon important issues. As Ally shares, HSU is also an educational space to enact civic participation and get involved in changing the institution to become better for herself and her peers.

*“I think it **[HMoob events]** kind of give, like, a **place for HMoob people to like reside in to feel comfortable.** And I think it does I think a good way to connect with other Hmong people too. **When you can barely find any around here,** I feel like I guess a good opportunity for that, but I think **it is a good chance for like other people like who are not wanting to kind of check it out so then they could be included and understand our culture as well.**”*



The UW-Oshkosh Paj Ntaub Research Team shares about their digital toolkit with students on campus, Sept. 2025.

Despite HMoob events being a space where many students can feel seen and heard, not all students have the same positive experiences. Andrea describes a reoccurring feeling that many students experience as incoming students,

*“I think I might join HATS just for the food. I feel like when I go there I **don't really know anyone**, and then, like I maybe it's just me, but it seems like **not a lot of people there want to talk to each other**. I kind of have to force people to talk, and I **hate forcing people to talk**.”*

What Andrea offers is some nuance to the comfortability of HMoob events. Those who do not feel already integrated in the community may feel isolated at events that are meant for them. Representation and seeing people who look like you are only the first part of feeling connected to the campus community. Overall, students still report a lack of HMoob presence on campus. Thus, maintaining a strong HMoob community on campus seems impossible to materialize due to the lack of diversity and representation, poor resources, and minimal support for HMoob organizations, staff, and faculty. As previously discussed in the literature review, direct communication and interactions between HMoob students and staff are vital for students' success and community (S. Xiong, 2023, 2024, 2025). More resources are needed for both HMoob organizations and the institution to create larger and more frequent spaces for HMoob students to belong in whether these be physical spaces like buildings or dorms, events and trips where students can get to know each other, or long-term support programs and mentorship programs.

These institutional changes can provide sustainable academic programs, student support programs, and peer-to-peer programming that can connect upper and lowerclassmen with each other or with outside resources within Oshkosh. Part of every student's journey in college is about self-discovery and being able to freely and safely explore what HMoobness means to HMoob students, especially those who often struggle with their cultural identity and feeling “HMoob enough”.



The UW-Oshkosh Paj Ntaub Research Team connecting with students about our findings on loneliness at UW-Oshkosh (Nov. 2025) and the Hmong National Development Conference in Minnesota (April 2025).

The Relationship Between Self-sufficiency and Feeling like a Failure: How Pressure Shapes Students

Furthermore, the UW–Oshkosh longitudinal study highlights that students' professional identities are shaped not only by educational experiences and support systems, but also by family expectations, cultural values, and financial obligations. Several HMoob students described both intrinsic and extrinsic pressures that motivate them to become self-sufficient. These motivations extend beyond a single aspect of their lives and are reflected across three interconnected domains: social, cultural, and financial stability. Participants emphasized the importance of achieving security in each of these areas as a means of fulfilling personal, familial, and community expectations. Many students feel a deep sense of gratitude to their parents who immigrated to America and sacrificed their lives working for their children to have greater financial security and a possibility for economic mobility. For students, demonstrating strong security and independence in these spheres serves as their repayment. Oftentimes, this sentiment is further emphasized by first-generation students, like Andrea, who are the oldest siblings in their family:

*“Okay, so my family, we were bankrupt, so we lost our home like a few years ago...I think **seeing my parents struggle just really scared me**. And I just don't wanna be working at a factory job, because over here my dad just talks about how he's being treated at work... And he said that his boss treats him so bad ...”*

As immigrants, many HMoob families struggle with financial security and being able to obtain an education while providing for the family. Andrea speaks to this struggle, and her observations demonstrate the toll that a lack of financial stability can put on a family. Education is viewed primarily as a mechanism for economic mobility and as a means of giving back to family and community in recognition of the physical and mental sacrifices that they have made to allow students educational opportunity.

