From Descendants of Refugees to First-Generation College Students: The Untold Story of Southeast Asian American College Students’ Lived Experience

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FROM DESCENDANTS OF REFUGEES TO FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS: THE UNTOLD STORY OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN AMERICAN COLLEGE STUDENTS’ LIVED EXPERIENCE

by

Vunsin Hiew Doublestein

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy Educational Leadership, Research, and Technology Western Michigan University April 2017

Doctoral Committee:

Donna Talbot, Ph.D., Chair
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Chien-Juh Gu, Ph.D.
Aggregate data on Asian Pacific Americans (APAs) may show APAs to have exceptionally high educational attainment and economic mobility compared to other racial groups (Museus & Buenavista, 2016). In reality, various APA sub-groups face significant obstacles to academic access and success and are found at both the highest and lowest levels of the achievement, as well as educational attainment and income spectrums. In spite of the growing awareness of and scholarship on the complexity of APA student experience in higher education, there is limited research on Southeast Asian Americans (SEAAs) who have come to the U.S. as refugees, the circumstances surrounding their forced migration, and how their immigration status affects their access to programs and services.

This phenomenological study explored the experience of first-generation college students of Southeast Asian descent in the Midwest, whose families have resettled in the U.S. as refugees. According to Creswell (2007, 2009), in a phenomenological approach, participants describe, in their own voice, the essence of their lived experiences about a phenomenon. Specifically, this phenomenological inquiry developed a deeper understanding about the experiences of these students and the meaning of their college experience through the lens of refugees’ experiences.
This study utilizes a criterion sample of eight SEAA undergraduate students enrolled in U.S. institutions of higher education in the Midwestern states of Indiana, Michigan, and Ohio. The population in this study is limited to undergraduate students who have self-identified as Southeast Asian American of Cambodian, Hmong, Lao, or Vietnamese descent, have attended high school in the U.S., are first-generation college students, and whose parents have been accepted into the U.S. under refugee status. The results of this phenomenological study are developed through data collected from the face-to-face, semi-structured, in-depth interviews.

The findings of this study reveal five strong themes that capture the essence of the experiences of these first-generation college students of Southeast Asian descent, whose families have resettled in the U.S. as refugees, and how their experiences reflect the nuance of their family’s forced migration. These themes are: (1) the journey is difficult, (2) family circumstances guided academic choices, (3) childhood community has an influence on college experience, (4) support, inclusion, and sense of belonging foster college success, and (5) the legacy of trauma is embedded in their everyday lives. Recommendations for practice and research are also discussed.

This study adds to the small but growing literature on SEAA college students. With the knowledge produced by this study, student affairs professionals, administrators, and policymakers will have a better understanding of and be better equipped to address the issues surrounding the lack of programs and services for SEAA college students.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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I am also grateful to Dr. Sue Poppink for assisting me with my data collection process. Just as I was about to give up on participant recruitment, she connected me with someone who would indirectly lead me to three additional participants. To the most understanding and supportive supervisor anyone could ever ask for, Diana Hernandez, you have been a great mentor and a fantastic boss to me for the past 10 years. Thank you for the continuous motivation you have given me, for making me believe in myself, and for helping me stay focused throughout this process.

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The completion of this dissertation would not have been possible had it not been for the participants’ willingness to take a risk and be vulnerable. The participants in this study shared with me their struggles and the traumatic events that their families have been through. They have honored me with their rich and meaningful stories filled with suffering, hope, resilience, and self-discovery. I am humbled by their trust in me and am thankful that I was able to build a rapport with them.

Last but not least, I would like to thank my family. To my mom, although you may not understand what exactly I do for a living or be able to explain my culturally unconventional profession and academic pursuit to our family and friends in Malaysia, I know that I have always had your full support and I know that you still love me. To my parents-in-law, thank you for always making me feel smart and accomplished. To my daughter, Kameron, I strive to become a better person and to be a good role model to you, and I want you to know that you can grow up to be anything you want to be. To my incredible husband, Ryan, thank you for putting up with me and giving me space in my times of stress. I could not have done it without your love and support.

Vunsin Hiew Doubblestein
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Background

When asked to think about Asian or Asian American college students, the first words that usually come to mind are “smart,” “math whiz,” “nerdy,” “quiet,” and “model student.” These stereotypes come as no surprise when looking at the numbers alone. At first glance, as a group, Asian Americans seem to have exceptionally high educational attainment and economic mobility (Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund [AALDEF], n.d.; Kibria, 1999; B. S. K. Kim, Yang, Atkinson, Wolfe, & Hong, 2001; Osajima, 1995; Yeh, 2005). Furthermore, Asian Americans are “often portrayed as a model minority because of their hard work and educational achievements, and for earning family incomes close to White Americans” (Ting, 2000, p. 442). This model minority stereotype positioned Asian Americans as the model of success in achieving the American Dream that other racial minorities should follow (Ngo & Lee, 2007).

The model minority stereotype masks the underperformance of Asian Americans who are not as well off academically, socially, and economically (AALDEF, n.d.; King, 2000; Nance, 2007b). According to Poon (2010), “the achievement gap framework often used in research on minority education cannot be easily applied to Asian Americans given the diverse education attainment levels among the pan-ethnic population” (p. 5). The claim that all Asian Americans are model minorities is based on aggregated data and statistics (Balón, 2004; S. M. Lee, 2002; Yoo, Burrola, & Steger, 2010) due to small sample size or for convenience (Lew, Chang, &
Wang, 2005), lumping together unique ethnic groups as if they have the same traits (Brydolf, 2009; B. S. K. Kim et al., 2001; King, 2000). It also conceals important distinctions between groups, presents an oversimplified portrayal of Asian Americans as a homogenous group (Lew et al., 2005), and hides a larger reality (AALDEF, n.d.).

In reality, Asian Americans in numerous groups face significant obstacles to academic success (Chou & Feagin, 2010) and are found at both the highest and lowest levels of the achievement and educational attainment spectrum (Brydolf, 2009; Poon, 2010) as well as income spectrum (S. J. Lee, Wong, & Alvarez, 2009). “They are more likely than Whites to have graduated from college, but they are also more likely [than Whites] to have less than a high school education” (Brydolf, 2009, p. 40). There are typically more individuals contributing to an Asian American family’s household income (AALEDF, n.d.; Paisano, 1993); therefore, while Asian American families may have higher household income, they actually have lower per capita income.

There is tremendous diversity among the Asian American population, with Asia comprising more than 40 countries that are ethnically diverse (Asian & Pacific Islander Institute on Domestic Violence [APIIDV], 2011) and the Southeast Asia region alone comprising more than 11 countries (APIIDV, 2011; Fania, 2013; Um, 2006). The 2000 census counted 25 Asian groups and 24 Pacific Islander groups (Lew et al., 2005). Although the category of “Pacific Islander” was split from the “Asian or Pacific Islander” category used in the 1990 census (King, 2000), many research studies on Asian Americans, including those conducted after 2000, continue to include Pacific Islanders in their scope of work and reports.

The Asian diaspora is also large and widespread (APIIDV, 2011). Japanese immigrants arrived in the U.S. on May 7, 1843 and Chinese immigrant laborers arrived to work on the
transcontinental railroad about 20 years after that (Asian-Pacific American Heritage Month, n.d.; Batalova, 2011). Koreans, South Asian Indians, Filipinos, and other Asian groups arrived in the U.S. in the years that followed (Asia Society, 2015). Beginning in 1975, around two million Southeast Asians fled the chaotic region of Indochina and up to 70% of them were resettled in the U.S. as refugees (Fania, 2013). In recent years, Burmese refugees have made up the largest proportion of refugees resettled in the U.S. (Bridging Refugee Youth and Children’s Services [BRYCS], n.d.; Burt & Batalova, 2014; Inkpen & Igielnik, 2014). These refugees and their descendants make up the Southeast Asian American (SEAA) community in the U.S.

**Overview of the Study’s Topic**

Asian Americans are one of the fastest growing racial groups in the U.S. (Ahmad & Weller, 2014; Balón, 2004; Inkelas, 2003b; B. S. K. Kim et al., 2001; Museus & Buenavista, 2016) and in universities in the U.S. (Poon, 2010; Ting, 2000). The 2000 census counted 25 Asian groups, including, but not limited to, Asian Indian, Chinese, Filipino, Hmong, Indonesian, Japanese, Pakistani, Vietnamese, and an “Other Asian, not specified” category (Lew et al., 2005). The census also counted “24 different Pacific Islander groups, including, but not limited to, Native Hawaiian, Guamanian or Chamorro, Fijian, and Samoan, which together comprise 0.3% of the U.S. population” (Grieco, 2001, as cited in Lew et al., 2005, p. 65).

Many research studies use the terms *Asian American, Asian Pacific American (APA), Asian Pacific Islander (API)*, and *Asian American/Pacific Islander (AAPI)* interchangeably, and it is often difficult to figure out which specific data refer exclusively to Asian Americans and not Pacific Islanders. For the purpose of this study, those terms are reported as used by each individual author or group of authors whenever their work is being cited.
The American Community Survey (ACS), which replaced the long-form survey and Summary File 4 of the decennial census in 2010, collects information throughout the decade rather than once every 10 years to provide improved census statistics (Hmong National Development, Inc. [HND], 2013; Lowe, 2010; Southeast Asia Resource Action Center [SEARAC], 2011). The ACS estimated that there were 1,174,651 Southeast Asians refugees that were resettled in the U.S. between 1975 and 2010 (SEARAC, 2011). Among that population, 989,871 (85%) have since naturalized as citizens. According to the Southeast Asian Resource Action Center (SEARAC) (2011), Southeast Asian Americans include people from the countries of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, as well as the Hmong population, and they comprise about 15% of the general APA population.

Although APAs only comprise 2-3% of the total U.S. population (Humes & McKinnon, 1999, as cited in Inkelas, 2003b), 6% of college students nationwide identified as Asian American (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2000, as cited in Diamond, 2008). Aggregate data on APAs may show that APAs represent a significant share of several Ivy League and the nation’s most competitive schools (Inkelas, 2003a, 2003b). Aggregate data on APA may also show APA students to be “more likely to have attended at least four years of college by the age of 25” (Escueta & O’Brien, 1995, as cited in Inkelas, 2003a, p. 626). Furthermore, aggregate data on APA may show that almost 50% of Asian Americans have a bachelor’s degree or higher, compared to less than 30% of the overall U.S. population (SEARAC, 2011). Due to these aggregated data and statistics, APAs as a group are often stereotyped and labeled as the model minority regardless of their varying histories, cultures, racial and ethnic heritages, languages, and experiences.
The percentage of SEAAs with a bachelor’s degree, however, ranges from 13.2% for Laotian Americans to 25.5% for Vietnamese Americans (SEARAC, 2011). The poverty rates for SEAA families range from 12.2% for Laotian families to 27.4% for Hmong families, compared to 9.3% for all Asian American families and 11.3% for families in the general U.S. population. In the 2005 ACS, 50% of Vietnamese and 45% of Cambodians, Hmong, and Laotians reported that they speak English “less than very well” (Pfeifer, 2008).

Problem Statement

In spite of the growing awareness of and scholarship on the complexity of APA student experience in higher education, there is limited research on SEAAs who have come to the U.S. as refugees. The majority of the existing research on APAs focused on the structural overrepresentation and higher performance and on success indicators that have led to the aggregated APA population being labeled a “model minority.” It continues to reinforce a one-dimensional perspective of APA needs on college campuses. As a result, the importance of considering APAs as a group and SEAAs as subgroups that should be included in the discourse of historically marginalized population has been minimized and overlooked.

Although there are intragroup differences, gender role expectations and gender differences, disparate income levels, different educational levels, and dissimilar immigration status and circumstances, as well as a long history of APA oppression, aggregated data and statistics often lump all APAs together as if they have the same traits, stereotyping and labeling them as the model minority. These factors have rendered APAs and their oppression invisible, particularly for those who do not fit the “model minority” stereotype. While APAs represent one of the fastest growing populations in higher education and in the U.S., as a group, they are underserved in higher education as the misunderstood and marginalized “model minority.”
Purpose Statement

This study provides a better understanding and sheds light on the experiences and specific needs of this invisible minority and the various barriers and challenges faced by first-generation college students of Southeast Asian descent, whose families have resettled in the United States as refugees, throughout their college journey. This study also delves into the circumstances surrounding SEAA families’ forced immigration and how their refugee and resettlement experiences influenced their descendants’ college experience. Finally, this study explores the impact of community or lack thereof for SEAA students living in low ethnic concentration areas.

In addition to allowing student affairs professionals to better serve the specific and distinct needs of these students, the knowledge produced by this study assists policymakers in examining the intentions and rationale behind the policies, not just the statistics of the policies. With the knowledge produced by this study, student affairs professionals and policymakers have a better understanding and are better equipped to address the issues surrounding the lack of programs and services for SEAA students.

This phenomenological study explored the experience of first-generation college students of Southeast Asian descent in the Midwest, whose families have resettled in the United States as refugees. Specifically, this phenomenological inquiry developed a deeper understanding about the experiences of these students and the meaning of their college experience. The phenomenological exploration of these students also allowed for a deeper dive into the way in which these students’ experiences might reflect the nuance of their family’s refugee and forced migration experiences.
Potential Contributions

This study makes a number of important contributions to the student affairs profession and to higher education research. First, this study fills a gap in the research on SEAA college students whose families have resettled in the U.S. as refugees and add to the small but growing amount of literature on SEAA college students. This study also emphasizes the importance for researchers, administrators, and policymakers to disaggregate the ethnic groups under the APA umbrella to provide a deeper and clearer understanding of each subgroup and to address the diverse needs of specific APA ethnic groups (Chhuon & Hudley, 2008; Her, 2014; Maramba & Palmer, 2014; Palmer & Maramba, 2015).

Second, the findings of this study encourage student affairs professionals and higher education researchers to examine the roles that culture and non-traditional forms of capital play in the college experiences of marginalized student populations. The findings of this study implore administrators and faculty members to implement programs, services, and curriculum that help fulfill the needs of these students for cultural knowledge, cultural familiarity, cultural expression, and cultural advocacy (Maramba & Palmer, 2014). The findings of this study are used to advocate to policymakers for funding for pre-college programs that support marginalized populations that remain overlooked and underserved.

