Attrition of Hmong Students in Teacher Education Programs

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Abstract

This paper is a descriptive study that addresses student attrition in two Title VII Bilingual Education Career Ladder Programs for Hmong paraprofessionals and traditional-age college students working towards teacher certification in Wisconsin. The U.S. Department of Education (USDE) funded these projects. One project is now in its fourth programmatic year, and the other is in its third year. After reviewing the literature regarding Hmong Americans and providing an overview of the two projects, the authors assess the primary factors leading to student attrition in the two USDE projects. They also suggest some strategies that might be employed to maximize retention.

A Brief History of the Hmong People

The Hmong people came to the United States from the mountains of Laos as refugees at the end of the Viet Nam Conflict. The Hmong were first allies of the French, and then of the United States, in the fight against the Vietnamese communists. Quincy (1995) maintains that nearly one third of the Laotian Hmong died in combat or from starvation and disease caused by the war, and more died in Thailand where they were placed in refugee camps, then resettled throughout the world, with more than 80,000 coming to the United States. Prior to the Viet Nam Conflict, the Hmong people were a patrilineal, patrilocal, and polygynous people practicing slash-and-burn agriculture in the mountains.

While some characteristics of Hmong cultural tradition differ greatly from U.S. culture, the Hmong people demonstrate considerable skill. For example, a 1992 University of Wisconsin–Green Bay survey of Hmong adults in Green Bay found:

> The majority of Hmong are literate, and two-thirds of the adult Hmong population in Green Bay are able to speak English. Fully half of those able to speak English can speak, read, and write in English. In addition, 65 percent of the Hmong indicated that they spoke a second language, usually Laotian. Of this group, 50 percent could speak, read, and write in the second language. Twenty-five percent reported that they speak a third language, usually Thai. (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1998, p. 24)

Hein's (2000) research in Eau Claire found a different result: "In my sample of forty-eight Hmong Americans, only one respondent reported that he arrived in the United States speaking English fluently; thirty-five reported that they spoke no English at all on arrival. At the time of the survey (twelve years after arrival on average), only nineteen claimed full fluency in English; fourteen indicated that they spoke little or no English (the remainder had some but not full fluency)" (p. 423).

For a variety of reasons, including their recent arrival in the United States, traditional Hmong culture has been a major influence in the lives and living pattern of the Hmong people. For example, early marriage and large families continue to characterize the Hmong people in the United States. Knutson (1998) notes that both family traits stem from traditional family patterns in Laos. In Laos, the marriages were arranged, and an expensive bride price was required, with girls marrying as early as 12 years of age. While the pressure for Hmong Americans to marry early has been relaxed, it is not unusual for females to marry young and to leave school to do so.

The Hmong people have primarily settled in three states: California, Wisconsin, and Minnesota (Miyares, 1998). In California and Minnesota, the Hmong are concentrated in one or two urban centers, but in Wisconsin, the Hmong have settled in several medium-sized communities in the central area of the state.

Language Barriers

One of the factors complicating the adjustment of the Hmong people has been English language acquisition. Limited English proficiency is an important component of interpersonal discrimination, according to Hein's (2000) research. While some of the Hmong people have been in the United States for 25 years, learning the English language has been difficult. It was difficult for the adults when they arrived in the United States because the women were generally not literate in their own language, much less English, while the men often had very limited English skills but were expected to work by both their U.S. sponsors and the U.S. government and therefore did not have time to study English. In many communities, English classes were created for women to attend in the daytime while their husbands worked. Over time, the English-language skills of some women quickly surpassed the skills of their husbands. Once armed

with adequate English-language skills, young women sought employment, leaving their children in the care of grandparents or others who did not speak English. Because they were supervised by grandparents or other Hmong adults who used Hmong as the primary language at home, children had limited English exposure prior to attending school. Thus, a significant number of Hmong students became, and continue to be, English language learners (ELLs) who need assistance in school to acquire English-language skills. According to the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, of the nearly 11,000 ELLs in the state, the Hmong comprise over 60% of the pool of students who are ELLs (S. Weroha, personal communication, February 6, 2000).