Many students are also role models for the family and community that can help support and motivate future generations to follow the same path. However, students have reported that this desire for self-sufficiency can lead to increased pressure. Xai, a Radio, Television, and Film major and alumni, explains,

*“I think mentally, I would say that after graduating and stuff I'm doing okay. But ideally, I could do better. Because all my life, all I've known is going to school. Now that I'm out of college, got my bachelor's degree, **I'm at a point where I'm like, what do I do now?** Because I've never had a real job in the film industry anyways. So that's kinda scary to try to find one...I'm not really into that my workplace right now so that's gonna put a stress on me and the pressure of- I guess the pressures of having a job. Being stable and stuff to my family is kinda on me a bit.”*

For Xai, the pressure to achieve financial security is accentuated by graduation and being out into “the real world.” Additionally, he perceived financial stability as a personal responsibility, emphasizing that the burden of achieving long-term security is largely dependent on his own efforts. For Xai, not using his degree nor fulfilling what is “up to his potential” contributes additional mental pressures. As time passes; these experiences lead him to question whether there is something wrong with him. This is further illustrated when he talks about his relationships and the expectations associated with them:

*“Just this past weekend my younger cousin got married, and we had a Hmong wedding for him...I was ready to be there for him because I’m the oldest son...Oldest Hmong Vang in my family. I **had the responsibility to be there** too, but also just hearing all people tell me, hey, why isn’t this your wedding? You’re older than him. Why don’t you have a girlfriend?”*

This question on its own is not harmful. Rather, Xai being in a relationship gives family members some assurance in social and familial security, and that is largely their concern. This is the success that families hope for their children to obtain. However, when these expectations are communicated repeatedly and reinforced through comparisons with peers or relatives, they establish a certain standard in which students evaluate themselves. For students who perceive themselves falling short of these standards, repeated comparisons can contribute to self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy. The implications of “not being enough” can easily be interpreted as negative, especially when students are indirectly taught to place their self-worth on success, security, and status.

This desire for independence can be a guiding motivation for students, but Andrea also demonstrates how it can create a potentially unhealthy sense of self:

*“...think, as of right now. It’s applying to jobs. At night I dig myself into this deep rabbit hole, where I just **feel like I’m a failure to myself**, I’m a **failure to my family**, but I don’t know. It’s kind of hard to find a job with a bio major, and I feel like I have to go to graduate school and I don’t know **it’s just so much pressure**, especially being the oldest child. I learned— I tried to make this like a habit of mine, just to apply to two to three, two to three jobs a week. So I’ve been doing that so I don’t feel like a failure. But, yeah, that’s currently what I’m struggling right now is just applying for jobs. But not really education I’m struggling as of right now.”*

For many HMoob students, academics achievements alone are not the limiting factor for success. Earning a degree, while important, is viewed as a step toward fulfilling broader familial and cultural expectations of success. Beyond completing their education, HMoob students perceive themselves as financial and informational providers, knowledge, and guidance for their families and future generations. Consequently, these financial pressures have become a critical concern for a large portion of HMoob students. Andrea describes the fear of not being able to earn money and continue her education, exemplifying the potential cost of relying on this pressure as a form of motivation: the internalization of failure as an identity. When these pillars of social, cultural, and financial security are not met, they attribute these perceived shortcomings to personal inadequacy. Such self-blame fosters persistent feelings of inadequacy and diminishes students' sense of agency. Ultimately, the avoidance of feeling like a failure can limit their control in directing their own lives.

In order to help students who are struggling with self-sufficiency, there needs to be a focus on increasing resources, diversity, belonging, as well as acknowledgement of HMoob students. A restructuring and increased resources of HMoob studies advertisement/promotion and HMoob organizations and communities can go a long way and ensuring students are able to feel they are not the only ones struggling to find independence and self-sufficiency. Things like financial workshops also serve as recognition of this problem and provide a visible steppingstone for students to work on their financial security and decrease the pressures on the students themselves to solely fix the issue of self-sufficiency and be the sole supporters and role models for the community.

Mentorship: Educational and Professional Development of HMoob Undergraduate Students

HMoob students require different forms of mentorship that reflect their unique circumstances, experiences, and aspirations. For some, mentorship provides guidance in navigating the unfamiliar structures of higher education. For others, it offers support in selecting a major or preparing for life after graduation. Still, others seek a trusted confidant who can listen as they negotiate family obligations, emotional pressures, or uncertainty about the future. Across these contexts, mentorship extends beyond providing academic advice, it involves supporting students as they make sense of their experiences and determine their next steps with confidence.

We explored whether students had mentors in their lives and analyzed their postgraduate experience to assess how mentorship positively impacted their career decision-making. Rather than describing mentorship as a formal or institutional relationship, participants consistently defined mentors by the relationships they built and the support they received.

Many participants moved through college without a consistent mentor to rely on for guidance. However, their narratives should not be interpreted as evidence that mentorship is unnecessary. Instead, these narratives emphasize the invisible labor invested to progress their education and persist towards their goals.

What makes a good mentor?

