

The Necessity of Ethnic Studies:

Prioritizing Ethnic Studies During COVID 19 and Beyond

RESEARCH BRIEF • DECEMBER 2020

Keywords: ethnic studies, budget cuts, COVID-19 pandemic, critical consciousness, community cultural wealth, HMoob American college students, Hmong studies

Lena Lee, Pa Kou Xiong, Ying Yang Youa Xiong, Lisa Yang, Bailey Smolarek, Mai Neng Vang, Matthew Wolfgram, Payeng Moua, Ariana Thao, and Odyssey Xiong



Wisconsin Center for
Education Research
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON



HMoob American Studies Committee
Bridge. Educate. Establish. Empower.

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has caused a devastating ripple effect on educational institutions—from budget cuts to health and safety concerns to changes in learning environments. In higher education specifically, Covid-19 is disrupting student lives by interrupting in-person learning, forcing students out of their living spaces, and causing students to suffer financially. The consequences of the pandemic have also led to financial crises for universities, causing administrators to make challenging budgetary decisions. Unfortunately, during times of budget scarcity, colleges and universities have historically opted—and continue to opt—for cuts that impact students of color profoundly, including deep cuts to diversity and inclusion efforts and ethnic studies programs, suspensions of ethnic studies faculty hiring, and even resulting in the termination of tenure-track faculty positions in ethnic studies (Bikales & Chen, 2020; Meyerhofer, 2020; Myers, 2014; Wang, 2016).

University administrators are currently having to make hard financial decisions which will have lasting impacts on students, staff, and their communities. Within this looming financial crisis, with multiple competing priorities and far less resources than in the past, in this report, we argue that ethnic studies programs must be prioritized for continued investment.

Ethnic studies is essential for the student experience as it transforms students' lives in critical ways that other fields of study cannot. Sleeter (2011) defines ethnic studies as "...units of study, courses, or programs that are centered on the knowledge and perspectives of an ethnic or racial group, reflecting narratives and points of view rooted in that group's lived experiences and intellectual scholarship" (p.7).

Ethnic studies courses center the experiences of marginalized peoples and uplift these voices. Moreover, these courses, through their content and pedagogical approaches, challenge students to reflect on how they participate in upholding systems of oppression, as well as how they can transform society to be more just (Cabrera, Meza, Romero, & Cintli Rodríguez, 2013; Cammarota & Romero, 2014). The educational and social benefits of ethnic studies curriculum for students of color have been well-documented (Banks, 2012; Cammarota & Romero, 2014; Dee & Penner, 2017; Romero & Ochoa O'Leary, 2014; Sleeter, 2011; Sleeter & Zavala, 2020); thus, expanding the budget for ethnic studies is an impactful and necessary step toward fulfilling the commitments of institutions of higher education to increase institutional diversity and ensure the educational success of students of color.

This report is based on a student-led qualitative research project that examines how HMoob American students experience college at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (UW-Madison). We use the findings in our study as a case study (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2016) to consider the importance and impacts of ethnic studies courses for students of color, not only at UW-Madison but also in other contexts of public higher education more generally.

Ethnic Studies in Higher Education

Ethnic studies is vital for achieving the goals of a liberal education. UW-Madison summarizes a liberal education as a "well-rounded, world-class education [that] prepares you not only for a better career, but also to

Research studies have illustrated how ethnic studies programs equip students with tools to achieve all of the American Association of Colleges and Universities' learning outcomes for a liberal higher education.

be a better citizen” (UW-Madison, n.d.). The Association of American Colleges and Universities (n.d.) lists the essential learning outcomes of a liberal education as: 1) knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world; 2) intellectual and practical skills (i.e., inquiry and analysis, critical thinking, written and oral communication, etc.); 3) personal and social responsibility; and 4) integrative and applied learning. Our data suggest that ethnic studies courses played an imperative role in guiding students’ understanding of societal structures, social issues, and their own positionality in society (Cammarota, 2016; Rodriguez, 2019; Sleeter, 2011). Similarly, several research studies have illustrated how ethnic studies programs equip students with tools to achieve all of the aforementioned learning outcomes, including unique knowledge and skills that have a lasting influence on students’ educational, social and personal growth (Banks, 2012; Chang, 2002; Sleeter & Zavala, 2020; Yosso, 2005).

Historically, ethnic studies courses and programs on different college campuses throughout the United States have come about through student activism and collective action (Sleeter, 2011), advocating for the courses and uncovering a pattern of minimal institutional support for Ethnic Studies initiatives. For example, at UW-Madison, the ethnic studies requirement was advanced by students of color and recommended by the Steering Committee on Minority Affairs, a group of faculty and staff, after a racist incident in the late 1980s (Holley et al., 1987). In their report, also known as the *Holley Report*, the Steering Committee urged UW-Madison to require six credits of ethnic studies courses as a way to “comba[t] bigotry and racism” (Holley et al., 1987, p.67). The report describes the benefits and urgency of making available ethnic studies courses for all students.

This paper, in particular, focuses on two important impacts of ethnic studies: (1) ethnic studies course content and pedagogical approaches support students in building their critical consciousness, and (2) ethnic studies courses provide a space that acknowledges and privileges the wealth of knowledge and resources that students from marginalized backgrounds carry with them. Given these important aspects of ethnic studies, it is imperative that such programs continue to be supported by educational institutions in order to provide meaningful educational experiences for students of color, as well as for society in general.

This paper focuses on two important impacts of ethnic studies: (1) ethnic studies course content and pedagogical approaches support students in building their critical consciousness, and (2) ethnic studies courses provide a space that acknowledges and privileges the wealth of knowledge and resources that students from marginalized backgrounds carry with them.

Background

In this report, we use data from our two-year qualitative research study that investigated the experiences of HMoob American college students at UW-Madison, including the role of HMoob studies—a specific branch of ethnic studies—in those experiences. This data is used to demonstrate how ethnic studies programs, such as HMoob Studies, are essential in developing students’ critical consciousness. This data documents the value of ethnic studies coursework to push back on deficit narratives, which pathologize and blame HMoob communities for the challenges they face, by encouraging students to embrace the knowledge and experiences of marginalized communities (DePouw, 2012; Yosso, 2005).