Another language-centered issue is that Hmong students are now arriving at school without the same understanding of the Hmong language that they had in the past. Thus, English as a Second Language (ESL) instructors in several Wisconsin public schools describe the situation as being considerably more complex than in the past. Teaching a language (English in this case) to people who already have a sound understanding of one language is much easier than teaching people who do not have a solid footing in a primary language. Shifting public school budgets that can curtail ESL expenditures exacerbate the challenge to ESL instructors. Education professionals in Green Bay reported that while the ESL budget has grown over the years, state and federal government reimbursement has dropped from roughly 70% to 25%. The local commitment to supporting these services continues to face heavy pressure for “readjustment” (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1998).

Table 1
Hmong Students, Teachers, and Paraprofessionals in Select Wisconsin School Districts, 2000–2001

School disctrict	Number Hmong students	Percentage Hmong students	Number Hmong teachers	Number Hmong paraprofessionals
Eau Claire	1,068	9	2	16
Green Bay	1,067	5	6	25
La Crosse	1,070	14	4	25
Menomonie	378	11	1	5
Oshkosh	904	8	4	14
Steven Point	710	8	0	13
Wausau	2,150	24	4	45
Wisconsin Rapids	381	6	0	5

Need for Hmong Teachers

While several communities have substantial numbers of Hmong children in the public schools, there are few Hmong teachers, counselors, or administrators to serve as role models (see Table 1). However, the school systems have hired Hmong paraprofessionals as teacher assistants or translators. The paraprofessionals are not certified, serve as assistants, have annual contracts, and are often limited to part-time employment. Several of these paraprofessionals have worked for a number of years in the public schools. After such a lengthy period of employment, many of the Hmong paraprofessionals have an interest in becoming certified teachers. This interest on the part of Hmong paraprofessionals was the stimulus to develop a teacher certification program for the Hmong people in Wisconsin's northern tier.

A Brief History and Explanation of the Projects

In September 1999, the U.S. Department of Education (USDE) granted the University of Wisconsin (UW) System funds for a 5-year program that aims to assist Hmong American bilingual paraprofessionals and recent high school graduates in overcoming barriers to educational advancement. The program allows them to become certified teachers and school administrators in the state of Wisconsin by participating in two projects at several UW System schools.

The USDE projects provide undergraduate- and graduate-level training for bilingual Hmong American teachers who are already certified. All student participants, whether working towards certification or a graduate degree, can attend school on either a full-time or part-time basis. Participants have great flexibility in their participation because they may change from full time to part time, and vice versa, at any time, although all programs are day programs, with a limited number of courses available in the evening or on weekends.

The program covers student tuition and fees, provides intensive tutoring to participants who may need additional training in ESL, and gives supportive preparation for the required Pre-Professional Skills Test. Coordinators at each of the institutions involved provide students with advising and counseling services, and address any issues of concern that students may have.

Many of the bilingual paraprofessionals participating in the program are nontraditional-age college students, ranging in age from 25 to 50. They are experienced in working with children and in working with the public schools because they continue on a part-time basis as translators and teacher aides in the schools. Many have goals of becoming certified teachers, so they will have their own classrooms and, as professionals, will have the respect of the community. Correspondingly, their income will also increase considerably. Most of the paraprofessionals are married, have children, and need to work to help support the family. Most paraprofessionals in the programs are women and more likely to have been born in Laos, or in the refugee camps of

Thailand, than the traditional-age student participants. For the most part, the paraprofessionals have absolutely no experience, or very limited experience, with the demands of college- or university-level work, and their educational attainment, beyond acquiring English skills, is not recent.

Each project can support a maximum of 28 students, in a mix of both part-time and full-time students. The larger the number of full-time students, the fewer the total number of students in the project. There are currently 19 students from three universities participating in Project Teach. Four of the 19 are on leave, and 15 are actively enrolled. Two students have graduated, and 13 have dropped out of the program. The majority of students in this project are majoring in Elementary Education or Early Childhood Education.

In Project Forward, there are 28 student participants from five UW institutions. Among the six graduates, one received a graduate degree in Education Administration. Of the five newly certified teachers who graduated, two have continued in Education Administration graduate programs on a part-time basis while teaching. However, 10 project participants have dropped out, 3 of them before the program began.