Research Questions

This study was guided by this overarching question: What is the experience of first-generation college students of Southeast Asian descent in the Midwest whose families have resettled in the United States as refugees? Three additional sub-questions guided this inquiry:
1. Where and how do these students’ cultural background and refugee or forced migration status influence their life aspirations and expectations for their college experience?

2. Where and how do these students’ cultural heritage and refugee or forced migration status influence how they view and conduct themselves as college students?

3. What is the impact of community or lack thereof for Southeast Asian American students living in a low ethnic concentration area and how has that influenced their college experience?

**Methods Overview**

This qualitative design utilized a phenomenological approach to identify “the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants” (Creswell, 2009, p. 13). A phenomenology is the “study of the world as it appears to individuals when they lay aside the prevailing understandings of those phenomena and revisit their immediate experience of the phenomena” (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007, p. 495). As a qualitative researcher, my job was to elicit a more authentic version of participants’ experience of a phenomenon, not just the common or widespread understanding of the phenomenon.

Phenomenological interviews have been quite successfully used in studies of “the challenges of identity development of refugees” (Mosselson, 2006, as cited in Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 149). This phenomenological study, therefore, was able to describe “the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, p. 57). It was also able to highlight what the participants of this study had in common while also noting where and how they also presented a range or diversity of experience.
This study utilized a criterion sample of eight SEAA undergraduate students enrolled in U.S. institutions of higher education in the Midwest. The population in this study was limited to undergraduate students who have self-identified as Southeast Asian American, are of Vietnamese, Cambodian, Lao, or Hmong descent, have attended high school in the U.S., are first-generation college students, and whose family had been accepted into the U.S. under refugee status. Criterion sampling was used because it “works well when all individuals studied represent people who have experienced the phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, p. 128) and “includes all cases that meet some criterion [and is therefore] useful for quality assurance” (Creswell, 2007, p. 127; Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 111).

This study also utilized a maximum variation sampling strategy to select participants with the most diverse variations among a larger group of potential participants that already match the study’s criteria (Creswell, 2007; Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Merriam, 2009). Snowball sampling was also employed to recruit additional participants. I asked each participant I interviewed to refer me to other potential participants who might match the criteria (Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Merriam, 2009).

**Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this study is shaped like an iceberg (see Appendix A) because the iceberg is a good metaphor for what is known and unknown about the APA and SEAA experience. The tip of the iceberg, which is only a small visible aspect of something much larger, is the portion above the water surface that most people are seeing and think they know about APAs. It represents what the aggregated and skewed data in research and the media are often saying about APAs and are typically stereotypes associated with APAs. Policy decisions are, unfortunately, often based on these skewed data and stereotypes. Some
stereotypes that are contradictory are presented side by side to show their absurdity and pointlessness.

The underwater portion represents what the aggregated and skewed data in research and the media often do not say about APAs, particularly about the SEAA community and other APAs from underprivileged backgrounds. Typically, the majority of the volume of an iceberg lies below the water. The shape, size, and volume of the underwater portion can be difficult to judge by just looking at the portion above the surface alone. This portion is divided into five categories: intragroup differences, internalization of stereotype, challenges, invisible minority, and history of and present day APA oppression. There is also a question mark in this underwater portion to represent all the other things that remain unknown about the APA and SEAA experience.

The model minority stereotype is represented by an ominous cloud with lightning bolts hanging over the iceberg, plaguing the APA population and clouding the judgment and blurring the vision of the general population. The model minority stereotype, like any other stereotype, does contain a grain of truth (Diamond, 2008; Wu & Kidder, 2006); however, it is “exaggerated, distorted, and often presented without causes and contexts” (Wu & Kidder, 2006, p. 48). The existence of a cloud with rain and thunder over an iceberg is a climatic anomaly. This represents the exaggeration and distortion which contribute to the perpetuation of the stereotype.

The conceptual framework for this study is derived from the modest but growing body of literature on APA and SEAA undergraduate students’ experiences in higher education. In spite of the growing awareness of and scholarship on the complexity of APA and SEAA student experience in higher education, there is nonetheless a scarcity of research on SEAA students from families that have resettled in the U.S. as refugees. For this reason, APAs as a group and
SEAAs as a subgroup have often been excluded from the discourse of historically marginalized population as the model minority stereotype renders APAs and their oppression invisible. According to Poon (2010), “the achievement gap framework often used in research on minority education cannot be easily applied to Asian Americans given the diverse education attainment levels among the pan-ethnic population” (p. 5).

Summary

Asian Americans are “often portrayed as a model minority because of their hard work and educational achievements, and for earning family incomes close to White Americans” (Ting, 2000, p. 442). Due to aggregated data and statistics, APAs as a group are often stereotyped and labeled as the model minority regardless of their backgrounds and experiences. In spite of the growing awareness of and scholarship on the complexity of APA student experience in higher education, there is limited research on SEAAs who have come to the U.S. as refugees, the circumstances surrounding their forced migration, and how their immigration status affects their access to programs and services. The majority of the existing research focused on the structural overrepresentation and higher performance and on success indicators that have led to the aggregated APA population being labeled a “model minority” and continues to reinforce a one-dimensional perspective of APA needs on college campuses. As a result, the importance of considering APAs as a group and as SEAAs as subgroups that should be included in the discourse of historically marginalized population has been minimized and overlooked.

This phenomenological study explored the college experience of first-generation college students of Southeast Asian descent in the Midwest, whose families have resettled in the U.S. as refugees. Specifically, this phenomenological inquiry developed a deeper understanding about the experiences of these students and the meaning of their college experience. The
phenomenological exploration of these students also allowed for a deeper dive into the way in which these students’ experiences might reflect the nuance of their family’s refugee and forced migration experiences.

This study was guided by this overarching question: What is the college experience of first-generation college students of Southeast Asian descent in the Midwest whose family have resettled in the United States as refugees? This study utilized a criterion sample of SEAA students enrolled in U.S. institutions of higher education in the Midwest. A semi-structured in-depth interview process provided me, the researcher, with the parameters that specifically addressed the research topic but at the same time the flexibility to explore and discover new and unexpected sources of information. The conceptual framework for this study, which uses an iceberg as a metaphor for what is known or unknown about the APA and SEAA experience, is derived from the modest but growing body of literature on APA and SEAA undergraduate students’ experiences in higher education.
CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Background

Asian or Asian American college students are often perceived by the general population to be smart, good at math, nerdy, quiet, and model students. Looking at the aggregated and skewed data and statistics, these stereotypes come as no surprise. As a group, Asian Americans may seem to have exceptionally high educational attainment and economic mobility (Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund [AALDEF], n.d.; Kibria, 1999; B. S. K. Kim, Yang, Atkinson, Wolfe, & Hong, 2001; Osajima, 1995; Yeh, 2005). As a group, Asian Americans are also “often portrayed as a model minority because of their hard work and educational achievements, and for earning family incomes close to White Americans” (Ting, 2000, p. 442). This stereotype positioned Asian Americans as the model of success in achieving the American Dream that other racial minorities should follow (Ngo & Lee, 2007).

The model minority stereotype is problematic because it conceals important distinctions between groups, presenting an oversimplified portrayal of Asian Americans as a homogenous group (Lew, Chang, & Wang, 2005), hiding a larger reality (AALDEF, n.d.), and masking the underperformance of Asian Americans who are not as well off academically, socially, and economically (AALDEF, n.d.; King, 2000; Nance, 2007). According to Poon (2010), “the achievement gap framework often used in research on minority education cannot be easily applied to Asian Americans given the diverse education attainment levels among the pan-ethnic
population” (p. 5). The claim that all Asian Americans are model minorities is based on aggregated and skewed data and statistics (Balón, 2004; S. M. Lee, 2002; Yoo, Burrola, & Steger, 2010) due to small sample size or for convenience (Lew et al., 2005), lumping together unique ethnic groups as if they have the same traits (Brydolf, 2009; B. S. K. Kim et al., 2001; King, 2000).

In reality, various Asian Americans subgroups face significant obstacles to academic success (Chou & Feagin, 2010) and are found at both the highest and lowest levels of the achievement and educational attainment spectrum (Brydolf, 2009; Poon, 2010) as well as income spectrum (S. J. Lee, Wong, & Alvarez, 2009). There is tremendous diversity among the Asian American population, with Asia comprising more than 40 countries that are ethnically diverse (Asian & Pacific Islander Institute on Domestic Violence [APIIDV], 2011) and the Southeast Asia region alone comprising more than 11 countries (APIIDV, 2011; Fania, 2013; Um, 2006). The Asian diaspora is also large and widespread (APIIDV, 2011). Beginning in 1975, around two million Southeast Asians fled the chaotic region of Indochina and up to 70% of them were resettled in the U.S. as refugees (Fania, 2013). These refugees and their descendants make up the Southeast Asian American (SEAA) community in the U.S.

**Asian Pacific Americans**

*Asian Pacific* is a broad term that includes the whole Asian continent and the Pacific islands of Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia (Asian-Pacific American Heritage Month, n.d.). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2013), an *Asian* person is defined as one who has origins in “the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent” (para. 5). A *Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander* (NPHI) person is defined as one who has origins in “any of the original peoples of Hawaii, Guam, Samoa, or other Pacific Islands” (para. 6, U.S. Census Bureau, 2013).
In 2000, NPHI scholars and activists successfully convinced the U.S. Census Bureau to split the category of “Pacific Islander” from the “Asian or Pacific Islander” category used in 1990, creating a new racial category of “Native Hawaiians and Other Pacific Islanders” (King, 2000). The 2000 census was also the first time when individuals had the option to report more than one race (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013).

This U.S. Census Bureau definition of Asian seems to exclude people who have origins in Central Asia and Western Asia. Per U.S. Census Bureau (2013) definition, people of the Middle East, which is a transcontinental region in Western Asia, are considered White. The U.S. Census Bureau has no explicit guidelines for classifying people of Central Asia. The U.S. Census Bureau (2013), however, emphasized that “an individual’s response to the race question is based upon self-identification” (para. 7) and that the racial categories included “generally reflect a social definition of race recognized in this country and not an attempt to define race biologically, anthropologically, or genetically” (para. 10).

Even though the panethnic terms Asian American, Asian Pacific American (APA), Asian Pacific Islander (API), and Asian American/Pacific Islander (AAPI) are not interchangeable terms, many research studies, even those conducted after 2000, still use the terms interchangeably, often to imply that Pacific Islander populations are included (Poon et al., 2015). It is often difficult to figure out which specific data refer exclusively to Pacific Islanders and which research study have meaningfully included Pacific Islanders. This is problematic because NPHIs have distinct voices and experiences from Asian Americans. For the purpose of this paper, whenever each individual author or group of authors are cited, the specific terms used in that particular publication will be used in this paper.
Twenty-three specific AAPI student subgroups are counted by the University of California system alone while the AAPI classification “can include as many as 50 different racial and ethnic groups” (Brydolf, 2009, p. 40). The 1990 census recognized 57 distinct ethnic groups that fall under the Asian or Pacific Islander category (Yeh, 2004). After the creation of the new NPHI category, the 2000 census counted 25 Asian groups, including, but not limited to, Asian Indian, Chinese, Filipino, Hmong, Indonesian, Japanese, Pakistani, Vietnamese, and an "Other Asian, not specified" category (Lew et al., 2005). The census also counted “24 different Pacific Islander groups, including, but not limited to, Native Hawaiian, Guamanian or Chamorro, Fijian, and Samoan, which together comprise 0.3% of the U.S. population” (Grieco, 2001, as cited in Lew et al., 2005, p. 65).

Asian Americans are one of the fastest growing racial groups in the U.S. (Ahmad & Weller, 2014; Balón, 2004; Inkelas, 2003b; B. S. K. Kim et al., 2001; Museus & Buenavista, 2016) and in universities in the U.S. (Poon, 2010; Ting, 2000). The U.S. Census Bureau reported that the number of Asian Pacific Islanders in the U.S. has seen a 45% increase in 10 years, from 7.3 million in 1990 to 10.6 million in 2000 (Nance, 2007a). An earlier report stated that Asian Pacific Americans make up 2-3% of the total U.S. population (Humes & McKinnon, 1999, as cited in Inkelas, 2003b). According to a more recent report, in 2004, Asian Americans represent 4% of the U.S. population (Dundes, Cho, & Kwak, 2009; Yeh, 2004). According to another report, there are 11.9 million Asian Americans, who make up 4.2% of the U.S. population, living in the U.S. (Lew et al., 2005). As of 2009, over 10.6 million Asian immigrants were living in the U.S. (Batalova, 2011).

There are over two million Asian Americans living in the Midwest and they make up 3% of the population in the Midwest. Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, and Ohio are four states in the
Midwest that are home to more than 225,000 Asian Americans (APIIDV, 2011). Since the first Chinese railroad workers resettled in Chicago in the late 19th century, the Midwest has become a popular resettlement destination for different Asian Americans subgroups (National Asian Pacific Center on Aging [NAPCA], 2012). Over time, these settlements have created ethnic communities and clusters of Asian Americans throughout the Midwest.

**Overview of Asian Pacific American Immigration History**

Asian Americans have a unique immigration history to America and this has had a considerable impact on their experience in this country. Asian immigrants have played an integral role in the development of this country, recruited to work in various sectors ranging from mining, construction, and factory work to farming and fishing (Asia Society, 2015). Japanese immigrants first arrived in the U.S. on May 7, 1843 (Asian-Pacific American Heritage Month, n.d.; Batalova, 2011). About 20 years later, Chinese immigrant laborers arrived to work on the transcontinental railroad that was completed on May 10, 1869. These early immigrants, along with immigrants from the Philippines, Korea, and India, were generally low-wage laborers who not only faced discrimination and exploitation, but also severe immigration restrictions (Lew et al., 2005).

For over 160 years, Asian immigrants were not allowed to become naturalized U.S. citizens or to bring their family members into the U.S. (National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium [NAPALC], n.d.a). While Africans and people of African descent became eligible for citizenship through the 1870 Naturalization Act, the same law excluded Chinese from citizenship and forbade the wives of laborers from entering the U.S. In 1882, Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, which prohibited the admission of Chinese laborers until it was repealed in 1943. In 1907, the Gentlemen’s Agreement also limited Japanese immigration.
Three years later, in 1910, the U.S. Supreme Court extended the 1870 Naturalization Act to all other Asians, excluding them from citizenship.