Study Description

Our *HMoob American College Paj Ntaub* is a qualitative, college student-led, community-based participatory action research (CBPAR) study that started during the 2018- 2019 academic year to explore the educational experiences of HMoob American college students on the UW–Madison campus. In the first year of our study—based on interviews with 27 current HMoob American students at UW-Madison—we identified spaces of exclusion and belonging for HMoob American students on campus, as well as processes of marginalization and experiences that impact the education and career success of these students. Findings from this first year of research suggested that the presence of HMoob studies courses or courses with an extensive and critical focus on HMoob history and experiences on this predominantly white campus is associated with positive outcomes for HMoob American students. These positive outcomes include expanding students’ knowledge and appreciation of their community’s history and culture, fostering a sense of belonging, and providing a space for identity development. Other research studies have shown how these outcomes contribute to student educational success, such as course attendance, retention rates, and higher GPAs (Romero & Ochoa O’leary, 2014; Sleeter, 2011; Sleeter & Zavala, 2020). Findings from Year 1 of our research also uncovered students’ desire for more HMoob studies curriculum that provide critical perspectives and culturally-sustaining pedagogical approaches, indicating a need for more institutional support for HMoob studies (Lee et al., 2019).

This report presents findings from Year 2 of our research, in which we ask current and former HMoob American students more extensive questions regarding their experiences with HMoob studies courses or other ethnic studies courses that include HMoob studies content (e.g., other Asian American studies courses, Southeast Asian studies courses). Through these interviews, HMoob American students shared how these courses provided a space that challenge them to consider and interrogate their own privileges. These courses also moved students to challenge oppression in all forms and spaces. The rest of this report will be a synthesis of our participants’ experiences with HMoob studies content. We share these narratives in hopes that they will compel readers to further support the growth and goals of ethnic studies programs and courses.

Methodology

The data from both Year 1 and Year 2 of the *Paj Ntaub* research study included field notes and memos from participant observations and public observations, artifacts, and extensive interviews with current and former students. Our team sought to document participants’ high school and college experiences as well as the factors that impacted their educational and career trajectories. For this report, we focus on data that document participants’ experiences with HMoob studies coursework in both high school and college, paying particular attention to how such academic experiences impacted HMoob American students’ schooling and identity as HMoob Americans. Year 1 of the *Paj Ntaub* research study included 27 current HMoob American students, and Year 2 of the study included an additional 67 current students, alumni, and stop-out or transfer students (see Table 1). For both years of study, our team of student researchers, mentored by professional educational researchers at the Wisconsin Center for Education Research, recruited participants through snowball sampling techniques, which resulted in a diverse sample of HMoob American students.

Table 1. Participant Categories

Interviews	2018 - 2019	2019 - 2020
Current Students	27	36
Alumni	N/A	24
Drop outs/Transfers	N/A	7
TOTAL	27	67
	GRAND TOTAL	94

To organize our collected data, we segmented transcribed interviews, observational fieldnotes, auto-ethnographic journals, and ethnographic photographs and artifacts in the data analysis software *MAXQDA*. Each piece of data was coded through a first round of inductive open coding for recurrent phrases, ideas, and themes (Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Ryan & Bernard, 2003). To further analyze our data, we used the searching, categorizing, and memoing functions in *MAXQDA* to make deeper analyses of each major theme. For this report, we analyzed one of these themes: participants’ experiences with and the impact of HMoob studies content at UW-Madison.

Impacts of Ethnic Studies on HMoob American College Students

In this section, we address two important impacts of ethnic studies courses: one focused on the cultivation of critical consciousness and the other focused on the recognition of community cultural wealth. For each of these impacts, we present our research findings on HMoob studies courses at UW-Madison, providing concrete examples from the HMoob American participants that we interviewed. Our findings also provide a key example of how ethnic studies courses can benefit students more generally.

Fostering Critical Consciousness

Research in critical historiography has shown that Eurocentric curricula dominates the United States education system (Banks, 2012; Grosfoguel, 2012; Sleeter, 2011). As Sleeter (2011) explains, Eurocentric curricula results in the exclusion of non-Eurocentric narratives and perspectives on U.S. history:

While content related to African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans has been added, deeper patterns and narratives that reflect Euro-American experiences and worldviews, and that have traditionally structured K-12 textbooks—particularly history and social studies texts—remain intact. Whites continue to receive the most attention and appear in the widest variety of roles, dominating story lines and lists of accomplishments (p. 2).

Research also indicates that the exclusion of non-Eurocentric narratives and perspectives on U.S. history remains a feature of education in the United States (Sleeter, 2011). In an effort to confront Eurocentrism, ethnic studies courses focus on restoring and privileging non-Eurocentric narratives.

Asian American studies courses, for example, teach about the experiences of Japanese Americans during World War II. The dominant Euro-American narrative dictates that people of Japanese descent were the “enemy Other” during the war (Rodriguez, 2019). This narrative traditionally promotes Executive Order 9066 as a justifiable wartime act and a necessary national security response to the bombing of Pearl Harbor, which led to the mass incarceration of Japanese Americans. Missing from this narrative, however, is an analysis of how the Order was a discriminatory, racist, and ignorant act towards Japanese Americans. Rodriguez (2019) argues that Asian American history classes played an important role in teaching a more nuanced narrative from minoritized perspectives.

Amplifying and discussing missing narratives is a form of resistance to dominant narratives, engendering reflections of one’s power and privilege. Providing opportunity for these types of discussions and encouraging critical self-reflection within ethnic studies courses is one way to cultivate critical consciousness. Critical consciousness is both a reflection of oneself and a call to action to transform the world (Cammarota, 2016; Freire, 2014). Critical consciousness allows people to make an analysis that shifts the blame off of marginalized communities and onto systems and institutions that perpetuate violence and oppression (DePouw, 2020; Freire, 2014; hooks, 1994). In other words, critical consciousness moves one to act; therefore, it is a form of activism that is driven by the hope for change obtained and restored through self-reflection. Critical consciousness involves a process of internal transformation, which “stems from marginalization [or understanding marginalization,] and presents the possibility of recognizing how oppression operates in society” (Cammarota, 2016, p. 234). When courses succeed in fostering critical consciousness, students gain the language to talk about their own oppression, as well as the ability to critically reflect on how they are complicit in upholding oppression and invest in a system of accountability in order to create a more just world (DePouw, 2020; Freire, 2014; hooks, 1994). By requiring these dialogues, ethnic studies courses become a core tool for building, guiding, and solidifying critical consciousness.

Critical consciousness is both a reflection of oneself and a call to action to transform the world (Cammarota, 2016; Freire, 2014).