Unfortunately, the terminating participants did not always inform project staff about their intent, and staff members were unable to remedy the situation, or attempt resolution, so the participant could remain in school. Other times, student attrition was unavoidable, as in the instance of a student getting married and relocating to a different state, or the situation in which a participant divorced and relocated. While neither project "creamed" or "dredged" for participants, it remained a problem for project staff, as well as other university staff, to see students terminate their educational efforts.

Most participants in these two projects have been able to follow through on advice about getting help, namely by utilizing tutors or remedial assistance. In some instances, ESL classes were arranged, and in another situation, attendance at a technical college for a semester was suggested to help bolster self-esteem and to develop a pattern of successful accomplishments. Unfortunately, some students unrealistically assessed their academic proficiency and were not always receptive to the need for more ESL or study-skills instruction. For traditional-age college students, being encouraged to take an ESL class was more difficult to accept if they had been mainstreamed in high school. The goal of ESL assistance was not to make them long-term dependent, but provide them with both an English-language foundation and some understanding of learning strategies that would help them meet the academic demands of college. It is typical for the program coordinator at each institution to meet with each student on a monthly basis to assess how school and non-school activities are going. In most instances, Hmong staff serve as program coordinators.

An advising coordinator in the School of Education at one of the institutions also schedules regular meetings with each student and is available on a drop-in basis. At another institution, where a Commanding English Program for incoming refugee students had been developed, the project utilized an existing close-monitoring environment, additional and almost unlimited tutoring, and mentoring placement with returning multicultural students.

A recent feature to reduce attrition in both projects provides students who need to leave their university the opportunity to take a "leave of absence" without losing their project slot. While the student is on leave, project administrators have been able to fill that position with another student. When the "on-leave" student is ready to come back to school, he or she can take the place of a student who has graduated or fill the position of another student who needs to take a leave. The leave program has been helpful for some students who may have otherwise had to drop out. For example, in one project, two students are on leave, one for a family crisis and another due to employment obligations, while four students are on leave in the other project.

Review of the Literature

A review of the literature indicated that attrition is a concern. While Hmong high school graduation rates and the number continuing on to two- and four-year colleges are comparable to statistics for Whites (Hutchinson, 1997), Hmong students face challenging obstacles and barriers at the college level that many Whites are not exposed to. M. Xiong (1996) lists lack of language services, discrimination, and alienation as prominent issues many Hmong college students must face. Moua (1995) reports that the amount of reading assignments in some classes causes difficulty. She found that students who were not confident about their reading skills lacked the assertiveness necessary to succeed in some classes.

M. Xiong (1996) discovered that some Hmong students were hesitant to use counseling services. In traditional Hmong culture, problems are handled by the head of the household, which means that many Hmong students socialized in this more traditional culture will be more reluctant to talk with strangers (or non-Hmong staff) about their need for help. Both M. Xiong and Moua (1995) agree that some Hmong students who are accepted at universities drop out because they are not ready or adequately prepared for college-level work.

In a study conducted by J. Xiong (1998), 32 low-income Hmong students were tracked following their high school graduation. Seventeen went on to college, and six years later, J. Xiong tracked 16 of them for the data used in her study. Eleven of the students had dropped out for a variety of reasons. Five

had faced financial problems that caused them to drop out, three needed to leave because of family responsibilities, two faced both financial problems and family responsibilities, and the final student was not prepared to work at the college level.

Regardless of these difficulties, Pobzeb (2001) notes that approximately 6,500 Hmong students were enrolled in various undergraduate institutions in 2001. Hmong participation in higher education, as reflected in total Southeast Asian enrollment in the UW System, indicates significant growth, since Southeast Asian student enrollment in the UW System increased 125 % from 1991 to 2001 (UW System statistics report, 2001). The exact number of Hmong students is not available for the UW System, but the majority of the Southeast Asian students are Hmong.

Methodology and Findings

This research was initiated to focus on the causes of attrition and to suggest some solutions. While the majority of the students in these programs have made steady progress towards teacher certification, and nine have already graduated, program staff have been concerned about attrition. Table 2 shows that in both projects, there are a total of 23 people who have dropped out of the program.