The Immigration Act of 1917 further restricted immigration from the Asia-Pacific region (NAPALC, n.d.a). In 1922, Congress passed the Cable Act, which stated that women who married aliens ineligible for citizenship would lose their American citizenship. In *Ozawa v. United States* (1922), the U.S. Supreme Court also ruled that Asian immigrants could not become citizens because they were not White (Chou & Feagin, 2010). It was not until the mid-1940s that certain Asian ethnic groups were declared to be eligible for citizenship (NAPALC, n.d.a). The last of the laws prohibiting Asian immigrants from becoming naturalized citizens were only repealed in 1952. Only through the 1965 Immigration Act that the demography of APAs in the U.S. changed significantly (Chou & Feagin, 2010), allowing “a greater number of educationally and economically successful Asian American professionals who could ‘contribute’ to the American society” (Takaki, 1993, as cited in Yoo et al., 2010, p. 115) to immigrate to the U.S. At around the same time, the model minority image was concocted.

**The Model Minority Stereotype**

The term “model minority” goes back to the 1960s (Brydolf, 2009; Poon et al., 2015). The image of the model minority gained popularity in the 1960s when the academic and economic successes of Japanese Americans and Chinese Americans were highlighted by the media (Her, 2014). A lot of academic research, focused primarily on East Asians (Diamond, 2008; Yeh, 2005), also support “the image of Asian American students as model minorities” (Ngo & Lee, 2007, p. 416).

The concept of the model minority was “introduced as a divisive tool against African, Latino, and Native American communities during civil rights, labor rights, identity, and
immigration reform protests” (Iwamoto & Liu, 2009) to pit them against Asian Americans (Her, 2014). This “middleman minority notion” (Poon et al., 2015, p. 5) is used to implicate Asian Americans as honorary Whites, discipline other racially minoritized groups, and maintain White dominance. Although some economic privileges come with this status, it does not come with political and social power.

In early 1966, William Petersen of New York Times Magazine first coined the term to describe Japanese Americans and commend them for their success through individual effort and hard work in an article titled “Success Story, Japanese-American Style” (Diamond, 2008; C. J. Kim, 1999; McGowan & Lindgren, 2006; Yoo, Burrola, & Steger, 2010). A social demographer, Petersen believed that the “success and achievement of Asian Americans paralleled those of the Jewish Americans” (P. N. Nguyen, 2004, para. 7), another formerly marginalized group who had succeeded because of hard work and determination despite past discrimination.

Later that year, the U.S. News & World Report published an article titled “Success Story of One Minority Group in America,” lauding Chinese Americans as the model minority who have achieved success due to their exemplary cultural values (Chou & Feagin, 2010; C. J. Kim, 1999; McGowan & Lindgren, 2006). This stereotype was later reinforced by the media (Yeh, 2004) and generalized to all Asian ethnic groups (C. J. Kim, 1999; McGowan & Lindgren, 2006; Yeh, 2004; Yoo et al., 2010).

Model minority defined. The model minority stereotype may be summarized as “the belief that Asian Americans, through their hard work, intelligence, and emphasis on education and achievement, have been successful in American society” (McGowan & Lindgren, 2006, p. 331). By promoting the idea of meritocracy, the dominant group was able to promote the belief
that racism was not the reason why certain marginalized groups were not able to achieve success (Her, 2014). Those problem groups should look at this complying minority as a role model if they want to achieve success (P. N. Nguyen, 2004). Asian Americans are “often portrayed as a model minority because of their hard work and educational achievements, and for earning family incomes close to White Americans” (Ting, 2000, p. 442). In fact, they are perceived to be doing so well academically that they are actually overrepresented in higher education (Her, 2014).

As a group, Asian Americans are assumed to have achieved success through merit and adherence to traditional Asian cultural values (Osajima, 1995), to be “inherently intelligent” (Hentoff, 2003, p. 34), to be good students capable of high academic performance, to be “culturally predisposed to socioeconomic achievements” (Kibria, 1999, p. 31), and to believe in and have achieved the American dream (Yoo et al., 2010). According to this stereotype, Asian Americans are also “supposed to be engineers, scientists, and doctors” (Wu, 2002, p. B12). Their success provides a “formula for success” (Osajima, 1995, p. 41) that other less successful people of color groups should strive to follow.

**Stereotype fact-checked.** The model minority stereotype, like any other stereotype, does contain a grain of truth (Diamond, 2008; Wu & Kidder, 2006); however, it is “exaggerated, distorted, and often presented without causes and contexts” (Wu & Kidder, 2006, p. 48). This mostly White-generated definition of success usually focuses on areas of educational and income achievements, ignoring other important areas of Asian American lives (Chou & Feagin, 2010). While “there are exceptional Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders who are extremely accomplished...it is simply not true that they are typical” (Brydolf, 2009, p. 40).

The claim that all Asian Americans are model minorities is based on aggregated data and statistics (Balón, 2004; S. M. Lee, 2002; Yoo et al., 2010) due to small sample size or for
convenience, (Lew et al., 2005), lumping together unique ethnic groups as if they have the same traits (Brydolf, 2009; B. S. K. Kim et al., 2001; King, 2000). It also conceals important distinctions between groups, presents an oversimplified portrayal of Asian Americans as a homogenous group (Lew et al., 2005), and hides a larger reality (AALDEF, n.d.). While Asian Americans may have higher educational attainment, they have lower per capita income compared to Whites and are more likely than Whites to live below the poverty line (Ying et al., 2001).

Some reports even lump together Asian American students and Asian international students, who are more motivated to complete a degree because they have come to the U.S. with “the specific goal of attaining an education” (Yeh, 2004, p. 84). Asian international students earned 18% of all U.S. doctoral degrees in 1997, compared to only 3% of APAs (Yeh, 2004). Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders are also often lumped together with Asian Americans (Schmidt, 2003), rendering them invisible and depriving them of the attention that they deserve (King, 2000). Because of the racial and linguistic complexity of APAs as well as their different origins, cultures, histories, socialization processes, and learning styles, it could be detrimental to lump different groups together in a single racial category or mistake one group’s experience to be representative of all other APA groups (Her, 2014).

**Apparent educational and economic success.** At first glance, as a group, Asian Americans seem to have exceptionally high educational attainment and economic mobility (AALDEF, n.d.; Kibria, 1999; B. S. K. Kim et al., 2001; Osajima, 1995; Yeh, 2005). Figures frequently imply that Asian Americans are overrepresented in and have overtaken or invaded institutions of higher education (AALDEF, n.d.; Chang, 2008; Rubin, 2008; Ting, 2000). More than 42% of Asian Americans over the age of 25 have a college degree compared with 26% for
non-Hispanic Whites (NCES, n.d., as cited in S. M. Lee, 2002). Furthermore, 22.7% of Asian/Pacific Islanders held a post-bachelor’s degree in 1992 (Ying et al., 2001) while more than 8% of the doctorates conferred by U.S. institutions of higher education between 1994 and 1995 were earned by Asian Americans (NCES, n.d., as cited in S. M. Lee, 2002).

Asian Americans also earn family incomes that are close to Whites (Ting, 2000). Since the late 1980s, Asian families have consistently had median household incomes that are higher than all other races (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2010). According to the 1990 census, in 1989, the national per capita income was $14,143 while the Asian per capita income was $13,806 (Paisano, 1993). Asian families, however, had higher median household incomes in 1989 than all other families ($41,583 compared to $35,225). The 2000 census showed that Asian families still had higher median household incomes ($59,300) than all other families ($50,000) (Reeves & Bennett, 2004). A decade later, in 2009, Asian families had median household incomes of $65,469 compared with $54,461 for non-Hispanic White families and $49,777 for all other families (DeNavas et al., 2010).

**Factors affecting income levels.** There are several ways to look at and compare income-based data. There is also a subtle but important differences between household income, family income, median income, and per capita income, for example. *Per capita income* refers to the “average [income] obtained by dividing aggregate income by total population of an area” (Southeast Asia Resource Action Center [SEARAC], 2011, p. 20). *Median income* is obtained by dividing the “income distribution into two equal groups, one having incomes above the median, and the other having incomes below the median” (SEARAC, 2011, p. 20). A *household* “includes all the people who occupy a housing unit as their usual place of residence” (SEARAC, 2011, p. 20) and they may or may not be related to one another. A *family household* on the other
hand “includes a householder and one or more people living in the same household who are related to the householder by birth, marriage, or adoption” (SEARAC, 2011, p. 20).

What reports typically do not show is the fact that “while Asian Americans may have household incomes equal to or greater than Whites, they also have…more individuals contributing to a family’s household income” (AALDEF, n.d.); therefore, they may have a higher household income but not per capita income. The average Asian American family size and household size are 3.59 and 3.08 respectively, compared to the average overall U.S. family size and household size of 3.23 and 2.63 respectively (SEARAC, 2011). More Asian family members are in the workforce compared to other races, with 20% of all Asian families having three or more workers in the family (Paisano, 1993). Asian Americans are also concentrated in the West Coast and other high-cost urban areas in the U.S. that have a higher cost of living and inflated income (Chou & Feagin, 2010; S. J. Lee et al., 2009).

**Impacts and Consequences of the Model Minority Stereotype**

The designation of Asian Americans as the model minority “contains the premise that people can be arranged by racial group and…that the differences between racial groups are more significant than either the similarities between racial groups or the differences within them” (Wu, n.d., as cited in McGowan & Lindgren, 2006, p. 375). It may also lead to increased anti-immigration sentiments (McGowan & Lindgren, 2006) and hostility from other groups (Poon et al., 2015). By pitting different communities against one another (Osajima, 1995), Whites can “divide and conquer racial minority groups…[and] dissipate racial minorities’ collective power when America becomes ‘majority minority’” (McGowan & Lindgren, 2006, p. 43).

Asian critical scholars worry that the model minority stereotype is designed to drive a wedge between and sow resentment and jealousy among people of color groups (Brydolf, 2009;
McGowan & Lindgren, 2006; Schmidt, 2008). A poll conducted by “New America Media, the nation’s largest collaboration of news media…revealed that, overwhelmingly, [Asian Americans, African Americans, and Hispanics] are more trusting of Whites than [of] each other” (Nealy, 2008, p. 15) and that they have deep-seated mistrust for one another. This tension can be attributed to each group’s belief in erroneous stereotypes about the other groups. Furthermore, “stereotyping, whether positive or negative, can [have] damaging” (Rubin, 2008, p. 31) effects on everyone.

**How it affects Asian Pacific Americans.** Being Asian American does not mean simply fitting into a U.S. Census Bureau racial category. Dhingra (2003) defined being Asian American as “having learned mainstream norms of communication, unlike other minorities who have rejected ‘American culture’ and being ‘proper’” (p. 129). The negative experiences and beliefs of APA students may be viewed as a threat to their sense of social identity, resulting in disidentification and decrease in their ethnic group pride (Yoo et al., 2010).

Kibria (1999) described the perspective in which Asian American is understood as “stifling, claustrophobic, and contradictory in an essential sense to individuality” (p. 32). Furthermore, Chou and Feagin (2010) believed that Asian Americans lack the “powerful group memory” (p. 24) that African Americans and Latinos share. Because of these reasons, APA students may resist the pressure to belong to pan-Asian or ethnic communities on campus in order to affirm their individuality (Kibria, 1999; Osajima, 1995).

Asian Americans find themselves “low on the racial hierarchy because their oppression is often discounted” (Goodwin, 2003, p. 15). While the model minority stereotype “suggests that racism is no longer a problem for Asian Americans” (Osajima, 1995, p. 42) or downplays the existence or impact of racism (Her, 2014), this does not mean that APA students are “immune
from racial hostility on campus” (Kibria, 1999, p. 32) or do not face any problems. In addition to being excluded from programs and services intended for underserved populations (Her, 2014), APAs may also feel distant from other racial minorities (Dhingra, 2003) against whom they are often pitted (Osajima, 1995; Ying et al., 2001).

Perpetual foreigner syndrome. At the same time, Asian Americans also face backlash among Whites who resent their academic success (Dundes et al., 2009). No matter what, they will be denied certain privileges that Whites, particularly White men, have always had (Dhingra, 2003). Furthermore, since the success of APAs is often attributed to their “ongoing cultural distinctiveness” (C. J. Kim, 1999, p. 118), they are perceived as perpetually foreign (Chou & Feagin, 2010; Kibria, 1999; C. J. Kim, 1999; Wu, 2002), inassimilable into White society (Chou & Feagin, 2010; C. J. Kim, 1999), lacking in social skills (Kibria, 1999), and lacking in credibility (Wu, 2002). This perpetual foreigner syndrome continues to plague Asian Americans no matter how many generations their families have been in the U.S. (Wu, 2002).

Asian Americans find their patriotism and citizenship constantly challenged (Chou & Feagin, 2010), often being told to return to wherever they came from whenever they broach the subject of discrimination (Wu, 2002). In times of economic downturn or national crisis, they are often “marked as [the] ‘foreign’ scapegoats” (Dhingra, 2003, p. 119). Referring to the World War II internment of Japanese Americans, the Los Angeles Times declared, “a viper is nonetheless a viper wherever the egg is hatched—so a Japanese American, born of Japanese parents, grows up to be Japanese, not an American” (C. J. Kim, 1999, p. 166). In another example, media commentators disguised ostracism as praise when they compared fourth-generation, native-born Japanese American, Kristi Yamaguchi, with Japanese Midori Ito in the 1992 Olympic figure skating competition, pronouncing, “Yamaguchi’s and Ito’s ‘bloodlines both
stretch back, pure and simple, to the same, soft, cherry-blossom days on the one bold little island of Honshu”” (C. J. Kim, 1999, p. 126).