Participants were asked to describe shared qualities they believed characterized as a good mentor for HMoob students. Across the interviews, most participants emphasized that what distinguished an effective mentor for HMoob students was how they approached and responded to students who may otherwise be hesitant to reach out. Andrea emphasized the importance of approachability and communication when working with HMoob students:

“ Like good communication... not coming off like assertive... I feel like a lot of these Hmong students they're very **shy** and **quiet**... the only way to come up and talk to them is just to come up **approachable**... and help them and feel like you're a great resource for them”.

- Andrea

Andrea's reflection suggests that some HMoob students may be less likely to initiate conversations with faculty, making a mentor's interpersonal approach an important factor in making the support accessible. Additionally, HMoob mentors should play an active role in reducing the social barriers that can discourage HMoob students from seeking support.

Theo further expands on this idea by adding another explanation for why approachability is important in HMoob mentorship when entering unfamiliar environments. He shares:

*“I think just being able to relate to them on the level of being **introverted**, you know, like that it's hard to reach out. It's hard to kind of get immersed with a new environment...”*

Natalie extends this discussion by focusing on the mentor's role in maintaining the relationship once a connection is established. She explains:

*“I think they also have to be kind of like **persistent** and constantly not like urging but just encouraging you”*

Together, these perspectives suggest that effective mentorship is not only about availability but also about intentionally cultivating relationships over time. Relatively few described cultural identity as the defining characteristic of a good mentor for HMoob students. This distinction is significant because meaningful mentorship does not necessitate identity congruences, but it does require recognition and understanding that students' identities, experiences and social contexts fundamentally shape their educational experiences. Participants recognized behaviors they often saw in HMoob students, such as being quiet or reserved. Although they did not see these traits as deficits students had to overcome, they believed effective mentors should recognize these behaviors and adjust how they build relationships. For these participants, the first responsibility of a mentor is to create the conditions that make students feel welcomed, understood, and supported.



Dr. Chong Moua, assistant professor of Hmong Studies and History, Houa Xiong, Assistant Dean of Students, and Kaonue Xiong, Admissions Counselor, with students at UWO Paj Ntaub event on campus. Oct. 2025.

Mentors at UWO.

Andrea's mentorship experience demonstrates that the presence of advising offices, career centers, or support programs does not guarantee that students will recognize or be able to access these resources relate to their own circumstances. As an alumna her experience illustrates the importance of having mentorship that is relational, accessible, and connected to students lived experiences.

ANDREA EXPLAINS:

*"...if I were to go to the resources on campus, it will be my first time meeting them. I don't know if I'll be comfortable... when I was a freshman sophomore, I for sure needed help, and **I didn't know where to go or I sort of did...there wasn't really like a mentor like HMoob mentor for me to look up to but I know we have some really good faculty members here.** So, Chong, she's a really good person to go to and talk to. I think it was my first time seeing her and she just looked nice, **like someone that I will just talk about my life...** and Houa too... I think, like I got kind of close with her during HATS..."*



Andrea named Dr. Chong Moua, Assistant Professor of Hmong Studies, and Houa Xiong, Assistant Dean of Students and co-founder of Hmong Achieving Together for Success (HATS), as individuals who have built relationship with her during her time as a UW-Oshkosh student. Similarly, Xai offers a similar sentiment, reflecting on how college would have been if he had a HMoob mentor throughout college. Xai's access to HMoob faculty was not equally available across academic spaces; therefore, he had fewer opportunities to connect with HMoob mentors.

Xai shares,

*“... **there just wasn't any Hmong advisors within my own department** and stuff...I wouldn't know who to reach out to. I knew there's HSU [Hmong Student Union] and the other HMoob groups that was there, and I did go to some of the meetings and stuff... I guess I just didn't know who to reach out to if I needed help or anything”.*

Xai's experiences demonstrate that while HMoob students can identify HMoob organizations on campus, the challenge lies with the uncertainty of who to approach and how to establish these meaningful relationships. Expanding opportunities for HMoob students to regularly interact with HMoob faculty can aid students in identifying HMoob mentors. This can foster trusting relationships to develop over time for students who are initially hesitant to reach out.

Universities can create regular opportunities for mentorship relationships to develop through consistent exposure. As Xiong and Lee (2011) notes, when students encounter the same individuals across multiple contexts—courses, programs, events, organizations, and advising spaces—familiarity develops, making it more likely that students will seek help when challenges arise. Therefore, mentorship should not be dependent solely on student willingness to navigate unfamiliar networks. Instead, universities can establish structures that allow mentorships to develop through sustained visibility, accessibility, and connection.