“...no matter where I go in the world, I have to fight for my own existence...”: Understanding Systems, Shifting Blame
Oppression is integral to the maintenance of university systems, and this is demonstrated, in part, by universities not investing in the growth of ethnic studies. The refusal of universities to deeply invest in and develop ethnic studies programs is connected to their complicity of upholding these oppressive systems, such as anti-blackness and colonialism. When universities do not expand and improve ethnic studies, building critical consciousness within ethnic studies programs is inevitably weakened. From our own study, we found that students who did not have access to ethnic studies courses or content also did not have the tools to name their own oppression nor to critique the maintenance of these systems. Instead, many HMoob American students in our study internally blamed themselves, which led to students wanting approval from university systems. In one case, a participant, Kim, exemplifies how not learning to break from internalized shame can push students to search for acceptance by these university systems that violate them, as well as simultaneously supporting narratives that shame other marginalized communities. When Kim was asked how she thought the school perceived HMoob American students, she replied:

I think the campus thinks HMoob American students are really good students, good workers, really like – obedient and stuff, so yeah. ... It's not obedient – like really good work ethics. Yeah. Like students with good work ethics. Yeah, not obedient.

Even though she changed her language to “good work ethics,” both “obedient” and “good work ethics” are example of model minority language employed to label and characterize Asian ethnic groups in the United States (Lee, 2009). Asian Americans are rendered successful, law-abiding citizens that do things the “right” way, but this also creates a paradox of which groups are not law-abiding or hardworking; those groups are Black and Brown communities. This model minority stereotype is a racialized rhetoric that pits Asian Americans against other people of color in order to justify that systemic racism does not exist, and that the only barrier to success in the U.S. is how hard someone works. For Kim, it felt like acceptance by the university through recognition of HMoob people’s hard work. But, without developing Kim’s critical consciousness, she was unable to recognize that HMoob people should not have to prove their belonging through hard work, and that framing them in this way, hurts Black and Brown students who work hard but never get rewarded, because of systemic oppression. Kim’s own conceptualization of her community demonstrates the deep necessity for spaces that can nurture critical consciousness in students to break shame and blame on marginalized people.

Many students go through college like Kim without any internal transformation and unknowingly accepting and perpetuating white supremacy. However, there are other examples of students developing critical consciousness in ethnic studies programs. Instead, they learn to critique what the assumed knowledge and perspective that they have been taught all their lives. One student, Luna, explains that, growing up, she was shamed for not knowing certain parts of her culture, and she “internalized” that shame. She began to believe that she was not “HMoob enough” and also in the negative stereotypes of HMoob Americans. Another participant, Yuam, also believed that people who were not speaking, reading, or writing in HMoob, were considered “less HMoob.” These ideas of what it means to be HMoob are defined within the context of displacement caused by U.S. militarism and capitalism. A sense of loss of things like language, practices, and skills tied to this definition of “HMoobness” are then blamed on HMoob people rather than on the systems that push these conditions of loss.

Building critical consciousness within certain ethnic studies courses was what equipped these students with the tools to call out oppression and refuse and rewrite deficit narratives. Hence, they were able to break through their blame and shame towards their HMoob culture and identity and redirect accountability towards systems of oppression. Luna describes how an Asian American Studies course at UW-Madison, taught by a HMoob woman, pushed her to think about how systems of oppression played a role in how she perceived and valued her HMoob identity. Luna was extremely moved when her HMoob instructor said, “I have no shame in learning about myself.” Hearing what that HMoob instructor said supported Luna in contextualizing power and oppression. Her own journey through HMoob studies, including the experiences with this instructor, made her re-evaluate her original thinking about what it means to be HMoob.

For Yuam, she recognized eventually that she had “succumbed to what whiteness intends to do.” Yuam’s quote below shows her process of reflection on her own internal transformation. She discusses how a class she was taking during study abroad introduced her to a global perspective of HMoob experiences in Thailand:

During my study abroad in Thailand 2016, I came back with a reframing of what it meant to be HMoob for myself. As a kid, the adults always grieved about how HMoob tsis muaj teb chaws (HMoob don’t have a country) and it did not phase me until my experience in Thailand ... From coursework, I also learned about a lot of modern social issues in Thailand, one being discrimination on ethnic minorities. From interactions with Thai folks, to the way Thai folks presented information about the ethnic minorities, it was very clear [that] the ethnic minorities in Thailand weren’t valued members of society, hence the derogatory term of being labeled collectively as “hill tribes.” ... I realized that no matter where I go in the world, I have to fight for my own existence as a HMoob American woman, a person of color, a minority, a stateless group of people ... Is statelessness an automatic that we as HMoob folks cannot strip off? Because with it comes the consequences of systemic oppression and loss of legitimacy.

Through her class, she was able to reject the traditional deficit narrative that HMoob people in Thailand were refugees needing help. Through that rejection, she was able to break out of her blame and shame towards herself and her community to see that HMoob refugees were devalued, and HMoob people continue to suffer, because of systems of oppression. Because she could name systems that created these conditions for her community, she was now able to understand her own experiences with constant statelessness.

For our participants, redefining what HMoob means to them involved transforming how they could forgive and love themselves, instead of hating various aspects of their identities. This refusal of shame and blame, and of acceptance of identity, is part of the critical self-reflection process inherent in developing a critical consciousness, which moves people to do better for themselves and for their communities. When students begin to have this internal shift where they are no longer blaming themselves, they also are practicing a refusal to be understood or palatable within a white supremacist, imperialist framework. Their original understanding of the world, one where they shamed themselves and try to be accepted by systems that abuse their communities, is deconstructed, and they begin to build a new analysis of themselves within the world. This is how cultivating critical consciousness can empower and transform individuals. Per the liberal education learning outcomes, education has the duty to create informed citizens of our society, and ethnic studies courses can do this by providing culturally-sustaining curriculum that can allow students to be critical of systems of power and oppression in order to create better, more just conditions for everyone within society.

“...because survival and prosperity is very different”: Taking Action to Transform the World

A crucial part of critical consciousness is taking action, which happens simultaneously with critical self-reflection. Our findings showed that when HMoob American students do develop a critical consciousness, they are moved to challenge systems of oppression. Through her ethnic studies courses, Yuam transformed her critical self-analyses into actions:

In my HMoob content courses, I wrote about the metaphor of being “fatherless” in the HMoob community and what that may look like, and how literature and tangible pieces can be ways of coping, healing, and making sense of one’s own experiences. ... My passion to learn more about my community could be met through [my] program and I wished I had switched sooner. I am exploring it further in my graduate studies because I want to look into intergenerational trauma of HMoob children with refugee parents and its cognitive impacts. ... I wanna flip family studies because it’s still such a Western vs Eastern family studies. HMoob families don’t fall completely within those categories, I just want to look at more culturally-relevant and inclusive ethnic family studies.