**Struggles remain obscure.** The model minority stereotype “obsures the plights of many struggling APAs” (McGowan & Lindgren, 2006, p. 336) who do not fit the model minority mold (Her, 2014), as well as the experiences of Pacific Islanders, whose racialized experiences are not directly tied to the model minority terminology (Poon et al., 2015). “Those in the general public who hold positive model minority stereotypes of APAs as smarter, harder working, or richer than other minorities tend to be complacent about any discrimination APAs face” (McGowan & Lindgren, 2006, p. 374), oblivious to the long history of anti-Asian laws and racial discrimination against APAs in the form of “racial triangulation (defining the alien),…exclusion (keeping the alien out), and internment (rounding up the alien within)” (C. J. Kim, 1999, p. 115). Asian American students who need access to academic support programs and services to help them successfully navigate their college journey are often overlooked and excluded from these types of programs and services (Her, 2014).

The model minority stereotype is also considered by many Asian critical scholars to be “just a modern version of the fear of the ‘Yellow Peril’ that animated the exclusionary and discriminatory laws of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” (McGowan & Lindgren, 2006, p. 343). In addition, APAs students are often portrayed as affirmative action victims (McGowan & Lindgren, 2006; Wu & Kidder, 2006) and “used as a pawn in the affirmative action debate” (Schmidt, 2003, p. A24), often without their knowledge or consent.

Since “Asian Americans only receive praise when they [stay] out of the way” (Dhingra, 2003, p. 125) and not complain about ill-treatment, the model minority stereotype could hinder their overall achievements and limit their rights and authority. According to the stereotype,
Asian Americans are more concerned about getting ahead than making headlines (C. J. Kim, 1999) or getting involved in politics and with social justice activities. Asian American students, therefore, lack adequate Asian American role models in leadership positions and may be less likely to seek opportunities to hone their leadership skills or pursue leadership positions, especially because “Asian Americans are racialized within the American society” (Kwon, 2009, p. 59) to be unfit leaders.

**Black-White binary.** Asian Americans “continue to occupy a liminal space in the traditional Black-White racial framework of U.S. society” (Poon, 2010, p. 5). C. J. Kim (1999) claimed that “Asian Americans have been triangulated vis-à-vis Blacks and Whites, or located in the field of racial positions with reference to these other points” (p. 107), and that two types of processes – “relative valorization” and “civic ostracism” work in complementary fashion to maintain this position and the historical persistence of the racial triangulation. According to C. J. Kim (1999), when Chinese immigrants first entered the U.S. in the mid-1800s, they “did not fit into the prevailing bipolar racial framework” (p. 109) but were considered superior to Blacks; therefore, a new racial category had to be constructed.

Osajima (1995) shared a similar view, saying that “the focus of success places Asian Americans in an awkward position vis-à-vis American race relations” (p. 42). He added that the model minority stereotype, along with the Black-White binary, brand APAs as the exception and pitted them against “underqualified racial minorities (i.e., African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans)” (Osajima, 1995, p. 42). This strategy puts APAs and Blacks, as well as other racial minorities, “on the opposite sides of the fence” (C. J. Kim, 1999, p. 123).
Issues and Challenges Facing Asian Pacific Americans

The model minority stereotype masks the underperformance of APAs who are not as well off academically, socially, and economically (AALDEF, n.d.; King, 2000; Nance, 2007b). The stereotype overlooks many issues related to APAs, including lower educational attainment, limited career opportunities, higher poverty rates, factors that affect income levels, intragroup differences, gender role expectations and gender differences, and the history of Asian American oppression. Issues that impact Asian Americans in unique ways, such as poverty, health disparities, and immigration struggles, often go underreported or unreported (Cheney-Rice, 2015). These issues are shaped by their countries of origin, the time period of their arrival, and circumstances surrounding their immigration to the U.S.

The Center for Economic Opportunity reported that the largest group living in poverty in New York City is Asian American (Boddie, 2015). A study by the National Coalition for Asian Pacific American Community Development also revealed that the Asian American poverty rate grew by 38% from 2007 to 2011. Boddie (2015) asserted that reports published by the Pew Research Center have failed to paint a more nuanced picture of childhood poverty among Asian American children. This is because their poverty is masked by a relatively high median income of the aggregated Asian American population. If disaggregated, poverty statistics will reveal that certain Asian American subgroups have the highest poverty rates and most rapidly growing poverty rates among all racial and ethnic groups in the U.S.

According to Poon (2010), “the achievement gap framework often used in research on minority education cannot be easily applied to Asian Americans given the diverse education attainment levels among the pan-ethnic population” (p. 5). When all Asians are lumped together and their diversity is not recognized, certain groups become marginalized and are rendered
invisible (Her, 2014). In reality, Asian Americans in numerous groups face significant obstacles to academic success (Chou & Feagin, 2010) and are found at both the highest and lowest levels of the achievement and educational attainment spectrum (Brydolf, 2009; Poon, 2010). “They are more likely than Whites to have graduated from college, but they are also more likely [than Whites] to have less than a high school education” (Brydolf, 2009, p. 40).

Poon et al. (2015), however, cautioned against using the low educational attainment among certain Asian American groups to counter the model minority stereotype, as this could in turn result in those groups being stereotyped as the low-achieving Asian groups and continues to reinforce the stereotype that other Asian groups are the high-achieving Asian groups. It is important for scholars to shift the focus away from countering the model minority stereotype to addressing the system that works to maintain White dominance in higher education and to understanding the unique perspectives and experiences of the diverse AAPI populations.

**Barriers to higher education.** Museus and Buenavista’s (2016) study found many AAPI high school students to lack access to information about college, particularly about financial aid options. Thirty-one percent of the participants reported that they did not have someone on whom they could rely to answer their questions about college or to support them in their college planning process. The completion of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) was also a complicated and challenging process for AAPI high school students, as they had trouble obtaining the information required to fill out the application. As a result, these students were unable to complete and submit their FAFSA application by the deadline. AAPI students also enter college without adequate preparation and financial resources (Chaudhari, Chan, & Ha, 2013).
**Language barrier and limited career opportunities.** Many Asian Americans speak English as a second language (Brydolf, 2009; Hentoff, 2003; Osajima, 1995). The U.S. Census Bureau reported in 2001 that “88% of Asian students have at least one immigrant parent, compared to 65% for Hispanics” (Hentoff, 2003, p. 34). Over one-third of the Asian population in California has limited English proficiency and 15% of AAPI students are English learners (Brydolf, 2009).

Many also have problems speaking English (Ting, 2000; Yeh, 2005), with 69% of Laotians, 63% of Hmong, and 59% of Cambodians reporting that they do not speak English well (Osajima, 1995). While many immigrants “have enough command of the English language to become citizens,…there is a language barrier for more complex tasks, such as understanding a voting ballot or visiting the doctor” (Nance, 2007a, p. 9). In order to avoid language difficulties, APA immigrant students may stay away from courses that depend heavily on writing and English fluency, deciding to major in fields like mathematics and science instead (Lew et al., 2005).

**Glass ceiling.** Due to the glass ceiling, Asian Americans workers make less money and receive fewer promotions than Whites with the same level of educational attainment (AALDEF, n.d.; Chou & Feagin, 2010; Dhingra, 2003; Kwon, 2009; S. M. Lee, 2002; S. J. Lee et al., 2009; MgGowan & Lindgren, 2006). Asian Americans are often passed over for promotion and higher-level managerial jobs due to the stereotype of Asian Americans as diligent workers but poor leaders who are too passive to complain (Iwamoto & Liu, 2009). Asian Americans often have to overachieve to reach the same level of success as White Americans (Chou & Feagin, 2010), further reinforcing the stereotype of overachiever.
**Intragroup differences.** The educational and economic success achieved by Asian Americans “may actually be reflective of resources and achievements that were obtained prior to their immigration into the United States” (S. J. Lee et al., 2009, p. 73). Some immigrants arrive in the U.S. already equipped with resources that could positively influence their success. In general, Asian American students whose parents are highly-educated, speak English fluently, and are professionals will have different and often more resources and higher expectations from their parents compared to Asian American students whose parents have lower level of educational attainment, do not speak English fluently, and are rural laborers (S. J. Lee et al., 2009). Many Asian immigrants actually fall into the latter category. Recent Asian Indian and Taiwanese immigrants, for example, come to this country with a college degree already in hand while Cambodian and Laotian immigrants come to this country as refugees and asylum seekers (Brydolf, 2009; Diamond, 2008; S. J. Lee et al., 2009; Soodjinda, 2009). Chinese immigrants from the Guangdong Province and Fujian Province are also often rural laborers with lower level of educational attainment (S. J. Lee et al., 2009).

**Refugees and asylees.** In addition to having lower educational attainment and income levels, many recent Asian immigrants, particularly those from Southeast Asia, are refugees and asylum seekers with less education and fewer resources (Brydolf, 2009; Diamond, 2008; Soodjinda, 2009). They may experience complex problems ranging from drug use and alcohol abuse to psychological and emotional problems (Hickey, 2005). Most of the new immigrants are not only first-generation college students, but may also have never attended school before (Brydolf, 2009). These “involuntary migrant minorities have been treated as permanent members of a lower caste [who]…do not believe that educational institution serves as a viable
means for their upward mobility” (Ying et al., 2001, p. 61). They have been looked down upon by Whites and also shunned other higher status Asians (Lew et al., 2005; Yeh, 2004).

Similarly, Pacific Islanders such as Native Hawaiians, Tongans, Samoans, Guamanians, and Micronesians are also more likely to be “refugees or involuntary immigrants who may not have had exposure to education, even in their own countries” (Yeh, 2005, p. 84) and are less economically advantaged compared to Asian Americans (King, 2000). Although they are often lumped together with Asian Americans in research studies, Pacific Islanders, particularly Native Hawaiians, have a different immigration status and historical relationship to the U.S. government from that of Asian Americans (King, 2000; Lew et al., 2005). Unlike Asian Americans who had immigrated to the U.S., Native Hawaiians were instead “subjected to a history of colonization” (King, 2000, p. 197) by European settlers very much like Native Americans.

Undocumented immigrants. The Pew Hispanic Center estimated that there were 1.3 undocumented Asians in the U.S. in 2010 (Batalova, 2011). They accounted for 11% of the total 11.2 million estimated undocumented immigrants in the U.S. According to the AAPI Data project, in 2011, one in every eight Asian immigrants was undocumented (Cheney-Rice, 2015). By 2013, that number had grown to 1.5 million. In states like New York and Virginia, undocumented Asians made up one-quarter of the undocumented population of those states.

Undocumented immigrants are at a high risk for wage theft, poor treatment, harassment, health and safety violations at work, and related abuses from employers, live in constant fear of deportation or homelessness, and have limited access to education resources (Cheney-Rice, 2015; Lake Snell Perry Mermin/Decision Research [LSPM/DR], 2006). Most undocumented immigrants lack health insurance as well as safe and affordable housing in their communities (LSPM/DR, 2006).
**Cultural differences.** Not all Asians have the same cultural practices (P. N. Nguyen, 2004). B. S. K. Kim et al. (2001) found differences between Filipino Americans and Chinese, Japanese, and Korean Americans with regard to their level of adherence to each of the six Asian cultural value dimensions on the Asian Values Scale (AVS). They attributed these differences to different religious influences and the colonization history of the Philippines. Espiritu (1992) also pointed out that Filipinos “have long felt that their concerns have been marginalized and neglected by the broader Asian American movement which has been dominated by Japanese and Chinese Americans” (as cited in Osajima, 1995, p. 47).

The focus on East Asians, who are often stereotyped and labeled as a model minority, not only diverts “higher education’s attention away from the educational and financial needs of more recent immigrants and refugees” (Liang, Ting, & Teraguchi, 2001, para. 3), but also places an inordinate amount of pressure on East Asians. The cultural grouping of Asian Americans could also cause confusion and ambiguity among SEAA students, who are already prone to “feeling lost amidst the collective Asian American identity as a whole” (P. N. Nguyen, 2004, para. 1). To better understand the college persistence and specific needs of AAPI students and the AAPI population, data and statistics for this population should be “disaggregated by criteria such as ethnicity, English proficiency, and generation in the U.S.” (Yeh, 2005, p. 82).

**Gender role expectations and gender differences.** There are different and intense gendered stereotypes associated with Asian men and Asian women (Balón, 2004). Asian men are often portrayed as the “‘Yellow Peril’ bent on accumulating economic and political power, while, conversely, others depict them as asexual and passive” (Dhingra, 2003, p. 119), subordinate and unfit for the role of a leader (Balón, 2009), or even feminine (Kwon, 2009). The history of emasculation of Asian American men can be traced back to the late 1800s and early
1900s, when Asian laborers were ridiculed for performing “women’s work” such as cooking, laundering, and domestic duties” (Chua & Fujino, 1999, as cited in Iwamoto & Liu, 2009).

Asian women, on the other hand, are often depicted as “hyper-sexual, exotic, and manipulative or as submissive servants” (Dhingra, 2003, p. 119). While they are often portrayed as “overly feminine…sexual creatures” (Balón, 2009, p. 36), they are also sometimes admonished for being unfeminine and labeled as the “cunning ‘Dragon Lady’” (Espiritu, 1997, as cited in Balón, 2009, p. 36). Regardless of these stereotypes, APA men are often more privileged within the APA community (Balón, 2009).

There are different gender role expectations for Asian men and Asian women as well. According to Dundes et al. (2009), Asian females are “twice as likely to admit parental influence in where they attend college” (56% compared with 28% of Asian males) and the “type of graduate school preferred” (58% compared with 31%) (p. 141). Meanwhile, the APA men in Balón’s (2004) study “believe[d] more strongly that they [were] more empowered than APA women to make a difference in their community” (p. 149). Furthermore, Ngo and Lee (2007) also found gender to be a salient factor for SEAA families, supporting the findings of Yeh (2004), who found that “young women from some ethnic groups are encouraged to leave college early in order to marry and have children” (p. 88).

Cohen (2007) found that there is a much higher suicide rate among Asian women who tend to internalize their frustrations more than Asian men. For Asian American women in the 15 to 24 age range, suicide is the second leading cause of death and compared to women in other racial groups, they also have the highest suicide rate (Cohen, 2007). Depression affects Asian American girls as young as those in the fifth grade. In addition to the pressure associated with living up to the model minority image and conforming to the White-dominated culture (Chou &
Feagin, 2010), Asian girls and young women may also have low self-image as they try to measure up against the White standard of beauty (Cohen, 2007).

