Awareness Points for Interacting with Hmong/Southeast Asian Students


At the end of the Vietnam War, the Hmong people came to the United States from the mountains of Laos. Some reports say that nearly a third of the Laotian Hmong died in combat or from starvation and disease caused by the war. More died in Thailand in refugee camps before resettling throughout the world, with more than 80,000 coming to the United States beginning in the late 1970’s. A 2000 census shows that about 75,000 Hmong live in Wisconsin and Minnesota. Yang, Vang, Xiong, Lee, Moua, Cha (Chang), Lo (Lor), Thao, and Her are the eight most common Hmong clan names.

Educational Attainment

- 50.7% of all adult Hmong-Americans have less than a 9th Grade education compared to 7.5% of the entire U.S. population
- 40.4% of all adult Hmong-Americans have earned a high school diploma or higher compared to 80.4% of the entire U.S. population
- 7.5% of adult Hmong-Americans have earned a Bachelor’s Degree or higher compared to 24.4% of the entire U.S. population
- The percentage of Hmong with a high school diploma and a Bachelor’s Degree has more than doubled since 1990 showing considerable educational progress among Hmong people in America
- 2000 Census Figures show Hmong men’s educational attainment still exceeds that of Hmong women, though the gap narrowed between 1990 and 2000. Anecdotal evidence suggests women have eliminated the gap and perhaps even pulled ahead in terms of enrollment and completion of higher education.

Linguistic Isolation

The percentage of enumerated U.S. Hmong households reporting linguistic isolation (no adults speaking English well or at all) was 34.8% compared to 4.1% of the entire U.S. population. Hmong families are becoming less linguistically isolated. Linguistic Isolation was enumerated as over 60 percent of Hmong households in 1990.

Hmong Schoolchildren and School/Parent Relationships

- Many Hmong Children in Kindergarten to first or second grade find learning English difficult. Most Hmong families do not teach reading and writing in the Hmong language though the Hmong language is primarily if not exclusively spoken at home
- According to some studies, a large proportion of Hmong students are visual learners. Effective instructional strategies should include visual, and hands-on activities
- Hmong children and youth must deal with conflicting messages from their family and peer culture with the old culture still being practiced at home on a daily basis by their parents while they also have continued exposure to and pressure from the peer youth culture at home
- Most Hmong parents place a high value on their children’s education but they may lack the resources or background to personally teach their children important academic skills. Communication must be established between parents and the schools so that each party can understand and respect the other’s potential role in a partnership
- Many Hmong parents continue to practice corporal punishment in the home and strongly believe in disciplining their children in cases of misbehavior

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Cultural Etiquette for Interacting with Traditional Hmong

• The handshake may be a new concept to the traditional Hmong person, this is especially the case among women. Traditional Hmong usually do not shake hands with women. Many Hmong women feel embarrassed shaking the hands of a male. Traditionally, handshakes do not occur. Persons greet one another verbally. Holding hands too tightly during a handshake may embarrass Hmong women.

• Most traditional Hmong families do not enjoy hearing direct comments about their children, especially infants and babies. A comment such as "your child is cute" is not looked upon favorably. Many Hmong believe that if a bad spirit hears such comments, it might come and take the child's soul away.

• When talking to a Hmong person, he or she may not look directly at you or give eye contact. The person you are speaking to may look down or away from you. Traditionally looking directly into the face of a Hmong person or making direct eye contact is considered to be rude and inappropriate.

• Hmong people tend to be humble. They usually do not want to show or express their true emotions in front of others. Often, they will say: "maybe" or "I will try" instead of giving a definite positive or negative reply. Sometimes they might say "okay" or "yes" which actually means "no", when they feel pressured.

• Most traditional Hmong elders, especially men, do not want strangers to touch their heads, or those of their children, due to their religious beliefs and personal values.

• Most traditional Hmong men take on an adult name after they have married and had their first child. The adult name is added to the first name. Most Hmong men prefer to be called by their adult name.

Gender and Family Roles

• When conversing with a Hmong family, one should always ask for the head of the household which is usually the father.

• It may be considered quite embarrassing and rude when outsiders assumingly label the members of a Hmong family as man or wife. If one does not know the family or the relationships between family members, one should ask Traditionally, it is considered inappropriate for the opposite genders to sit too close to one another when conversing. To avoid misinterpretations, a male should keep a distance between himself and a female when in conversation or in any type of encounter.

Customs

• There are many unusual physical marks which might be found on the body of a Hmong person. These are commonly the result of a home treatment with tiger balm and other remedies for traditional healing and health problems such as colds and headaches. These marks may involve bruises or redness from cupping, spooning, or coining on the neck, shoulder, back, chest, forearms, and forehead.

• Hmong who practice the traditional Hmong religion also may wear unusual accessories such as red necklaces made from silver and brass, white cloths around their wrists, and red or white strings on their wrists, necks, or ankles. These accessories may be worn for health and religious purposes.
Retention at College
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.

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.

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.