In her own journey, Yuam demonstrates that she is invested in interrogating and resisting single stories (Adichie, 2009), which is an act of critical consciousness. Through developing her critical consciousness, Yuam learns that it is not enough to just reject dominant narratives. She has been moved to act by making a goal to rewrite that single story and interweave it into spaces she occupies, such as her family studies courses.

Similarly, Tyler transformed their perception of themselves and their place in the world with critical consciousness through reflecting on how HMoob people preserve themselves, and acting to help the HMoob community prosper:

And I think one of the biggest takeaways I had from that [Asian American] history course was like, for so long, all HMoob people ever did was survive... Like, that’s all we ever did. Like, living in the refugee camps, running for our lives, fleeing to United States, like everything we did was to survive... And it’s something that I keep in the back of my mind all the time was... I want to break that cycle... And I want to find HMoob people near, or in, or around my generation who will be those people to be like, ‘no, we’re going to break that cycle of needing to survive so that we can prosper ... and we can flourish.’ Because survival and prosperity is very different.

Tyler’s quote demonstrates that they were able to take what they learned in classes—learning outcomes such as global militarism and colonialism—to break out of the mindset that HMoob people only live to survive. Because Tyler was given the tools through their Asian American history course to come to this critical understanding of survival versus prosperity, they were driven to commit to doing more than just preserving the HMoob community. Through this transformation, Tyler was driven to actively search for freedom and ways for the HMoob community as well as other communities of color to grow. Tyler shared that they do this by advocating for students of color to flourish at a predominantly white campus. Moreover, Tyler shared that they were intentional about building meaningful relationships through their role as a housefellow in the residence halls. They provided tools for their residents to rise above the challenges of being on a predominantly white campus, and they helped the residents feel empowered to demand better conditions. As demonstrated through Tyler’s actions, they are working to ensure that they and other marginalized communities can live for reasons beyond survival. Ethnic studies had equipped Tyler with the knowledge and empowerment to fight for a life where they and others can prosper.

HMoob American students' experiences of transformation in ethnic studies courses demonstrate the necessity of developing and sustaining all ethnic studies programs. Ethnic studies can deepen students' analyses of systems of oppression in their own way. That is, even HMoob studies programs has its own way of helping students—especially HMoob American students—understand what it means to live in a racialized society built on the enslavement of Black people, capitalism, and U.S. colonialism. This means that ethnic studies and every different branch of it is important, as every branch of ethnic studies does not repeat the same things. They all add to the same conversation about how oppression works, but through different lenses and bodies of experience. By deepening their analyses of oppression through ethnic studies, students are able to build and strengthen their skills of making critical connections between past, current and future events to anti-blackness, white supremacy, state-sanctioned violence, capitalism, and other systems of oppression. Moreover, learning about these systems and structures of power imbalance can empower students to name their own privileges and disadvantages in society, as well as to challenge these systems—not only for themselves, but for all marginalized people. If schools do not have investments in ethnic studies programs or curriculum that build critical consciousness, what society loses is continuously growing cohorts of students who could have had the knowledge of how people are impacted by power and systems of oppression, as well as the commitment to a life-long project to change these conditions of suffering (Tintiango-Cubales et al., 2015)

Facilitating Community Cultural Wealth

As outlined in the last section, ethnic studies courses and programs play a pivotal role in cultivating students' critical consciousness and will to act in transformative ways. In addition to providing spaces that allow all students to reflect on their identities and positioning within various intersecting systems of oppression, ethnic studies courses and programs also uplift and encourage marginalized students to recognize and utilize their community cultural wealth. Yosso (2005) describes community cultural wealth as “an array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression” (p.77). These knowledge, skills and abilities within communities of color have been historically undervalued because dominant narratives hold that communities of color do not have the “cultural capital” that are needed to be successful. The deficit presumption that “disadvantaged” communities offer less valuable knowledge and skills is a narrative that is at the intersection of racism and classism regarding poor communities of color. Moreover, these deficit narratives can be internalized, or unconsciously accepted, leading to harmful perceptions of different races, including one's own race, perpetuating what Pérez Huber et al. (2006) describes as the cycle of subordination:

Ethnic studies courses and programs play a pivotal role in cultivating students' critical consciousness and will to act in transformative ways.

Unequal resources, racial segregation and poverty are intertwined into a complicated system of subordination that results in low educational achievement for Students of Color and perpetuates racial stratification for many Communities of Color. ... In order for this cycle of subordination to continue, the people being denied opportunities must believe, to some extent, their “failure” in attaining educational opportunities, is a result of their own lack of abilities and effort (p.16).

As a counter to deficit thinking about communities of color, Yosso (2005) argues that in actuality, communities of color possess a set of cultural capital that allow them to survive and thrive as they navigate through a society that was not built for them to succeed in. These forms of capital include: aspirational (ability to

remain hopeful), linguistic (skills obtained from being bilingual), resistant (knowledge and skills to challenge inequities), navigational (ability to navigate through social institutions), social (networks that provide support), and familial (commitment to community). Pedagogical approaches in ethnic studies courses that foster critical consciousness also simultaneously highlight the strengths and knowledge that each student brings into the classroom. These approaches attempt to dismantle deficit narratives that students may have internalized by empowering students to draw upon their skills and experiences for course projects and discussions. Students are also reminded that they have been able to draw from their cultural capital for survival in an unjust society. As an outcome, students become more confident about the knowledge and skills they have gained from their lived experiences and from their communities, allowing them to be more fully engaged in their educational experience. Additionally, because ethnic studies courses allow students to become aware of and interrogate oppression, students can better recognize and dismantle internalized racism, which would work towards discontinuing the perpetuation of subordination. Through this effort to dismantle internalized racism, students are able to name how colonialism and white supremacy have affected their capacity to value the knowledge and cultural wealth that they and their communities possess.

“...we must look out for each other and love each other from wherever we stand”: Drawing on Community Cultural Wealth in Navigating through Higher Education

Yosso’s (2005) concept of community cultural wealth posits that students of color possess an array of knowledge, skillsets, and experiences that help them persist through systems of oppression. Further analysis of our data showed that HMoob American students developed a greater appreciation for the resources and knowledge within their communities because of ethnic studies courses, specifically Asian American Studies courses. Our participants shared how courses with HMoob studies content have fostered their community cultural wealth by providing culturally sustaining curriculum that centers the narratives and voices of their community. Participants have also explained that through their ethnic studies courses, they have also learned how to draw on their HMoob language, traditions, and history of resilience as a resource to navigate marginalizing spaces, such as campus. They shared, specifically, that courses with HMoob studies content brought them to an understanding that they possess strengths such as bilingualism/biculturalism, community, and familial networks that are valuable to their learning and development as active participants in society. For instance, Ntxhi talked about the community building she experienced while pursuing her Asian American Studies certificate and its relevance to her self-development and life-long journey.