Natalie, a sophomore double majoring in accounting and finance, described her parents fulfilling the mentorship role and were a pivotal part in helping her adjust to the responsibilities of adulthood:

*“I think they [parents] really have like impacted me on **making good life decisions**... for work you have to do like I-9's and like you have to do all these information stuff.... they help me understand oh, I need this information...honestly, I think **they do pretty good job kind of guiding me** to have like a good set strong like lifestyle and all.”*

By her final interview, Natalie, now a junior, reflected on becoming more intentional about utilizing campus resources. While her parents were an important part of helping Natalie navigate practical responsibilities, she recognized that engaging with campus resources could further support her in preparation for professional opportunities ahead:

*“...there’s just a lot more resources too in college that sometimes I just... kind of blame my younger self for not using... and utilizing the school more... I don’t know, **I feel like I’ve changed and opened my mind more...**”*

Natalie’s account suggests that rather than replacing existing support systems that students rely on for mentorship, institutions can build upon these relationships. HMoob students often develop their college goals through support from parents, siblings, educators, and their own determination (S. Xiong, 2023, 2024). However, one source of support cannot prepare a student for every aspect of college life, and professional development. Natalie’s narrative highlights the value of expanding on the strengths students already bring from families while creating additional pathways to institutional support. Many HMoob students possess strong foundations of persistence, motivation, and responsibilities cultivated through their families and communities. Universities can support students by building these foundations and extending students’ networks. This is particularly notable for first-generation students, whose families may offer strong encouragement while having limited direct experience with higher education systems. Thus, external mentorship and institutional mentorship can be complementary in fostering HMoob students’ personal, academic, and professional development.

Unlike Andrea and Natalie, Theo’s mentorship experience demonstrates how mentorship can evolve from academic advising into a deeper relational support system throughout their college journey into their professional life. When Theo entered college, he was uncertain about his future until advisors introduced him to a new career path:



*“I originally came into college as just like a general biology major and **I had no idea what I wanted to do.** But I talked to my TRIO advisor...completely persuaded me to joining the Med Tech slash MLS program... And she just made it seem so easy...”*

As he progressed to his senior year, his mentorship became more personal. Theo described Houa as someone he could rely on:

*“Yeah, like, I consider [Houa] like a person I can go to whenever I need to... I would say I could call her my second mom... **she’s just like my UWO mom...** If I need something specific to college, I could go to her, and I would feel safe enough to do that.”*

As students become more familiar in the academic space, they may no longer need someone to provide support in exploring academic and career options. Instead, they seek trusted individuals to ask questions and talk through challenges beyond academics. S. Xiong (2024) found that HMoob students benefit when advising provides both academic and interpersonal validation. Theo's experience challenge approaches that prioritize academic performance while overlooking the broader social contexts and responsibilities students navigate. Such narrow frameworks may unintentionally privilege students already familiar with institutional systems, professional networks, and fewer external constraints. For HMoob students, academic decisions are deeply connected with familial obligations, financial pressures, cultural values, and commitments to community. Culturally responsive mentorship strives to understand how each student's unique experiences and background inform their aspirations and trajectories.

Mentorship beyond college. The completion of a college degree does not mark the end of participants' need for mentorship. Instead, mentorship remained a critical resource that influences whether graduates entered the workforce equipped with guidance and support or were compelled to independently navigate career pathways. Andrea, who graduated with a Biology degree and working at Roger's Behavioral Health, reflected upon her last semester of college when she started exploring employment positions in Milwaukee. She noted the difficulty of finding individuals who understood the geographical context and entry pathways into her field:

*“...I went to school out of town in Milwaukee, like, not a lot of people know the jobs out in Milwaukee. So, it was kind of **hard for me to find resources in Oshkosh.** So, I did try my best to, reach out to people that worked in Milwaukee. But even then, that was very hard, because, I didn't have the experience. And I didn't have the resources that I need. So, I just had to really, research and do it all by myself”.*

Without established professional relationships in her desired location, Andrea relied on independent research, trial and error, and persistence in assembling information about potential career opportunities. Her persistence highlights both resilience and the additional effort required when professional networks are absent in providing insight into career pathways. Andrea's challenges stemmed from limited access to individuals who could facilitate and bridge the transition from graduation to employment. Her experiences show that mentorship can offer relational support and professional guidance necessary to translate those achievements into meaningful career opportunities.