The disproportionate representation of men in higher education leadership positions within the Asian and Asian American umbrella group not only masks the underrepresentation of Asian and Asian American women, but also results in the severe shortage of mentors and positive role models for these women and for female students of Asian descent. Asian women continue to be underrepresented in higher education as full-time faculty and administrators in spite of the increase in the number of Asian women earning undergraduate and graduate degrees. Although women made up 44% of higher education faculty in 1999, Asian Americans only represent 5% of higher education faculty (NCES, 1999, as cited in S. M. Lee, 2002). Asian males also significantly outnumber Asian females in the science, mathematics, and engineering fields and the tenure rates in higher education for women are only 52%, compared to 67% for Asian men, 57% for Hispanic women, 61% for White women, and 78% for White men (Goldberg, 1997, as cited in Lin, Kubota, Motha, Wang, & Wong, 2006).

**Asian Pacific American College Students**

APA students are rarely included in the literature and research that studies the experiences of underrepresented populations within higher education (Poon, 2010; Wu, 2002; Yeh, 2005). This could be attributed to “the ambiguous status of Asian Pacific Americans as a minority—but not an underrepresented minority” (Inkelas, 2003a, p. 636), leaving APAs “in a quasi no-man’s-land in the social order” and feeling “‘threatened’ from both sides of the social spectrum” (Inkelas, 2003a, p. 635). Due to the prevalence of the model minority myth, APA students are invisible to and neglected by university administrators and policymakers (Brydolf, 2009; Inkelas, 2003b; Osajima, 1995; Poon, 2010). APA students are “presumed to be
unaffected by significant prejudice, or, at worst, deprived to a much lesser degree than African Americans and Hispanics are” (Wu, 2002, p. B12). Often, APA students’ complaints of discrimination or unequal treatment are brushed aside (Lew et al., 2005), as they are assumed to have no problems (Osajima, 1995; Poon, 2010).

According to Cunningham and Llewellyn (1992), at the University of Illinois, “while Asian/Pacific Islander students constitute 9.7% of the undergraduate population and represent the largest racial/ethnic students of color, they are not considered ‘minority’ in terms of special services, educational opportunities, [and] funding in scholarships, grants, or job opportunities” (as cited in Osajima, 1995, p. 44). Similarly, at the University of California at Berkeley, the applications of APA students who were eligible for the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) at that campus were redirected to other University of California campuses, transforming EOP into a “strictly race-based program in which only ‘underrepresented minorities’ (Blacks and Hispanics) were eligible” (Takagi, 1990, p. 581).

**Affirmative Action and College Admission Policies**

Affirmative action is a very complex and multifaceted issue, especially for Asian Americans. Among the Asian American community, there are differences in opinion as to whether or not affirmative action actually benefit or hurt Asian Americans, especially when it comes to higher education. A study conducted at the University of California at Berkeley concluded that “APA students’ opinions ‘were the most conflicted’ and ‘complex’ of all the racial or ethnic groups of students regarding the diversification of the student body and opposition to affirmative action” (Institute for the Study of Social Change, 1991, as cited in Inkelas, 2003a, p. 626). While Asian Americans are seemingly not benefiting from affirmative
action (Hentoff, 2003) but not privileged like Whites, they are also sometimes wrongly suspected of having received preferential treatment (Rubin, 2008; Schmidt, 2003, 2008; Takagi, 1990).

Expert opinions on affirmative action are also split. The Asian American Legal Foundation (AALF), a non-profit organization founded to protect and promote Asian Americans’ civil rights, for example, submitted a brief to the Supreme Court in support of the White plaintiffs in the University of Michigan cases (Schmidt, 2003) and has long opposed affirmative action policies, claiming that “Asian Americans were the most discriminated against group when racial preferences were applied” (Schmidt, 2008, p. A20). Most APA experts and other advocacy groups, however, believe that affirmative action not only helps improve opportunities and ensure equal opportunities for Asian Americans in education, but also safeguards fair access to employment and business opportunities for qualified individuals (AALDEF, n.d.; C. J. Kim, 1999; NAPALC, n.d.b; Wu & Kidder, 2006).

Using Blumer’s (1958) theory of group position, Inkelas (2003a) conducted a qualitative study on Asian American undergraduate students’ views on affirmative action as well as their perspectives on U.S. race relations. Inkelas (2003a) noted that the participants in the study did not attempt to refute the model minority stereotype and had the assumption that White and Asian American students were academically superior to students in other racial or ethnic groups. Those who supported affirmative action also believed that other students of color were less qualified for admission than APA students and that target quotas were set by admissions office to increase African American, Hispanic, and Native American enrollments while limiting Asian American enrollments. One participant mentioned that when she tried to apply for a scholarship after finding out that she had the minimum ACT score and GPA, she was told that she did not belong to an underrepresented minority group (Inkelas, 2003a).
While the participants thought that competitive college admissions should be merit-based, they defined merit as “dedication, discipline, and work ethic” (Inkelas, 2003a, p. 635). Inkelas (2003a) also found that the participants appear to lack knowledge about APA civil rights history and believe that “proprietary claims to privileges such as affirmative action are based on degree of oppression” (p. 639), thereby justifying affirmative action benefits to other racial minority groups and not to Asian Americans. The reason for this lack of knowledge is mainly because unless a student is enrolled in an Asian American studies course, he or she is unlikely to learn about the history of any group except for that of European Americans (Osajima, 2007). Overall, the participants believed that Asian Americans neither benefit from “governmental mandates that favor underrepresented minorities” nor from “historical advantages afforded to children of alumni” (Inkelas, 2003a, p. 635).

**Exclusion From Campus Resources and Services**

Since APAs are not considered an underrepresented minority or part of the disadvantaged community by many higher education institutions, their specific and legitimate needs may often be overlooked by programs and services geared toward students of color (Her, 2014; Lew et al., 2005; Museus & Buenavista, 2016; Osajima, 1995). They may even be excluded from receiving certain benefits or services for students of color (Yeh, 2005). Just a little less than three decades ago, in 1993, even though students of Asian descent made up 23% of the undergraduate population at the University of California at Davis, there was not a student affairs position designed specifically to serve the APA student community, although such positions existed to serve the Latino and African American student communities (Osajima, 1995). Moreover, although Asian Americans represent the largest group of students attending two-year colleges,
due to the generalization of all Asian Americans as high academic achievers, most academic resources on campus are targeted at African American and Latino students (Soodjinda, 2009).

Nance (2007a) used the word “pyramid” to refer to the “proportionately smaller number of Asian administrators compared to professors, and professors compared to students” (p. 9). While Asian American students may be highly represented in higher education, “Asian Americans are underrepresented in faculty and administrative leadership positions” (Kwon, 2009, p. 4). Asian American college students, therefore, lack role models from similar cultural backgrounds to whom they could better relate and who could better understand their needs.

The model minority construct has made it difficult for APA activists to secure resources for APA courses and hire administrators and faculty members for APA courses and programs. The legitimacy and importance of research on APAs and APA studies are often challenged in academe (Osajima, 1995) because of this construct. As a result, Asian American students lack adequate Asian American role models in leadership positions and may be less likely to seek opportunities to develop their leadership skills or pursue leadership positions.

**Internalization of the Model Minority Stereotype**

The model minority myth puts APA students, both low-achieving students and students in the middle, in a very tough spot (Brydolf, 2009). The internalization of the model minority stereotype could cause psychological damages and adverse consequences on the ethnic identity development of APA students, making them less likely to seek help (Ly, 2008; Yoo et al., 2010). An APA student may be accused of not working hard enough if he or she is not at the top, because according to the model minority myth, all Asians must be smart (Brydolf, 2009).

Many APA students also face immense pressure to succeed and fulfill the model minority stereotype, often masking their social and psychological needs (Chou & Feagin, 2010; Ly, 2008;
Asian American students in Kwon’s (2009) study certainly “perceived that others have imposed the model minority stereotype on Asian American students” (p. 271). In order “to meet the internalized expectations of the model minority stereotype, Asian American students may limit themselves to the selection of specific colleges and major courses of study” (Diamond, 2008, p. 17), choosing “‘safe’ career paths like medicine and law” (Ly, 2008, p. 24), and thereby reinforcing the model minority stereotype. The cultural norm in many Asian cultures to select specific college majors and the pressure to fulfill familial expectations compounded these issues (Chaudhari et al., 2013).

Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) work on psychosocial student development, while considered groundbreaking, is inadequate to address the specific needs of APA students (Lew et al., 2005). In addition to the external influences of society, culture and family are also key factors in the identity development of APA students. APA students may experience cultural dissonance as they are “caught between two cultures” (Ly, 2008, p. 24) and have to constantly “negotiate the tension between the dominant norms of American society and familial and cultural values that affect their development tasks” (Lew et al., 2005, p. 76). This is because the cultural standards AAPI students experience in college and in mainstream society may be vastly different or at odds with the cultural standards they experience at home and in their ethnic community (Chaudhari et al., 2013).

Additionally, Asian American students, like other students of color who experience social isolation and dissatisfaction with campus life, are more likely to drop out of college (Ting, 2000). Even on campuses that have a larger population of Asian American students, they do not necessarily feel accepted or a sense of belonging. According to Poon (2010), even though Asian American students make up over 40% of the student population on some University of California
campuses, they continue to feel racially marginalized and isolated. In spite of their critical mass, they continue to experience a range of racial microaggressions because of a “campus racial climate that maintains White dominance and privilege” (p. xi). This leads to an unusually high suicide rate on campus.

Available Programs and Services Geared Toward Asian American Pacific Islander Students

In response to the repeated calls from researchers and to address the educational needs of the AAPI population, a number of key initiatives and programs have been developed and implemented to create more opportunities for low-income and underserved AAPIs. These initiatives and programs were created to provide resources to AAPI students that would increase their access and chances of success in higher education. A federal program and a largest non-profit provider of college scholarships for AAPI students are among two of the key programs and initiatives that are geared toward serving AAPI students.

there were 153 eligible AANAPISIs, 78 designated AANAPISIs, and 21 funded AANAPISIs (Asian & Pacific Islander American Scholarship Fund [APIASF], n.d.).

Institutions of higher education that are eligible for this designation must have at least a 10% enrollment of AAPI students and at least 50% of students who are low-income (Nelson, 2011). In 2007, the institutions that met the criteria actually enrolled 75% of low-income students (APIASF, n.d.). In order to receive this designation, institutions must submit a request to the U.S. Department of Education. Once an institution has received this designation, the institution is then eligible to apply for funding from AANAPISI and MSI grant programs (APIASF, n.d.; Nelson, 2011).

AANAPISIs are critical for serving low-income AAPI students and for supporting their degree attainment (APIASF, n.d.; Nelson, 2013). In spite of this new initiative, AAPI-serving institutions still have “trouble attracting the visibility in funding and policy that colleges serving other minority groups have enjoyed” (Nelson, 2011, para. 10). AAPI-serving institutions “suffer from the burden of the ‘model minority’ stereotype” (Nelson, 2011, para. 11) due to the overrepresentation of some Asian groups in higher education, especially at some high-profile institutions such as the University of California at Berkeley.

**Asian & Pacific Islander American Scholarship Fund.** The Asian & Pacific Islander American Scholarship Fund (APIASF) is a non-profit college scholarship provider. It is the largest provider of scholarships to AAPIs in the nation (APIASF, n.d.). Three scholarship programs are managed by APIASF, including the APIASF General Scholarship Program, the APIASF AANAPISI Scholarship Program, and the Gates Millennium Scholars (GMS) Program funded by a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Over $100 million in scholarships have been distributed to AAPI students across the U.S. and in the Pacific Islands since 2013. In
addition to providing scholarships to AAPI students, APIASF also forge partnerships and alliances with corporations, foundations, and community organizations; provide guidance and mentorship to AAPI students; serve as a valuable resource for studies on AAPI students; and increase awareness of AAPI educational issues, challenges, and barriers.

Southeast Asian Americans

According to Encyclopedia Britannica, Southeast Asia is a vast region of Asia that is “situated east of the Indian subcontinent and south of China” (Frederick, 2015, para. 1) and consists of 11 countries. Southeast Asia is generally divided into the mainland and island regions. The mainland region includes Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar (Burma), Thailand, Vietnam, and the west peninsula of Malaysia. The island region includes Brunei, Indonesia, east Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and the new nation of East Timor. People from these countries are collectively known as Southeast Asians (Frederick, 2015), although people from Brunei, East Timor, and Malaysia are identified as “others” within the Southeast Asian category in recent U.S. census (Fania, 2013). Many Southeast Asian immigrants to the U.S. resettled in California.

Southeast Asia’s population is made up of a wide variety of ethnic and linguistic groups as well as cultures (Frederick, 2015). It is one of the most diverse regions in the world when it comes to ecology, economy, social structure, culture, and language. While there is evidence of broad similarities that unite the peoples of this region, there has yet to be a conscious Southeast Asian regional identity. Throughout the course of history, neighboring countries such as China and Japan have considered it to be a region in its own right.

Southeast Asian Refugees

Southeast Asian refugees make up a high proportion of the refugee population in the U.S. (Hickey, 2005). The majority of these refugees resettled in the U.S. due to U.S. foreign policy in
Southeast Asia and as a result of the Vietnam War. Although Burmese refugees have made up the largest proportion of refugees resettled in the U.S. in recent years (Bridging Refugee Youth and Children’s Services [BRYCS], n.d.; Burt & Batalova, 2014; Inkpen & Igielnik, 2014) and Burma is geographically located in Southeast Asia, Burmese refugees are not included in this study of Southeast Asian refugees.

In many studies of Southeast Asian refugees and for the purpose of this study, “Southeast Asian Americans” and “Southeast Asian refugees” refer to people from the countries of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, a region formerly known as Indochina, and people of the Hmong ethnic group, who historically have not had their own country (Pfeifer, 2006) and who fled Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam after their countries were taken over by communists (Han, 2006; Hein & Moore, 2009; Hsu, Davies, & Hansen, 2004; V. T. Nguyen, 2012; Ying & Han, 2008). Because it is important in interpretative phenomenological study (IPA) to find a sample that is fairly homogenous and “for whom the research question will be meaningful” (J. A. Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2013, p. 49), this study focused on a sample of Southeast Asian refugees from the countries that were under French rule and were displaced as a result of the U.S. involvement against communist insurgencies in the former French Indochina during the Vietnam War.