While the researchers had access to student files, exit interviews, summaries of day-to-day interaction with students, as well as the program and off-campus assessments students had completed on a regular basis, some important data segments were missing for several students who were no

Table 2

Student Status in Two Wisconsin Bilingual Education Programs Spring 2001

	Number of enrolled para-professionals	Number of enrolled high school graduates	Number of students on leave	Number of students graduated	Number of students dropped
Traditional age	5	18	4	4	6
Non-traditional age	14	4	2	4	17
Total	19	22	6	8	23

longer in the program. The questionnaire used in this study, a modified and expanded version of the exit interview, was designed to specifically gather information regarding the student-identified causes of attrition. The survey included questions that asked for missing demographic information, their reasons for withdrawing from the program, including what individuals they may have consulted before leaving, and finally, what they were doing if they were no longer enrolled in college. Material presented here describes the general findings based on the sample of 23 former participants and utilizes a simple frequency count. The chi-square statistic, a nonparametric test of differences, was used to determine whether there were significant differences between males and females and between traditional-age and nontraditional-age students in attrition compared to total enrollment. In neither case was there a significant difference, although differences in attrition of traditional- and nontraditional-age students were close to the .05 level of acceptance.

Although this study utilized a population sample of former Hmong participants in two Wisconsin projects, it should be noted that the data collected do not comprise a large enough sample to make valid generalizations to other Hmong student populations, or projects, in the state or across the region.

To assess attrition and the causes for dropping out of school, an attempt was made to contact the 23 former project participants by phone. The researchers were able to reach 14 of them. All 14 former participants contacted were informed of the study's purpose, were asked to participate, and agreed to do so. The respondents were then given the choice of a phone interview (12 respondents) or completing a mailed questionnaire (2 respondents). Program staff, including Hmong, African American, and White members, conducted the phone interviews. For the nine students who were unreachable, data from their original exit interview and project files were used to complete the revised questionnaire as well as possible.

In each project, a larger number of nontraditional-age students had left the program than traditional-age college students, and a disproportionate number of males relative to their overall rate of participation. Overall, of the 23 students who left the program, 17 were nontraditional-age students. While the nontraditional students comprised 52% of all students in these projects, they accounted for 74% of those who left the program. Comparatively, the traditional-age students comprised 47% of all students but only 26% of those who dropped out of the program.

A similar comparison was made for female and male students. Women comprised 79% of all participants ever involved in either project and 65% of those who are no longer participants. Men comprised 20% of all participants but 35% of those who left the program. According to chi-square, neither sex nor age differences were statistically significant.

Former students in these two projects responded differently when asked why they dropped out of the program. The 10 respondents who had dropped out of Project Teach indicated a variety of reasons for leaving, although financial and employment factors seemed to be the most salient reasons. The students, most of whom were educational paraprofessionals, had difficulty balancing their professional and academic careers and could not risk losing the income their jobs provided. One respondent stated in her interview: "Project Teach is a very good program, but the money issues played the main factor in my decision to leave. We needed two incomes." Three of the students who had attended the same institution left for family-related reasons, specifically relocation. These three geographically mobile students would probably have left the program regardless of which campus they were at. Only one of these 10 former students continued taking courses, while the others completely withdrew from school. Four individuals each gave an additional reason. The secondary factors were: academic difficulty, insufficient time, a need to work, and "taking too long" to complete the degree.

From Project Forward, 13 students have left the program since startup three years ago. Nine of these former program participants were nontraditional-age students. Six of the 13 students dropped out because they could not maintain the required 2.5 grade point average (GPA). One of the remaining students left because of a family crisis, two left because they changed majors, and one student was receiving enough money from an alternative source and wanted to give up the program slot to someone who needed more financial backing. Three students left the program for unknown reasons.

One difference between the two programs was that the majority of former students in Project Forward were still enrolled in school. Six of the 13 former project students are currently enrolled full time, while two more are working and taking courses on a part-time basis. Furthermore students in Project Forward whose GPA drops below 2.5 are given two semesters to raise their GPA. During this time, the coordinator works directly with them and arranges tutoring services and other academic support. If a student does not achieve a 2.5 GPA by the end of two semesters, he or she must leave the program. Some of the students who left the program have remained in school working towards a degree in a different major, or struggle to maintain passing grades in hopes of reapplying in education.