... I took [an Asian American Studies course]... and [the professor] was my very first professor and my very first class and the very first lecture of my very first year. And to this day, nine years later, we still like email back and forth. So, he was a really big part of my Asian American experience and identity development, as well as other professors and TAs. ... the Asian American Studies program, like bless their heart, they taught me more about who I was, more than I even knew about myself. And not only as a HMoob woman and a HMoob person, but like as an Asian American woman and... person and just kind of like what it meant navigating through life as someone who’s a person of color growing up in the Midwest... I learned so much more about myself.

Ntxhi's story demonstrates an obvious internal transformation through the years of engaging with the Asian American Studies program, specifically on how the courses contributed to building her critical consciousness, finding connectedness to her ethnic and racial identity, and helping her conceptualize her racialized experiences. Prior to her insights about the program, she had just described the racist incidents of the "two different groups with the elevator" and the "alley story," which consisted of interactions with white students who violated her safety and made her question her belonging on campus. It deeply impacted her well-being that she had considered leaving Madison. However, through the Asian American Studies program, Ntxhi was able to find community. She developed a deeper understanding of her identities and how certain spaces already positioned her. She also met members of Asian American Studies who she continues to sustain relationships with post-undergraduate. According to Yosso's (2005) definition of community cultural wealth, this example represents the social capital where students draw from their social network and community resources to help them attain their scholarship and help them navigate the harmful conditions of institutional spaces. Being a part of the program allowed for Ntxhi to seek healthy connections with her community and place high value in her ability to draw from and foster her social capital.

Diving deeper into Ntxhi's story, she also reveals the role of linguistic and familial capital through her experience with Asian American Studies program such as demonstrating bilingualism and biculturalism to communicate and form relationships with others, as well as, how finding family kept her grounded on campus. Ntxhi states:

So, I loved [my instructor]...[she] and I actually started [a student organization] together. Yeah, so I have a lot of history with [her] and with the Asian Am department and with the HMoob sisterhood... I can't turn this down, like we have to do something about this for the sake of like HMoob women future... I think in every bit of my experience at UW... with [the HMoob sisterhood, Asian American student organization], and my peers... Asian Am program... the [multicultural student center]... that's what kept me grounded and wanting to continue to be at UW. Because if you remember, my first year, I wanted out... But it wasn't until I found all of these spaces and built all of these community that I was like, this is the reason why we need to continue to be here and do this work and build this work, because we need to create this space and help other students feel like they belong here, because they do.

With the various spaces on campus, it is apparent that multiple contexts require different forms of language expression and understanding. In spaces of ethnic studies, HMoob students' bilingualism and biculturalism have shown to influence their communication with others and how they form relationships with those individuals. Such as the relationship between Ntxhi and her instructor where they bonded through mutual understanding of cultural nuances and issues relevant to them in the HMoob community. Furthermore, the relationships in these spaces are guided by familial capital where educators and students engage in processes of care for each other through forming and maintaining kinship. Familial capital for communities of color extends the traditional understandings of "family," such that the concept and purpose of family goes beyond immediate family members and blood relations. Communities of color place value in maintaining kinship as a model to care for each other, cope with the impacts of institutional oppression, and provide resources for one another (Yosso,

2005). Hence, the perspective on familism as a source of cultural wealth in communities of color counters modernization literature that blamed large family networks as a hindrance to student's success (Valenzuela & Dornbusch, 1999).

Therefore, while ethnic studies courses are contributing to building students' critical consciousness, these courses are also providing a space that elevates and encourages the use of students' cultural knowledge and experiences. Most importantly, these ethnic studies courses, unlike classes that have Eurocentric curriculum, have been the few courses that have regarded students as more than just learners—students are made to feel like they are knowledge holders and knowledge producers. In this way, students learn to value and use, as well as build upon, the knowledge they bring with them from their home communities. An example includes when Lalin drew on their own experiences and knowledge of the HMoob baby carrier to supplement a presentation they gave in a textiles studies course:

...I chose the baby carrier... wrote about why each piece is on there... No one's really written about that, so I didn't have things to cite..

However, shortly after saying this, Lalin proclaimed that because of the limited documentation on HMoob baby carriers, their presentation felt like a “super gray conversation.” It is evident that in mainstream classes, where knowledge is only considered legitimate if there is written record or sources to cite, how easily it could be for students of color to feel like their knowledge of their own cultural artifacts is neither valid nor enough. Because most students' educational experiences have been largely Eurocentric and/or follow the banking model of schooling that sees students as empty vessels that are waiting to be filled with information from teachers (Freire, 2014), not every student has had the opportunity to realize and utilize the community cultural wealth they bring with them into the classroom.

Hence, the more need for ethnic studies courses that cultivate critical consciousness and builds community cultural wealth through uplifting minoritized experiences and voices. These types of courses challenge students to deconstruct their own internalization of deficit narratives and monolithic framing of marginalized people and their ways of knowing. As such, through building one's critical consciousness, it can allow students to value their communities' knowledge and strengths. For example, it allows HMoob American students to recognize and find solace and strength in HMoob resilience in overcoming the struggles of genocide, displacement, and resettlement, as well as HMoob communities' active role in social movements in the United States and abroad. These narratives cultivate resistant capital (Yosso, 2005) and allow people of marginalized backgrounds to understand that marginalized people were not and are not just passive victims of oppression, giving people hope and faith in the resiliency of their communities.

For example, in her interview Brook describes the role of her HMoob studies courses in occasioning a transformative realization of the resilience and agency of HMoob people throughout the diaspora, acknowledging that there is cultural wealth in the HMoob community that she had not seen, such as the resilience to exist and rebuild their communities wherever they are in the world. Before her participation in Asian American Studies courses, she mainly knew of the HMoob American community through U.S. narratives.

As a stateless group of people, HMoob people's existence questions and challenges the notions of colonial practices of state citizenships and re-constructs traditional conception of home. The sense of home-making, even in different parts of the world, is a part of HMoob community cultural wealth to survive oppressive states. Evidently, participants also cycle into home-making at the university through these ethnic studies spaces, which may look like finding belonging, preserving and growing their home knowledge, and forming grounding relationships inside and outside of the space. Because with resilience, there are aspirations and dreams, too.