In accordance with the Census Bureau, statistics for the Hmong population are disaggregated from other Laotian groups (SEARAC, 2011). Many Hmong also check multiple categories of nationalities, typically Laotian and Thai, on the census form. Additionally, Cambodians may also refer to themselves as the Khmer (Ying & Han, 2008).

**The former Indochina.** The region of Southeast Asia that includes Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam was also formerly referred to as Indochina, or French Indochina, as the three former
states were previously associated with France until 1950 (“Indochina,” 2014). They were first a part of the French empire and later incorporated into the French Union. The regime remained intact despite the Japanese occupation in 1940 but collapsed following Japan’s surrender in 1945. During a lull of the First Indochina War, France recognized Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam as independent, self-governing states within the French Union in an attempt to retain power in that region. The terms *Indochina* and *Indochinese* may be used in various literature to refer to those three countries when discussing the history of that region.

**Burmese refugees.** One of the world’s most ethnically diverse countries, Myanmar, a former British colony, has experienced a long-running civil war where there is large-scale, systemic persecution and state-sponsored violence against ethnic minorities (BRYCS, n.d.; Burma Refugee Family Network [BRFM], n.d.; Refugees International [RI], n.d.; Williams, 2012). While it has been officially called Myanmar since 1989 and the new name has been generally accepted by the international community, many who dispute the legitimacy of the military government “deliberately persist in using the old names…as a symbol of their opposition and defiance” (Barron et al., 2007, p. 4). By the end of 2001, more than one million ethnic Burmese had fled their homeland and sought refuge in neighboring countries (Hickey, 2005).

**Southeast Asian Population in the United States**

Southeast Asian refugees represent a wide range of ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups with varying occupations and education levels (Hsu et al., 2004). There are differential socioeconomic adaptation among the subgroups, with the Hmong at the greatest risk of falling below the poverty line (37.6%) (Ying & Han, 2008). Furthermore, some subgroups experience greater cultural discrepancy than other subgroups. The Hmong, who remain significantly more
traditional than other subgroups, faced the greatest cultural discrepancy upon their arrival in the
U.S. Cambodians, on the other hand, have suffered the most severe traumas under the Pol Pot
regime. Compared to other Asian immigrant parents, Southeast Asian refugee parents appear to
acculturate at a much slower rate. In spite of the great diversity within the Southeast Asian
refugee groups, they shared a similar experience of fleeing their homelands due to the Vietnam
War and resettling in the U.S. as refugees (Her, 2014).

Between 1975 and 2010, a total of 1,174,651 Southeast Asian refugees arrived in the U.S.
(SEARAC, 2011). Out of that total, 771,834 (65.71%) came from Vietnam, 257,587 (21.93%)
came from Laos, and 145,230 (12.36%) came from Cambodia. Between 1987 and 2010, a total
of 989,871 Southeast Asians who resettled in the U.S. as refugees naturalized as U.S. citizens.
The majority of young Southeast Asian adults today were U.S.-born or arrived in the U.S. as
young children (Museus, 2013; Ying & Han, 2008). Specifically, a total of 638,522 Vietnamese
Americans, 154,886 Hmong Americans, 140,886 Cambodian Americans, and 119,944 Laotian
Americans were born in the U.S. (SEARAC, 2011).

As illustrated in Table 1, California is the state with the highest number of Southeast
Asian refugee population and with the highest number of each Southeast Asian ethnic group
(U.S. Census, 2010, as cited in SEARAC, 2011). A total of 910,433 out of 2,506,303 (36.33%)
SEAAs reside in the state of California. Massachusetts has the second highest number of
Cambodian Americans (28,424), followed by the state of Washington (22,934). Minnesota has
the second highest number of Hmong Americans (66,181), followed by Wisconsin (49,240).
Texas has the second highest number of Laotian Americans (15,784), followed by Minnesota
(12,009). Texas also has the second highest number of Vietnamese Americans (227,968),
followed by the state of Washington (75,843).
Table 1

**Top Three U.S. States With the Highest Southeast Asian American Population in 2010**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>CA</td>
<td>102,317</td>
<td>CA</td>
<td>91,224</td>
<td>CA</td>
<td>69,303</td>
<td>CA</td>
<td>647,589</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>28,424</td>
<td>MN</td>
<td>66,181</td>
<td>TX</td>
<td>15,784</td>
<td>TX</td>
<td>227,968</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>WA</td>
<td>22,934</td>
<td>WI</td>
<td>49,240</td>
<td>MN</td>
<td>12,009</td>
<td>WA</td>
<td>75,843</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Adapted from “Southeast Asian Americans at a Glance: Statistics on Southeast Asians Adapted from the American Community Survey,” by Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC), 2011, p. 5.

**Southeast Asian population in the Midwest.** The demographic information for SEAAs in the Midwest came from several sources, which used data from the U.S. Census Bureau’s decennial population census and the American Community Survey (ACS) from various census years. These reports broke down and aggregated their data differently; some broke down the population by major metropolitan areas and some by states and regions, while some reports contained more recent figures but only included one ethnic group. Some reports also included one or two decimal points for percentages while others rounded up or down to the nearest whole numbers. Due to these differences in reporting style and in the types of data that are available, in-depth cross-ethnic analysis has not been performed in this study. The data is provided for information purposes in order to provide context and perspective for this community.

In 2010, the census estimated the SEAA population in the Midwest to be at 358,970, or 14.32% of the overall U.S. Southeast Asian population (SEARAC, 2011). Table 2 illustrates the population of SEAAs in the Midwest in comparison to the overall U.S. Southeast Asian population. While Vietnamese Americans, because of their large number, make up almost 70% of the overall U.S. Southeast Asian population and almost 45% of the overall SEAA population in the Midwest, only a little over 9% of the overall U.S. Vietnamese population actually reside in
the Midwest. In comparison, while Hmong Americans make up only a little over 10% of the overall U.S. Southeast Asian population, they make up over 35% of the overall SEAA population in the Midwest and almost 49% of the overall U.S. Hmong population residing in the Midwest.

Table 2

Southeast Asian American Population in 2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Midwest</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%a</td>
<td>%b</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambodian</td>
<td>27,252</td>
<td>7.59</td>
<td>9.85</td>
<td>276,667</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hmong</td>
<td>126,713</td>
<td>35.30</td>
<td>48.72</td>
<td>260,073</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laotian</td>
<td>46,740</td>
<td>13.02</td>
<td>20.14</td>
<td>232,130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>158,265</td>
<td>44.09</td>
<td>9.11</td>
<td>1,737,434</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>358,970</td>
<td>14.32</td>
<td></td>
<td>2,506,303</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Adapted from “Southeast Asian Americans at a Glance: Statistics on Southeast Asians Adapted from the American Community Survey,” by Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC), 2011, p. 5.*

* aPercentage of each ethnic group out of the overall Southeast Asian American population in the Midwest.

*bPercentage of each ethnic group in the Midwest out of the overall U.S. population of that particular ethnic group.

**Cambodian Americans in the Midwest.** The U.S. Cambodian population is concentrated in California, Massachusetts, and Washington (Pfeifer, 2000a, 2006, 2008; SEARAC, 2011).

Table 3 illustrates the growth of the Cambodian American population in the Midwest across three census years. The 2000 census estimated the Cambodian American population in Minnesota to be at 5,530, a little over 3% of the overall U.S. Cambodian population in the 2000 (Pfeifer, 2000a). Minnesota ranked sixth and was the only state in the Midwest in the top 10 list of states with the highest population of Cambodian Americans in 2000.

The 2005 ACS estimated the Cambodian American population in the Midwest to be just under 20,000, with Ohio ranking seventh (population of 6,160) and Minnesota ranking eight (population of 6,101) (Pfeifer, 2006, 2008). The Midwest was home to 19,591 (a little over 9%)
of Cambodian Americans in 2005 and 62.58% of them resided in Ohio and Minnesota. By 2010, Minnesota, with 9,543 Cambodian Americans (3.45%) was once again the only state in the Midwest in the top 10 list of states with the highest population of Cambodian Americans (SEARAC, 2011).

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2000&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>2005&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>2010&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>no.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MN</td>
<td>5,530</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OH</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MW*</td>
<td>15,999</td>
<td>9.31</td>
<td>19,591</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US</td>
<td>171,937</td>
<td></td>
<td>217,438</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Total includes all 50 states and the District of Columbia, although only states ranking in the top 10 are included in this table. *MW = Midwest.


**Hmong Americans in the Midwest.** The Hmong American population in the Midwest is concentrated heavily in Minnesota and Wisconsin (HND, 2013; Pfeifer, 2006; SEARAC, 2011), although there is a substantial population in Michigan and rapidly growing populations in Missouri and Kansas (HND, 2013). Table 4 illustrates the growth of the Hmong American population in the Midwest across three census years. The 2000 census estimated the Hmong American population in Minnesota to be at 41,800, in Wisconsin to be at 33,791, and in Michigan to be 83,428, ranking them second, third, and fifth respectively of the states with the highest population of Hmong American in 2000 (HND, 2000). Together, those three Midwestern states were home to almost 48% of the overall Hmong American population in 2000.
Table 4


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>2000&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>2005&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>2010&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>no.</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MN</td>
<td>41,800</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>24.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WI</td>
<td>33,791</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>19.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MI</td>
<td>5,383</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MW*</td>
<td>83,428</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>49.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US</td>
<td>169,428</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>183,265</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Total includes all 50 states and the District of Columbia, although only states ranking in the top 10 are included in this table. *MW = Midwest.

<sup>c</sup>Adapted from “Southeast Asian Americans at a Glance: Statistics on Southeast Asians Adapted from the American Community Survey,” by Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC), 2011, p. 5.

The 2005 American Community Survey estimated the Hmong American population in the Midwest to be at 95,902, which is 52.33% of the overall U.S. Hmong American population, with Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan being the three Midwestern states that ranked in the top ten and being home to almost 60% of the overall Laotian American population (Pfeifer, 2006, 2008). In 2005, Minnesota ranked second with 46,352 residents, Wisconsin ranked third with 38,814 residents, and Michigan ranked fifth with 7,769 residents.

The Midwest’s proportion of the overall U.S. Hmong population in 2010 was just a little under 49% at 126,713 (HND, 2013), compared to 95,902 (52.33%) in 2005 (Pfeifer, 2006, 2008). In 2005, Minnesota and Wisconsin were home to 85,166 Hmong Americans (88.81% of the Midwest and 46.47% of the U.S. Hmong population) (Pfeifer, 2006). In 2010, the Hmong population in Minnesota and Wisconsin increased to 115,421 (44.38% of the U.S. Hmong population) (SEARAC, 2011).
Laotian Americans in the Midwest. The U.S. Laotian population is concentrated in California, Texas, and Minnesota (Pfeifer, 2000b, 2006, 2008; SEARAC, 2011). Table 5 illustrates the growth of the Laotian American population in the Midwest across three census years. The 2000 census estimated the Laotian American population in Minnesota to be at 9,940, in Illinois to be at 5,325, and in Wisconsin to be at 4,469, ranking them third, sixth, and eighth respectively of the states with the highest population of Laotian American in 2000 (Pfeifer, 2000b). Together, those three Midwestern states were home to almost 12% of the overall Laotian American population in 2000.

Table 5


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2000&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th></th>
<th>2005&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th></th>
<th>2010&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>no.</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MN</td>
<td>9,940</td>
<td>5.89</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11,636</td>
<td>6.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IL</td>
<td>5,235</td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7,102</td>
<td>3.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WI</td>
<td>4,469</td>
<td>2.65</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IA</td>
<td></td>
<td>6.129</td>
<td>3.17</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MI</td>
<td></td>
<td>4,735</td>
<td>2.45</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US</td>
<td>168,707</td>
<td>193,247</td>
<td>232,130</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Total includes all 50 states and the District of Columbia, although only states ranking in the top 10 are included in this table. *MW = Midwest.


The 2005 American Community Survey estimated the Laotian American population in the Midwest to be at 37,820, which is 19.57% of the overall U.S. Laotian American population, with three Midwestern states ranking in the top ten and being home to almost 60% of the overall Laotian American population (Pfeifer, 2006, 2008). In 2005, Minnesota ranked third with
11,636 residents, Iowa ranked fifth with 6,129 residents, and Michigan ranked ninth with 4,735 residents. By 2010, only Minnesota and Illinois were in the top 10, with Laotian American populations of 12,009 (5.17%) and 7,102 (3.65%) respectively (SEARAC, 2011).

**Vietnamese Americans in the Midwest.** Over half of the U.S. Vietnamese population live in the West, although there were still 136,407 (almost 9%) Vietnamese living in the Midwest in 2010 (A. T. Nguyen, 2011). This is an increase from 106,938 (9.53%) residents in 2000 (Pfeifer, 2001) and 135,520 (9.55%) residents in 2005 (Pfeifer, 2006). While none of the Midwestern states rank in the top 10 states with the highest population of Vietnamese Americans in the country, Illinois, Minnesota, and Michigan ranked in the top 20 with a combined total of 64,765 (4.57%) Vietnamese American residents in 2005 (Pfeifer, 2006) and 75,643 (4.35%) Vietnamese American residents in 2010 (SEARAC, 2011).

**Southeast Asian American Immigration History**

Since American forces in South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia were defeated by communist insurgencies at the end of the Vietnam War, also known as the Second Indochina War, in 1975, more than one million Southeast Asian refugees have resettled in the U.S. (Frano, 2013; Han, 2006; Hein & Moore, 2009). The Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act of 1975 established a resettlement program for refugees who fled from Cambodia and Vietnam (Paisano, 1993). The Immigration Act of 1976 made Laotians, including Hmong, eligible to resettle in the U.S. under the same refugee resettlement program.

Between 1975 and the early 1990s, there were between 800,000 and one million Southeast Asian refugees residing in the U.S. (Hsu et al., 2004; SEARAC, 2011). In 1989, 42.8% of refugees admitted into the U.S. were from Southeast Asia (Hsu et al., 2004). By 2000, there were nearly two million SEAAs, including second-generation SEAAs, living in the U.S.
(Han, 2006; Ying & Han, 2008) and the majority of them are political refugees from the wars in Southeast Asia in the latter half of the 20th century (Frano, 2013; Han, 2006).