Implications for Programmatic Adjustments

Many Hmong students are participating in higher education programs with some distinct disadvantages. Some of these include difficulties in English-language acquisition, socialization in traditional Hmong cultural patterns that sometimes clash with U.S. culture, and a financial necessity to work while attending school. Furthermore, Hmong students generally have few family members who have experience with the higher educational system in the

United States and who can serve as role models and provide support. Some students are also older, nontraditional-age students, pressed by family responsibilities, as well as financial obligations. Previous research indicates that Hmong people also face discrimination. Yet, education is highly valued, and students are striving and working hard to succeed. With all this in mind, what adjustments might be made to reduce attrition in programs such as those described in this article?

1. Giving the student a realistic assessment of the length of commitment, at the time of application, is a necessity and might minimize early student withdrawals. For some students, particularly those with limited experience with higher education, attending school on a part-time basis makes the attainment of a bachelor's degree a very long process, and after starting, many decide the long haul is simply not worth it. However, the time commitment may actually be reduced if the institutions could offer more evening courses, and/or intensive summer coursework. New programs with students who can only attend part time need to consider ways in which the institution can be more flexible in responding to the time constraints and needs of the students.
2. Because this study noted that older paraprofessionals were more likely to withdraw than traditional-age college students, and financial concerns may play a role, there needs to be additional supplemental income or insurance coverage for older students. Most of the paraprofessionals did not relocate to attend school, were already involved in their families as spouses and parents, and made a significant contribution to the family income. In some instances, their families' insurance programs were tied to the students' translator positions in the public schools, not to their spouses' jobs. Perhaps the public school employers would be willing to provide scholarship aid or continue insurance coverage on a reduced employment basis for their student paraprofessionals. If not, forgivable loans might be made available to students. Such loans are available in Wisconsin now, but only for minority teachers who are willing to teach in select counties or tribal schools. Modification of USDE guidelines in what expenses are acceptable would also help in "targeting" the success of a cadre of teachers from a particular minority group. Our efforts to obtain foundation support to help defray living costs for older students have not been successful, but funding along this line would be a tremendous asset for any program. A thorough discussion of financial needs and limits also must be initiated at the time of application. In addition, project coordinators need to continually evaluate financial considerations for students, and create or use an "on leave" program as necessary.

3. USDE projects, such as those described here, need to have staff members in positions of leadership who are sensitive and supportive of students in the program. In most instances, those staff performing advising and counseling tasks might also be more successful if they had the same ethnic background as the participants. In this way, cultural background should be more comparable and social and cultural distance minimized.
4. To some degree, the graduates of these programs serve as role models and mentors for those still in school, but making this informal system more structured with increased involvement should be explored. Furthermore, mentoring on a one-to-one basis by a public school administrator has been suggested but, up to this point, has not been undertaken in either of these Wisconsin projects.

Conclusion

The Hmong people from the mountains of Laos are but one relatively recent refugee group making strides in adjusting to life in the United States. In Wisconsin, they have settled in several medium-sized communities, where their children comprise a sizable percentage of the school-age pupils. To assist in helping to train Hmong bilingual teachers, the UW System initiated two USDE-funded projects.

Students in these two programs attend a UW System university or two-year college. While some students have graduated and taken teaching positions, and many other students are making good progress, a considerable number of students have left the program. In one project, economic reasons are the primary reason for dropping out of school, while low grades are noted as a major factor in the second project. In both projects, nontraditional-age students had higher frequencies of attrition than their traditional-age counterparts, although these differences were not statistically significant. Many of the older students were experienced educational paraprofessionals working in the public schools. They were married, had children, and made a major contribution to the household income. For many who have dropped out, immediate family factors and pressures took precedence over longer-term goals.

We suggest that it is essential at the time of application to provide realistic assessments of student-family finances, obligations, and the time needed to complete the program. We also suggest minimizing attrition through mentoring and support, and increasing language and cultural comfort factors, as well as adjusting the time slots of course offerings. Financial support, and changes in USDE guidelines in allowable expenses, could also be extremely important in minimizing student attrition.

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