A student researcher, Siab, assessed the aspirational quote HMoob communities have collectively used and passed on, "HMoob yuav tsum hlub HMoob," meaning HMoob people need to love HMoob people.

At the end of the day, we realize that we are a small population relative to the rest of the world, but we are scattered across the globe. In order to preserve our culture and our population, we must look out for each other and love each other from wherever we stand.

The wealth of resilient capital in the HMoob community to sustain their HMoob identity, culture, and communities despite being a stateless group of people torn by colonial violence, provides strength for HMoob students to draw from as they also try to create homes for themselves on campus.

Furthermore, several students in our study shared that it was their first time learning that HMoob Americans have organized successful social movements to fight oppression, discrimination, and violence against the HMoob community in the United States, including in Wisconsin. Allen shared a highlight from his HMoob studies course that informed him about the mobilization of HMoob people in the political arena:

So, we learned about the Secret War, Laos and how it impacted the HMoob population... number of losses, and also the legislation that passed [that] allowed it to happen, or recruitment of HMoob people and the reasons why... And that was a big part of it... we talked about the Ban Vinai camps and the story. And we personally did oral story project stuff, of our own history. And my parents did that, so I learned my parents' history. And then, they also talked about legislation that affects HMoob people... But there's also the movements that HMoob people did, such as—when their welfare cuts happened, they strongly pushed for it, or did movements that would give special benefits to HMoob people because they used to be allies of the U.S., in the Secret War.

Again, communities of color are not passive to subordination. Despite the setbacks such as policies and practices that hinder them, they are involved socio-politically and have taken stances on many issues. Students learning about their community history of standing up for themselves and communities around them aids in their own understanding about the theories and concepts of social movements learned in classes. This speaks to the aspirational and resistant capital that is part of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), further showing how transformational it could be when the knowledge and experiences of students' home community is

incorporated into their education. Therefore, the HMoob American students who participated in our research found HMoob studies courses to be an important opportunity to acquire a deeper appreciation for their community cultural wealth because their people's ways of knowing are privileged in the space.

Altogether, our participants' emphasis on building community, family, and kinship, as well as their transformational realizations of hidden narratives reflect a lot about how colonial and capitalist values of individualism and privatization have hurt folks whose communities have always thrived through familial and communal relations, collective knowledge, and home-making. Without ethnic studies, many of these students would not have had the tools to dismantle shame and internalized racism. They would not have had the opportunity to optimize their capacity to value and rely on the knowledge and cultural wealth that they and their communities possess. This is why it is important to invest in ethnic studies to honor the knowledges and strengths of students of color, while challenging them to become agents of change for themselves, their communities, and overall society.

Conclusion

This report describes innovative college student-engaged CBPAR research that provides qualitative research and deep analysis of the experiences and outcomes of ethnic studies coursework for students of color. With the benefit of this data and analysis, we have argued that ethnic studies programs and courses benefit the whole campus community—especially when they are taught well. Importantly, we focus on the impacts of ethnic studies courses on students of color and why these courses and programs must be sustained. Ethnic studies courses, through their curricular content and pedagogical approaches, provide spaces that incorporate counternarratives of marginalized experiences and analyses of systems and power. Such counternarratives can foster students' critical consciousness, allowing students to reflect on the ways that these systems harm people, helping them to shift blame they have placed on themselves or their communities and in turn learning to radically love themselves and their communities. Moreover, students are able to gain and develop tools to navigate their survival within these systems. Concurrently, ethnic studies programs and courses are also spaces that privilege and draw upon students' community cultural wealth, those knowledges, skills and resources that students bring with them into the classroom (Yosso, 2005). In turn, students develop a greater appreciation for the value of their communities' cultural capital and ways of knowing and being. As such, ethnic studies courses meet all the outcomes of a liberal arts education and do more than provide minoritized students with an inclusive learning experience (Association of American Colleges & Universities, n.d.).

In summary, ethnic studies courses are crucial to the academic, personal and social success of students of color on college campuses, as well as preparing all students to become more empathetic, justice-oriented members of a society that continues to become more diverse. Universities and educational institutions cannot simply talk about a commitment to diversity and the retention of students of color without funding programs that have been shown to contribute to student success. Inaction, or worse, cutting funding, for these types of programs, especially amidst a global pandemic that has disproportionately harmed minoritized communities, contributes to the maintenance of systems that cause the suffering of marginalized peoples. We urge institutions of higher education to continue investing in and growing ethnic studies programs as it is more crucial now than ever in our increasingly diverse world.

Recommendations

Based on an analysis of a sample of interviews with current and former HMoob American college students at UW-Madison, this report highlighted the value and necessity of maintaining and growing ethnic studies. We end this report with the following recommendations as courses of action specific to the University of Wisconsin System (of which the site our study is a part), but can be broadly applied to other educational institutions:

1. To uphold its commitments to diversity and realize its inclusion statements, the UW System must continue to sustain ethnic studies programs with sufficient funding regardless of circumstances, including COVID-19.
2. To acknowledge and take accountability for institutional racism and racist violence, which continue to occur on college campuses, the UW System must invest in the growth of ethnic studies programs, including hiring more faculty of color, creating and funding more ethnic studies courses, requiring more than 3 credits of ethnic studies coursework, and providing workshops and professional development opportunities for instructors to learn about and use critical pedagogy in their courses.
3. To increase campus-wide knowledge of the value of ethnic studies programs and to engender student engagement in the classrooms, the UW System must grow these programs into stand-alone departments with all the benefits and resources of a university department. The System must also embed ethnic studies programming and anti-racist training within student services, advising, new student orientations, and staff, faculty and administrator orientations.
4. To truly honor the voices and experiences of marginalized students in providing critical perspectives on curriculum and campus-wide policies, the UW System must center marginalized student narratives by creating more student-representative positions within various committees and extending actual decision-making abilities to these students.
5. To create a more inclusive, higher impact campus experience for minoritized students, the UW System must fund and support more creative endeavors led by marginalized students, such as community-based participatory action research projects and other scholar-activist projects and efforts. These opportunities should do more than just provide experience, they must also fairly compensate minoritized students for their time and labor.