U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. Following World War II, there was a state of political and military tension between the U.S. and its allies and the Communist nations and their allies, known as the Cold War (Bankston & Hidalgo, 2007). At around the same time, the Communists in Vietnam, led by Ho Chi Minh, started an anti-colonial war for independence against the French. France lost and accepted a peace agreement in 1954 that divided Vietnam into a Communist-controlled north and a non-Communist south, and Vietnam was pulled into the Cold War. Ho Chi Minh and dissidents in the South, known as Viet Cong or National Liberation Front (NFL), wanted to unite Vietnam.

Fearing communism would spread across Southeast Asia if South Vietnam fell to communism, the U.S. began to send large numbers of troops to Southeast Asia by 1965, as well as “substantial foreign aid and military assistance” (Bankston & Hidalgo, 2007, p. 144) to Thailand. Laos, which is located strategically between the Western-aligned Thailand, Cambodia, and South Vietnam and neighboring communist China and North Vietnam, was also considered a key domino in the Cold War (Duffy, Harmon, Ranard, Thao, & Yang, 2004). In that same year, the U.S. changed its immigration laws to remove discriminatory quotas based on national origins, and this allowed more immigrants from Asia to enter the U.S. (Bankston & Hidalgo, 2007). This change also set the stage for formalizing refugee policy and for the growth in the SEAA population (Bankston & Hidalgo, 2007; Frano, 2013).

The war eventually spread into Laos, where the guerilla forces known as Pathet Lao were allies of the North Vietnamese, and into Cambodia, which had its own Communist guerilla group known as the Khmer Rouge (Bankston & Hidalgo, 2007). The U.S. had also recruited the
Hmong, a minority group in Laos, to be a part of the Central Intelligence Agency’s secret army (Bankston & Hidalgo, 2007; Duffy et al., 2004). During this time, the U.S. engaged in massive bombing along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, North Vietnam’s main supply route to the south that crossed into Laos and Cambodia and back into South Vietnam, dropping approximately 539,129 tons of bombs, which was “about three and a half times the bombs dropped on Japan during all of World War II” (Bankston & Hidalgo, 2007, p. 144).

**The end of the Vietnam War and the refugee crisis.** Amidst growing reluctance among Americans to support the war in Vietnam, the U.S. began withdrawing all its troops from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia in 1973 (Bankston & Hidalgo, 2007). By the spring of 1975, South Vietnam had fallen to North Vietnam, Cambodia had fallen to the Khmer Rouge, and the Pathet Lao were allowed into a coalition government and quickly took over Laos (Bankston & Hidalgo, 2007; Duffy et al., 2004). Millions of people and about a third of Cambodia’s population were forced into concentration camps, where they died from sickness, starvation, or hard labor, or were executed.

Those who were associated with the American war efforts fled by boat into the China Sea to seek asylum in other nations or on foot to bordering Thailand (Bankston & Hidalgo, 2007; Duffy et al., 2004). Those who were fortunate enough to survive the trip languished for years in one of the refugee camps in Thailand before being admitted to the U.S. to be resettled. Those who stayed behind in their home countries became political prisoners and were sent to reeducation camps where they performed hard labor with little food or medicine (Duffy et al., 2004).

In 1977, President Carter signed legislation that would permit people from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia to become U.S. permanent residents (Bankston & Hidalgo, 2007). In 1978,
Vietnam invaded Cambodia to intervene to topple the ruthless dictator, Pol Pot, but was attacked by China, Cambodia’s ally. This resulted in an outpouring of refugees from Cambodia and Vietnam, including many ethnic Chinese who were living in Vietnam. This new war brought public attention to the region and increased the pressure on the U.S. to accept more refugees. In response to this refugee crisis, the U.S. Congress passed the Refugee Act of 1980 that provided for a separate annual number of admissions for refugees that is separate from the total number of all immigrants. The decision to resettle the refugees were applauded by U.S. refugee advocacy groups concerned about their living conditions in Thailand (Duffy et al., 2004).

Waves of immigration. Southeast Asian refugees came in two waves (Her, 2014; Hsu et al., 2004; Marsh, 1980; Museus, 2013; Ngo & Lee, 2007). The first wave of refugees who arrived were educated, wealthy professionals who were influential in their homelands or worked closely with the U.S. military (Hsu et al., 2004; Ngo & Lee, 2007). These refugees typically came with more transferrable skills and English language proficiency (Her, 2014). The Vietnamese, in particular, received the most exposure to Western culture due to their history of French colonization (Ying & Han, 2008).

The second wave of refugees included those who were less educated or illiterate, had lower English proficiency, worked as subsistence farmers or fishers, were less familiar with Western technology, and generally had less transferrable skills (Her, 2014; Hsu et al., 2004; Ngo & Lee, 2007). They were also referred to as the “boat people” and had endured severe migration trauma (Hsu et al., 2004). The Hmong, in particular, had an average of 1.7 years of formal education (Her, 2014) and did not even have a written language until the 1950s (V. T. Nguyen, 2012).
Distinction Between Refugee and Immigrant

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ Office of Refugee Resettlement (2012) defines a refugee as:

Any person who is outside any country of such person's nationality or, in the case of a person having no nationality, is outside any country in which such person last habitually resided, and who is unable or unwilling to return to, and is unable or unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protection of, that country because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. (para. 1)

A refugee is also someone who “is of special humanitarian concern to the United States” (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service [USCIS], 2011, para. 1). The refugee migration process is a state-sanctioned process that afford individuals who are approved for relocation “official status and rights through structured international and national protocols” (Patil, McGown, Nahayo, & Hadley, 2010, p. 142). Because of this official status, the Cambodian and Hmong refugees interviewed in Hein and Moore’s (2009) study saw being a refugee as “an ascriptive, master status that has both stigmatic and legitimizing qualities” (p. 15).

The Refugee Act of 1980 specifically provided for a separate annual number of admissions into the U.S. for refugees that is separate from the total number of all immigrants (Bankston & Hidalgo, 2007). This is because there is an important distinction between voluntary immigrants who left their native countries for better economic opportunities and refugees who were forced to flee their native countries to escape political persecution, due to circumstances beyond their control (Barowsky & McIntyre, 2010; Castles, 2005; Museus, 2013; P. N. Nguyen, 2004). Hsu, Davies, and Hansen (2004) described immigrants as being “pulled away” from their native countries and refugees as being “pushed out” of their countries, with no option to return to their homelands.
According to Han (2006), there are two types of refugee movement: anticipatory and acute. In anticipatory refugee movement, the refugees sense the danger and are able to leave early. Their migration resembles that of voluntary migrants. Most Southeast Asian refugees, however, have engaged in acute refugee movement, as they did not have time to plan or prepare for their departure from their homelands. In Liu’s (1979) study, 85% of the Vietnamese refugees only had two days or even as little time as two hours to make the decision to flee their homelands (Han, 2006). While some refugees ended up being repatriated, most end up being resettled in an industrialized country (Patil et al., 2010). Refugees face many unique and complex challenges, as they not only have to acculturate to their new country’s mainstream culture but also adjust from unindustrialized settings to industrialized settings.

**Refugee admission.** Each year, contingent upon funding, the U.S. attempts to consider at least half of the refugees referred by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) for resettlement (Bruno, 2015). The President and Congress determine the annual refugee ceiling and regional allocations. The Department of State (DOS) is responsible for handling the processing of refugees overseas and the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has the final say in determining admission eligibility of each refugee. Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the refugee program has been greatly impacted. In the years following the terrorist attacks, refugee admissions dropped to historically low levels, although they subsequently rebounded.

**Issues and Challenges**

It is important to note the historical context that brought Southeast Asian refugees to the U.S. (Hsu et al., 2004) and the impact of their pre-migration circumstances on their post-migration adjustment and long-term success. After the communists gained control of Vietnam,
Cambodia, and Laos, many Southeast Asians suffered from “government sponsored intimidation and threats to their lives” (Hsu et al., 2004, p. 195). While entering neighboring countries and being detained in refugee camps, they suffered from further assaults from border guards and camp guards. According to V. T. Nguyen (2012), refugee camps and detention centers “share a lineage with concentration and death camps” (p. 930). It is also important to note that each Southeast Asian refugee subgroup has its own unique set of refugee circumstances and post-migration challenges as well.

The data on SEAAs’ educational attainment and poverty rates came from several sources, which used data from the U.S. Census Bureau’s decennial population census from various census years and from CARE. These reports broke down and aggregated their data differently; some included a few other Asian ethnic groups and other racial groups for comparison purpose while others used the Asian aggregate group as a basis for comparison. In some reports, one or two decimal points were included for the percentages while in other reports, the decimal points were rounded up or down to the nearest whole numbers. As indicated previously, in-depth cross-ethnic analysis has not been performed in this study due to these differences in reporting style and in the types of data that are available. The data is provided for information purposes in order to provide context and perspective for this community.

**Migration, encampment, and acculturation stressors.** Southeast Asian refugees left their homelands, fleeing war, persecution, and communism in their native countries (Ying & Han, 2008). They have experienced severe migration traumas and stressors that include threats to their lives, separation from family and relatives, witnessing deaths of family and loved ones, torture, disease, starvation, and living in unsafe, overcrowded, and poorly sanitized refugee camps (Hsu et al., 2004). Upon arrival to the U.S., these refugees face various resettlement
challenges including racism, discrimination, civic ostracism, unemployment, extreme economic inequality, language difficulties, and social control by the welfare state (Beiser & Hou, 2006; Han, 2005; Hein & Moore, 2009; Yang, 2004). According to Hsu et al. (2004), “the most commonly diagnosed mental health problems in Southeast Asian refugee patients are depression, somatization and physical disorders, adjustment disorders, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)” (p. 200).

Refugee resettlement programs and post-migration adjustments. The Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) in the Department of Health and Human Services’ Administration for Children and Families (HHS/ACF) administers a set of refugee resettlement assistance programs to help refugees achieve economic self-sufficiency (Bruno, 2011). The current program has an eight-month maximum eligibility period for funding and has limited access to mental health care. DOS also administers an initial resettlement program for newly arriving refugees, known as the Reception and Placement (R&P) Program, which is separate from the ORR program. According to the Cultural Orientation Resource (OCR) Center (n.d.), a refugee with close relatives in the U.S. will be resettled in the area where the relatives live.

If a refugee does not have relatives in the U.S., a resettlement agency, or sponsor, will choose a placement site based on the area’s availability of jobs, housing, and social services (Cultural Orientation Resource [OCR] Center, n.d.). Public and private, non-profit entities can all serve as sponsors (Bruno, 2011). The sponsor will be the refugee’s main source of information and assistance during the refugee’s first few months in the country (Bruno, 2011; OCR Center, n.d.).

Refugees’ sponsors will meet them at the airport and are responsible for arranging housing and basic household supplies, as well as conducting orientation for the refugee and
making appropriate referrals. In spite of this, newly arrived refugees may still run into various hurdles such as difficulty finding staple foods at local stores to maintain a healthy diet (Patil et al., 2010), limited transportation options (LSPM/DR, 2006; Nawyn, Gjokaj, Agbényiga, & Grace, 2012), limited access to culturally-sensitive health care providers, and eventual challenges with finding appropriate and affordable housing (LSPM/DR, 2006).

Refugees are expected to obtain paid employment as quickly as possible and to also study English part-time while they work (Bruno, 2011; OCR Center, n.d.; Patil et al., 2010). The program fails to take into account that incoming refugees may have serious physical and mental health issues that are not being addressed or that many are widows who have young children and lack employment experience (Bruno, 2011). Fathers in traditional Southeast Asian families may also experience a loss of status as they lose their ability to support their families (Hickey, 2005). Furthermore, many incoming refugees lack job skills that are transferrable to the U.S. job market (Bruno, 2011).

Many observers have asserted that the refugee resettlement assistance program is in need of reform (Bruno, 2011). Due to the economic recession in recent years, it has become more and more difficult for refugees to achieve self-sufficiency. The current program does not include sufficient financial assistance to refugees and is not adequately meeting the overall needs of refugees. Furthermore, refugees resettled in different parts of the U.S. receive disparate levels of financial assistance and services. Finally, the minority staff of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee argued that the current program is outdated and fails to address the diverse needs of the increasingly diverse group of refugees that are being admitted.

**Language and cultural barriers.** There are high proportions of SEAAAs who have limited English proficiency (Her, 2014). Even American-born Southeast Asian children often have
difficulty with the English language when they start their formal education as they primarily speak a Southeast Asian language at home (Yang, 2004). In a study on Sudanese women, Warriner (2007) found that refugees experience considerable social isolation in communities that did not offer adequate language support (as cited in Nawyn et al., 2012). Their main concern was not about their limited employment prospects, because quick employment does not automatically help them better integrate into their local communities.

Being employed did not take the burden off the Burundian and Burmese refugees in Nawyn, Gjokaj, Agbényiga, and Grace’s (2012) study. These refugees had anxiety about not speaking English, but they had no exposure to English on their jobs or within their ethnic communities, as very few members of their ethnic communities speak English. Furthermore, long work hours often prevent refugees from participating in English as a Second Language (ELS) classes (LSPM/DR, 2006; Yang, 2004).

The refugees in Nawyn et al.’s (2012) study shared their experiences of feeling disrespected and mistreated but unable to speak up and feeling less valued in their receiving communities due to their language of English skills (Nawyn et al., 2012). The lack of English language skills can make it difficult for refugees to communicate with law enforcement officers, and this can lead to severe consequences (Bruno, 2011). Nawyn et al.’s (2012) participants also expressed their concern about having limited options for gaining access to basic and important information such as how to locate a hospital and schedule doctor’s appointments or how to read street signs and take public transportation. They worried about adjusting to life in the U.S. once their federally-mandated resettlement period ended.

The Vietnamese and Mexican immigrants in LaBelle’s (2007) study revealed similar acculturation stress and experiences of powerlessness when communicating with native English
speakers. Because of their accents, they were often treated as if they were not educated. They also experienced prejudice based on their skin color and social customs. Their anxiety level decreased as their accent decreased, and they used their encounters of prejudice as a motivation for them to improve their mastery of the English language.