Unlike some participants who navigated career transitions with limited guidance, Xai maintained contact with former professors and advisors. As he transitions into the film industry, he intentionally sought their perspectives on how to navigate the profession and carried their recommendations with him as he began his career. Although each mentor contributed in different ways, they supported both his professional development and his personal growth. Reflecting on these relationships, he shared,

*"All my professors in the RTF department helped me in some type of way. Before I left, I asked each of them like: what can I do to help me in the industry, and they all **gave me a piece of advice that I took to heart and stuff**. I guess my main one would be... my professor, and the advisor at the film society, and she was pretty close to me and helped me a lot with production-wise. Learning about how to be a film producer. On the other hand, I had 2 advisors... who helped me a lot **not only in academic-wise, but my personal-wise; they help me become more and of a more open person...I have their numbers. I can contact them anytime, and I plan on seeing them in the future**".*

Xai's experience illustrates how mentorship can extend beyond the college environment and become a source of guidance during life transitions. His relationship with his mentors is just one of several ways students continue learning as they move into new and unfamiliar professional environments. Despite the support from these mentors, Xai still struggled to maintain connections with mentors post-graduation. Like Andrea, Xai still continues to rely more on himself to find opportunities and professional experiences. Professional development is shaped by multiple forms of learning and support, with mentorship serving as one. The availability of mentorship can influence how students interpret opportunities and navigate professional opportunities as they establish their own career pathways.

Turning Research into Practice: Recommendations at UW-Oshkosh

The findings from this study demonstrate that creating a greater sense of belonging for HMoob students requires intentional institutional support. While participants described meaningful experiences through HMoob organizations, Hmong Studies, and mentorship, they also identified barriers related to visibility, access to resources, and community. To better support HMoob students, UW-Oshkosh should continue investing in initiatives that strengthen cultural inclusion and student engagement.

Based on these findings, we recommend the following initiatives for UW-Oshkosh:

1. **Strengthen the Hmong Studies Program** by hiring a Hmong Studies Director and increasing the visibility of the program through orientation, academic advising, and campus-wide promotion. Increasing awareness of the program can encourage student participation while providing students with opportunities to explore HMoob history, identity, and culture in meaningful academic spaces.
2. **Invest in HMoob-centered spaces and campus organizations** such as the Hmong Student Union (HSU) and Hmong Achieving Together for Success (HATS). Supporting these organizations can create welcoming spaces where students build meaningful relationships, strengthen their cultural identity, and develop a greater sense of belonging within the university community.
3. **Create university-sponsored community-building programs** that support student-led networking events, leadership development, and family engagement through campus events, cultural programming, and academic initiatives. Recognizing the important role families play in HMoob students' educational success, these initiatives can strengthen students' sense of belonging while supporting recruitment and retention efforts.
4. **Expand HMoob-centered educational and professional opportunities** by increasing cultural events, creating work-study positions, and developing partnerships with HMoob-serving organizations for internships. These initiatives can support students' academic, professional, and social development while strengthening their sense of belonging and connection to the HMoob community.
5. **Develop structured mentorship opportunities** through the Center for Student Success and Belonging that intentionally connect HMoob students with HMoob faculty, staff, alumni, and upperclassmen. Increasing the recruitment, retention, and visibility of HMoob faculty and staff can strengthen culturally responsive mentorship, increase awareness of campus resources, and support students' academic, professional, and personal development.
6. **Support student-engaged research and participatory action research (PAR)** initiatives that involve HMoob students as researchers and collaborators in identifying challenges and informing solutions that improve the HMoob student experience. Expanding opportunities for students to participate in student-engaged research can strengthen leadership, professional development, and civic engagement while providing valuable insights to inform institutional policies and practices.

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Appendix A: Research Project Timeline

The table outlines the four-year timeline for the HMoob American College Paj Ntaub Research Project funded by the National Science Foundation Grant, summarizing major activities and milestones completed during each year of the study. The participant numbers shown correspond only to the UW-Oshkosh site and reflect the sample gathered through the longitudinal study.