References

- Adichie, C. N. (2009, July). *The danger of a single story*. Retrieved from: https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?utm_campaign=tedsread&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=tedcomshare
- Association of American Colleges and Universities (n.d.). Essential learning outcomes. Retrieved from, <https://www.aacu.org/essential-learning-outcomes>
- Banks, J. A. (2012). Ethnic studies, citizenship education, and the public good. *Intercultural Education*, 23(6), 467–473. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14675986.2012.745986>
- Bartlett, L., & Vavrus, F. (2016). *Rethinking case study research: A comparative approach*. Taylor & Francis.
- Bikales, S. J. & Chen, R. K. (2020). Search for Harvard ethnic studies faculty suspended indefinitely due to pandemic. *The Harvard Crimson*. Retrieved from: <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2020/4/16/ethnic-studies-search-suspended/>
- Cabrera, N. L., Meza, E. L., Romero, A. J., & Cintli Rodríguez, R. (2013). “If there is no struggle, there is no Progress”: Transformative youth activism and the School of Ethnic Studies. *The Urban Review*, 45(1), 7–22. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-012-0220-7>
- Cammarota, J. (2016). The praxis of ethnic studies: Transforming second sight into critical consciousness. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 19(2), 233–251. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2015.1041486>
- Cammarota, J., & Romero, A. (2014). Introduction: Paulo Freire in raza studies. In J. Cammarota & A. Romero (Eds.), *Raza Studies: The public option for educational revolution* (pp. 3–13). University of Arizona Press.
- Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2014). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. Sage publications.
- Dee, T. S., & Penner, E. K. (2017). The causal effects of cultural relevance: Evidence from an ethnic studies curriculum. *American Educational Research Journal*, 54(1), 127–166. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831216677002>
- DePouw, C. (2012). When culture implies deficit: Placing race at the center of Hmong American education. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 15(2), 223–239. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2011.624505>
- DePouw, C. (2020). The need for critical race consciousness in Critical Hmong Studies. *Hmong Studies Journal*, 21, 1–30.
- Freire, P. (2014). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (30th anniversary edition). Bloomsbury.
- Grosfoguel, R. (2012). *The dilemmas of ethnic studies in the United States: Between liberal multiculturalism, identity politics, disciplinary colonization, and decolonial epistemologies*. 1, 10.
- Holley, C., Arenas, A.-T., Bowles, A., Cantu, K., Casanova, S., Fausett, R. S., Garcia, V., & Ginsberg, P. (1987). *The Steering Committee on Minority Affairs final report* (p. 92). University of Wisconsin-Madison.
- hooks, b. (1994). Engaged pedagogy. In *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom* (pp. 13–22). Routledge.

Lee, L., Lee, P., Smolarek, B., Thao, M., Vang, K., Wolfgram, M., Xiong, C., Xiong, O., Xiong, P. K., & Xiong, P. (2019). *Our HMoob American college paj ntaub*. Center for Research on College-Workforce Transitions. Retrieved from, <http://ccwt.wceruw.org/Research/publications.html>.

Lee, S. (2009). *Unraveling the “model minority” stereotype: Listening to Asian Americans*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Meyerhofer, K. (2020, July 13). Terminated Edgewood College professors ask: “Does tenure matter anymore?”. *Wisconsin State Journal*. Retrieved from, https://madison.com/wsj/news/local/education/university/terminated-edgewood-college-professors-ask-does-tenure-matter-anymore/article_ddbec74a-580c-543a-a7d7-cb71a74a7cd4.html

Myers, T. (2018, December 18). Future of ethnic studies divides UW. *Daily Cardinal*. Retrieved from https://madison.com/daily-cardinal/future-of-ethnic-studies-divides-uw/article_a77aee8e-7ece-11e4-8356-430561e1a829.html.

Pérez Huber, L., Johnson, R. N., & Kohli, R. (2006). Naming racism: A conceptual look at internalized racism in U.S. schools. *Chicana/o-Latina/o Law Review*, 26(183), 183–206.

Rodríguez, N. (2019). “Caught between two worlds”: Asian American elementary teachers’ enactment of Asian American history. *Educational Studies*, 55(2), 214–240.

Romero, A. J., & Ochoa O’Leary, A. (2014). “When you know yourself you’re more confident”: Resilience and stress of undergraduate students in the face of anti-ethnic studies bills. In J. Cammarota & A. Romero (Eds.), *Raza Studies: The public option for educational revolution* (pp. 91–106). University of Arizona Press.

Ryan, G. W., & Bernard, H. R. (2003). Techniques to identify themes. *Field methods*, 15(1), 85-109.

Sleeter, C. E. (2011). *The academic and social value of ethnic studies* (p. 38). National Education Association.

Sleeter, C. E., & Zavala, M. (2020). What the research says about ethnic studies: Chapter 3 from *Transformative ethnic studies in Schools: Curriculum, Pedagogy, and Research* (p. 1-26). National Education Association.

Tintiangco-Cubales, A., Kohli, R., Sacramento, J., Henning, N., Agarwal-Rangnath, R., & Sleeter, C. (2015). Toward an ethnic studies pedagogy: Implications for K-12 schools from the research. *The Urban Review*, 47(1), 104–125. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-014-0280-y>

UW-Madison (n.d.). Admissions. Retrieved from, <https://www.wisc.edu/admissions/>

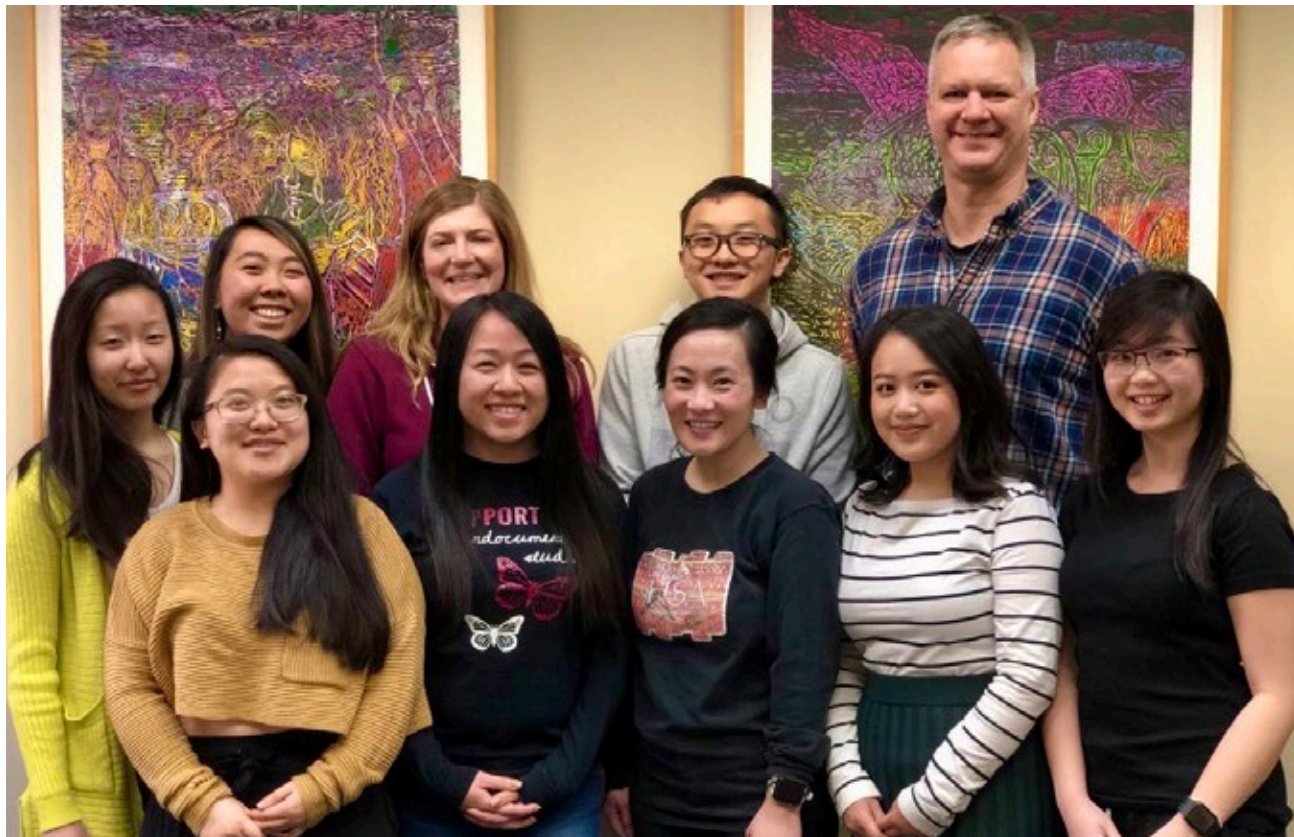
Valenzuela, A., & Dornbusch, S. M. (1994). Familism and social capital in the academic achievement of Mexican origin and Anglo adolescents. *Social Science Quarterly*, 75(1), 18–36.

Wang, F. (2016, February 26). SFSU College of ethnic studies Fights for Budget Survival, Wins Year Reprieve. *NBC News*. Retrieved September 28, 2020, from <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/sfsu-college-ethnic-studies-fights-budget-survival-wins-year-reprieve-n526691>

Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 8(1), 69–91. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1361332052000341006>

The UW-Madison Research Team

(Names are ordered as appearing in the photograph left to right and back to front)



Payeng Moua is an undergraduate researcher at CCWT. As a PEOPLE scholar, she is a senior studying Health Promotions and Health Equity while also completing an Asian American Studies Certificate with a HMoob emphasis and in hopes to complete her Leadership certificate as well. She hopes to one day be able to blend the sciences and remedies of health with the knowledge of HMoob culture and mannerism to give back to her community and not invalidate the beliefs and identities that they hold, but instead to add knowledge on health to communities cultural, religious and medicinal practices.

Ariana Thao is a recent graduate from UW Madison. She majored in Political Science, Sociology, and has a certificate in Asian American Studies with a HMoob American studies emphasis. She is a Chancellor's scholar alumna as a part of the Mercile J. Lee scholarship program. Currently she serves as a Resource Development & Implementation Specialist for Extension's Office of Access, Inclusion, and Compliance and intends to attend law school in the near future.

Bailey B. Smolarek holds a Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction and is an Associate Researcher at the Wisconsin Center for Education Research.

Odyssey Xiong graduated from UW-Madison with a B.A. in Sociology and a certificate in Asian American Studies with a HMoob emphasis.

Matthew Wolfgram holds a Ph.D. in Anthropology and is a Senior Researcher at the Center for College-Workforce Transitions at the Wisconsin Center for Education Research.

Lisa Yang is an undergraduate researcher on the team. She is currently a senior studying Education Studies, and has a certificate in Asian American Studies with a HMoob American Studies Emphasis. She is a PEOPLE scholar and hopes to support spaces that center youth and healing. This research has shown her that she enjoys creating art and literature that can build HMoob Studies.

Lena Lee is an intern at CCWT and is currently working on the “Our HMoob American College Paj Ntaub” research project. She has a B.A in Psychology and a certificate in Asian American Studies with a HMoob American Studies Emphasis. Lena is a proud PEOPLE and Rotary alumna who actively participated in student activism through the HMoob American Studies Committee (HMASC). She plans to attend graduate school in the near future and hopes to work with underrepresented students in education.

MaiNeng Vang (pronouns: she/her/nws) is a Ph.D. student in the Educational Policy Studies program at UW-Madison with a broad research interest in the educational experiences of minoritized students. More specifically, she is interested in understanding how race, ethnicity, gender, and class intersect to inform the lives and experiences of HMoob American students and their families. Mai Neng is currently a project assistant for the HMoob American College Paj Ntaub research team, a community-based participatory action research project.

Pa Kou Xiong is an intern at CCWT and a Behavior Support Specialist at Silvercrest Group Home in Neenah, WI. She has a B.S. in Human Development and Family Studies with Psychology. Pa Kou is a CAE alumna who actively participated in social justice work through the HMoob American Studies Committee (HMASC). She plans to attend graduate school and pursue a career in the field of mental health in the future.

Ying Yang Youa Xiong is a graduate student in the Applied Masters of Human Ecology program with interests in examining how refugee-ness and statelessness transcend cognitively through HMoob American families, particularly through their navigation within school spaces. Ying received her BS in Human Development and Family Studies with certificates in Asian American Studies and Global Health Studies from UW Madison in 2019, and currently work as a graduate researcher for the HMoob American College Paj Ntaub research team on community-based participatory action research.



**Wisconsin Center for
Education Research**
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

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.

CCWT would like to thank the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the UW-Madison School of Education's Grand Challenges Grant for supporting this work.

Suggested citation: Lee, L., Xiong, P., Xiong, Y., Yang, L., Smolarek, B., Vang, M., Wolfgram, M., Moua, P., Thao, A. & Xiong, O. (2020). *The Necessity of Ethnic Studies: Prioritizing Ethnic Studies During COVID 19 and Beyond*. Center for Research on College-Workforce Transitions.

<http://ccwt.wceruw.org/research/researchbriefs.html>

Center for Research on College to Workforce Transitions (CCWT)

1025 West Johnson Street, Madison, WI 53706

For more information contact Center Director Matthew T. Hora (hora@wisc.edu)

ccwt.wceruw.org