Table A1: Timeline

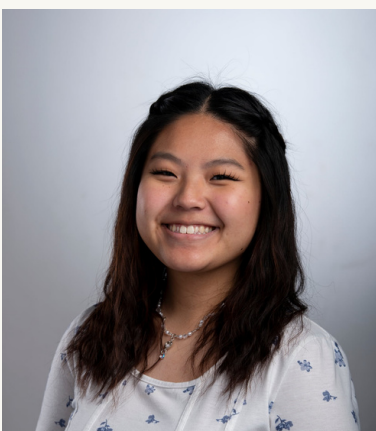
Year 1 (2022-2023) (n=64)	• Develop survey and mass email to HMoob undergraduate students attending the UW Systems (i.e. UW-Madison, UW-Milwaukee, UW-Oshkosh, UW-Eau Claire, UW-Green bay)
Year 2 (2023-2024) (n=31)	• Start of T1 data collection • T1 data transcribing • Data analysis via MAXQDA coding system
Year 3 (2024-2025) (n=18)	• Start of T2 data collection, reach out to former participants for participation in the follow up interview • T2 Data analysis • Data dissemination via conferences and student organization events
Year 4 (2025-2026) (n=11)	• Final T3 data collection, reconnect with former participants for follow-up interviews • T3 Data Analysis • Data dissemination via presentations and report writings

The UW-Oshkosh College Paj Ntaub Research Team



Andy Yang (she/her/hers) graduated with a Bachelor of Business Administration in Accounting and Finance in December 2025. She joined the research team in March 2023 with the intention of connecting with and learning more about the experiences of the Hmong community at UW-Oshkosh. Through interviews and data analysis, she has come to recognize that Hmong students continue to face many barriers that can impact their overall educational experience and success. She hopes that the findings from this research can help bring about meaningful changes that will improve the college experience for both current and future Hmong students. Being part of the research team has also allowed her to strengthen her skills in data analysis, critical thinking, communication, and other technical areas.

Javit Thao (he/him/his) graduated with his Bachelors of Sciences in Biomedical Science in spring 2024. He is pursuing a Masters in Counseling and has a passion in teaching/others/learning about mental health. The NSF research team provides an outlet for a fulfilling experience being able to have conversations with and gain a better understanding of Hmong people and culture. It is just one outlet in which he can help others feel not so alone.



Pangnra Yang (she/her/hers) is from Menomonee Falls and a senior in the nursing program. She has been part of the research team since 2023 and has been involved with recruiting participants and co-authoring dissemination material. Pangnra most enjoys presenting research at conferences, workshops, and other events. These opportunities allow her to engage in conversations about the experiences represented in the data to inform and advocate for meaningful change.

Seng Yeng Lee (she/her/hers) is a current student at the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh. She joined the UWO College Paj Ntaub research as a student researcher in March of 2025. Being in the team has made her understand HMoob students more and make connections to other students in the community. She hopes to bring a space where HMoob students can find resources and networks to become successful.





Vincent Lee (he/him/his) graduated with his Bachelors of Arts in Communication Studies, minor in Radio, TV, Film, and a Hmong Studies Certificate in Spring 2025. He joined the team in March 2023 and has recruited and conducted multiple research interviews. In being part of this research, he has learned a lot about HMoob students' experiences and allowing them to have a voice in any space. His future career plan is to work in the film industry.

Mai Chong Yang (she/her/hers) is a UW-Oshkosh alumna with a Bachelors of Science degree in Anthropology and a certificate in Hmong Studies. She first joined the UWO College Paj Ntaub research as a student researcher in 2022 and gradually transitioned into her position as the project coordinator. In part with the project, she took the lead in learning the importance of mentorship through the WiscAMP project. She hopes that this research project will give a voice to Hmong undergraduate students to further challenge the system and get the most out of their college journey.



Choua Xiong (she/nws) grew up in the Fox Valley and she teaches Hmong Studies and Anthropology courses. Her research focuses on building infrastructures where minoritized and diasporic communities cultivate thriving educational spaces. She leads and conducts several participatory action research projects that foster community assets and redistribute resources for educational equity.



(From left to right) Javit Thao, Seng Yeng Lee, Andy Yang, Mai Chong Yang, Choua Xiong, Pangnra Yang, and Vincent Lee

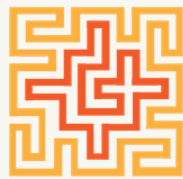
Resources

This report is written by the UW-Oshkosh College Paj Ntaub Research Team. For any follow-up questions or concerns, please contact Dr. Choua Xiong, assistant professor of Hmong Studies and Anthropology and the Principal Investigator, at xiongc@uwosh.edu.

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This project is in collaboration with the UW-Oshkosh Hmong Studies Program and the Our HMoob American College Paj Ntaub at UW-Madison.



UWO Hmong Studies



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