**English language learners.** Kanno and Kangas (2014) argued that English language learners (ELLs) lack academic preparation in high school, which is a major predictor of college access. In addition to having to adapt to different social norms of their new country and assimilating to a new culture, first-generation immigrant students also have to navigate and thrive within the education system with limited or even no English proficiency (Kiper, 2016). Immigrant parents’ limited English proficiency could also cause communication issues with their children’s school administrators, making it difficult for them to access necessary information and school resources and to develop quality relationships with their children’s teachers.

ELLs have limited access and opportunities for exposure to advanced-level courses in high school as well (Kanno & Kangas, 2014). In 2006, 19% of ELLs, compared to 45% of monolingual English-speaking students and 35% of students from linguistic minority backgrounds who were fully proficient in English, attended four-year institutions of higher education. What is ironic is that the ELL designation, which was meant to ensure academic equality and equity for the students, actually limits their access.

The state of Arizona’s Structured English Immersion (SEI) model, for example, required all students with the ELL designation to attend four hours of mandatory English language instruction daily (Kanno & Kangas, 2014). The model assumed that all ELLs would have gained enough English proficiency to be transitioned into the general education classroom within one
year. Kanno and Kangas (2014) contended that this kind of education model is detrimental to ELLs and put them at a disadvantage for a number of reasons.

In reality, ELLs not only almost never exit the SEI program within one year, but also experience academic and linguistic isolation from their English-speaking peers and the mainstream curriculum (Kanno & Kangas, 2014). Their access to both academic content learning and to their English-speaking peers are severely limited for the majority of their high school careers. Teachers and administrators have the tendency to discourage ELLs from taking challenging courses while ELLs and their parents often defer to school officials due to their cultural practice and lack of awareness about their options. As a result, ELLs are, at worst, often at risk of not being able to fulfill their high school graduation requirements, and at best, have limited options for furthering their education.

**Lower educational attainment.** While academic performance is linked to family status in Southeast Asian cultures, refugee children often did not have access to formal education in their birth countries and schooling were oftentimes sporadic or downright impossible for them (Hickey, 2005). While awaiting resettlement in refugee camps, refugee children had limited opportunities for education as well (P. N. Nguyen, 2004). Refugee families could spend anywhere between a few weeks to a few years in refugee camps before being resettled. Upon arrival to the U.S., these students often found themselves in unfamiliar learning environments with limited English proficiency (Kiper, 2016) and very different expectations, causing them to feel anxious and distressed about school (Hickey, 2005; LSPM/DR, 2006) and alienated from their schools (Yang, 2004). More than three decades after their arrival to the U.S., many SEAA students continue to struggle with their formal education.
Unlike many South and East Asian Americans, many SEAs, who make up 15.2% of people reporting Asian and/or Pacific Islander heritage (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000, as cited in Ngo & Lee, 2007), never finished high school (Yoo et al., 2010), have inadequate college readiness (Her, 2014; Soodjinda, 2009), and have the lowest educational attainment among Asian Americans (Her, 2014; NAPCA, 2012). High school dropout rates were 50% for SEAs and 60% for Samoans (Yeh, 2005). The percentages of SEA subgroups with bachelor’s degree more closely resemble those of other marginalized groups such as African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans than those of other Asian American groups (Yang, 2004). When all Asian American groups are lumped together and their data are reported under the aggregate Asian American category, these discrepancies are distorted and disguised (Her, 2014; Yang, 2004).

The U.S. Census Bureau (2000) reported that 59% of Hmong Americans, 52% of Cambodian Americans, and 49% of Laotian Americans have less than a high school diploma, compared to 8.6% of Japanese Americans (as cited in Ngo & Lee, 2007), as illustrated in Table 6. In a more recent report by CARE (2008), the numbers remained about the same, with 59.6% of Hmong Americans, 53.3% of Cambodian Americans, 49.6% of Laotian Americans, and 38.1% of Vietnamese Americans having less than a high school diploma, compared to 8.9% of Japanese Americans (as cited in Palmer & Maramba, 2015).

As illustrated in Table 6, among those who enroll in higher education in 2008, 47.5% of Hmong Americans, 46.5% of Laotian Americans, 42.9% of Cambodian Americans, and 33.7% of Vietnamese Americans who attended college did not end up earning a degree (Palmer & Maramba, 2015). In comparison, only 12.5% of Chinese Americans and 8.2% of Asian Indian Americans attended college but did not earn at least a bachelor’s degree. Compared to other Asian Americans, SEAs are more also likely to drop out of college or transfer for non-
academic reasons that may include lack of finances for education and perceptions of
discrimination (Maramba & Palmer, 2014; Palmer & Maramba, 2015). According to another
report, in 2010, 64.6% of Hmong Americans, 66.7% of Cambodian Americans, 67.5% of Laotian
Americans, and 69.8% of Vietnamese Americans had a high school education or higher,
compared to 85.9% of all Asian Americans (SEARAC, 2011).

Table 6

*Educational Attainment of Southeast Asian Americans Compared With Other Groups*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Less than high school</th>
<th>High school or higher*</th>
<th>Bachelor’s degree or higher</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2000a</td>
<td>2008b</td>
<td>2008b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEAs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambodian</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>53.3%</td>
<td>42.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hmong</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>59.6%</td>
<td>47.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laotian</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>49.6%</td>
<td>46.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>38.1%</td>
<td>33.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Asians</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian Indian</td>
<td></td>
<td>13.3%</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Asians</td>
<td>19.4%</td>
<td></td>
<td>85.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other races</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American</td>
<td>28.7%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic or Latino</td>
<td>48.3%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S. overall</td>
<td>19.6%</td>
<td></td>
<td>85.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* *High school or higher includes those who enrolled in higher education but did not end up earning a bachelor’s degree. SEAs = Southeast Asians.


*c* Adapted from “Southeast Asian Americans at a Glance: Statistics on Southeast Asians Adapted from the American Community Survey,” by Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC), 2011, p. 11.
Certain groups within the APA population “demonstrate very low college attendance and persistence rates” (Yeh, 2005, p. 81). As illustrated in Table 6, in 2000, while 42.7% of all Asian Americans aged 25 or older hold at least a bachelor’s degree, only 19.5% of Vietnamese Americans, 9.1% of Cambodian Americans, 7.6% of Laotian Americans, and 7.4% Hmong Americans do so (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000, as cited in Ngo & Lee, 2007). In 2010, while 48.9% of all Asian Americans aged 25 or older hold at least a bachelor’s degree, only 25.5% of Vietnamese Americans, 16% of Cambodian Americans, 14.8% Hmong Americans, and 13.2% of Laotian Americans do so (SEARAC, 2011). Although the percentages appear to have increased over 10 years, SEAAs still lag behind other Asian American groups when it comes to educational attainment.

A review of the distribution of APA students across different types of institutions provides a clearer picture of APA student enrollment trends. Of all the APAs enrolled in U.S. higher education institutions, 40% attend community colleges (Lew et al., 2005; Yeh, 2005). In the 2000-2001 academic year, they make up 15% of all students enrolled in two-year colleges. Contrary to popular belief that many APAs attend Ivy League schools, 82% of them actually attend public institutions (Yeh, 2005) and nearly half attend two-year institutions (Chang, 2008; National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research [CARE], 2008).

Between 1990 and 2000, AAPI enrollment in public two-year community colleges increased by 73.3% compared to 42.2% in public four-year colleges and 53.4% in private four-year colleges (CARE, 2008, 2010). In 2005, 47.3% of AAPI students were enrolled in community colleges (CARE, 2010).

An examination of the distribution of APA students across different states also provides another interesting perspective of APA student enrollment trends. The AAPI student population
is typically concentrated in just a small number of institutions and states, giving the false impression that they are overrepresented in higher education (CARE, 2008). In 2000, two-thirds of AAPI students attended only 200 institutions of higher education that are located in only eight states. Three-quarters of AAPI students attended 300 institutions of higher education across the U.S. Nearly half of all AAPI students attend institutions of higher education in the states of California, New York, and Texas. This distribution is frequently overlooked by researchers and policymakers.

There is also a gender disparity when it comes to educational attainment among SEAAs. In the Vietnamese culture, for example, males have a higher social status than females and boys receive more attention and esteem than do girls (Ngo & Lee, 2007). For Hmong Americans, “males gain status through education [while] females gain status through marriage and motherhood” (Ngo & Lee, 2007, p. 429). According to Ngo and Lee (2007), cultural pressure to marry and have children leads to high dropout rates for Cambodian girls as well. Furthermore, in the Lao culture, it is considered acceptable for high school boys in their late teens to court young Lao middle school girls, putting these young school-aged girls into the roles of prospective wives. All of these are significant barriers to educational persistence and attainment of SEAA females.

**Higher poverty rates.** SEAAs also face poverty rates above the national average (AALDEF, n.d.; Dhingra, 2003; Her, 2014; SEARAC, 2011). Almost 40% of Hmong Americans, Laotian Americans, and Cambodian Americans live in poverty (Lew et al., 2005; Nance, 2007a) compared to 13% of all Asian Americans (Nance, 2007a). Moreover, while some groups like Japanese American may have household incomes higher than Whites, many other Asian American households do not (S. M. Lee, 2002). These discrepancies are masked when all
Asian American groups are lumped together and their data are reported under the aggregate Asian American category (Her, 2014).

Table 7

Poverty Rates of Southeast Asian Americans Compared With Other Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2000a</th>
<th>2010b</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SEAs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambodian</td>
<td>29.3%</td>
<td>21.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hmong</td>
<td>37.8%</td>
<td>27.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laotian</td>
<td>18.5%</td>
<td>16.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>16.6%</td>
<td>15.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Asians</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filipino</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian Indian</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Asians</td>
<td>12.6%</td>
<td>12.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S. overall</td>
<td>12.4%</td>
<td>15.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

bAdapted from “Southeast Asian Americans at a Glance: Statistics on Southeast Asians Adapted from the American Community Survey,” by Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC), 2011, p. 13.

As illustrated in Table 7, disaggregated poverty rates of SEAA groups show their poverty rates to far exceeded the national average. In 2000, 37.8% of Hmong Americans, 29.3% of Cambodian Americans, 18.5% of Laotian Americans, and 16.6% of Vietnamese Americans lived in poverty, compared to 6.3% of Filipino Americans, 9.7% of Japanese Americans, 12.6% of Asian Americans, and 12.4% of the overall U.S. population (CARE, 2008). In 2010, the poverty rates for SEAAs remained high, particularly for Hmong Americans at 27.3% and Cambodian Americans at 21.3% (SEARAC, 2011). In the same census year, Laotian Americans and Vietnamese Americans had poverty rates of 16.4% and 15.2% respectively. Asian Americans, as an aggregate group, had a poverty rate of 12.4%, compared to 15.3% of the overall U.S. population.
### Table 8

**Income Levels of Southeast Asian Americans Compared With Other Groups**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Median family income</th>
<th>Median household income</th>
<th>Per capita income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1999(^a) 2010(^c)</td>
<td>2010(^c) 2010(^c)</td>
<td>2000(^b) 2010(^c)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SEAs</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambodian</td>
<td>$35,621</td>
<td>$49,210</td>
<td>$10,215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hmong</td>
<td>$32,384</td>
<td>$46,898</td>
<td>$6,613</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laotian</td>
<td>$43,542</td>
<td>$52,817</td>
<td>$11,454</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>$47,103</td>
<td>$56,958</td>
<td>$15,385</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other Asians</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>$70,849</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filipino</td>
<td>$65,189</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>$60,058</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian Indian</td>
<td>$70,708</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>All Asians</strong></td>
<td>$59,324</td>
<td>$75,964</td>
<td>$27,284</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other races</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td></td>
<td>$14,222</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian and Alaska Native</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>$14,267</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic or Latino</td>
<td></td>
<td>$12,111</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>$14,773</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td></td>
<td>$23,635</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S. overall</td>
<td>$50,046</td>
<td>$60,609</td>
<td>$21,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$50,046</td>
<td></td>
<td>$26,059</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\)Adapted from “We the People: Asians in the United States,” by T. J. Reeves and C. E. Bennett, 2004, p. 16.


\(^c\)Adapted from “Southeast Asian Americans at a Glance: Statistics on Southeast Asians Adapted from the American Community Survey,” by Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC), 2011, p. 15.

As illustrated in Table 8, in the 2000 census, Hmong Americans had the lowest per capita income of any racial and ethnic group included. Hmong Americans’ per capita income was $6,613 in 2000, compared to $14,267 for American Indians and Alaska Natives, $14,222 for Black or African Americans, and $12,111 for Hispanic or Latino Americans (as cited in Ngo &
Lee, 2007). The per capita income for the overall U.S. population that census year was $21,000. In the 2010 census, Hmong Americans continued to have the lowest per capita income of any racial and ethnic group included, with a per capita income of $10,605, compared to $27,284 for all Asian Americans and $26,059 for the overall U.S. population (SEARAC, 2011).

Hmong Americans also had the lowest median family income and median household income among Asian Americans, as illustrated in Table 8. Their median incomes were far below those of the national averages. In 1999, Hmong Americans had a median family income of $32,384, compared to $70,849 for Japanese Americans, $70,708 for Asian Indian Americans, $59,324 for Asian Americans, and $50,046 for the overall U.S. population (Reeves & Bennett, 2004). In 2010, Hmong Americans had a median family income of $46,898 and a median household income of $45,776, compared to $75,964 and $66,201 for Asian Americans and $60,609 and $50,046 for the overall U.S. population (SEARAC, 2011).

Southeast Asian American College Students

SEAAs “occupy a unique position in relation to this discourse of Asian American success” (Ngo & Lee, 2007, p. 416) and their experiences are shaped by polarized stereotypes of model minority and deviant minority (Chhuon & Hudley, 2008; Museus, 2013; Ngo & Lee, 2007). On one hand, they are viewed as the hardworking, over-achieving, and problem-free model minority (Museus, 2013; Museus & Buenavista, 2016; Ngo & Lee, 2007) that do not need academic support (Chhuon & Hudley, 2008; Her, 2014; Yang, 2004). On the other hand, they are also viewed as the deviant minority that includes high school dropouts, gang members, and welfare dependents (Museus, 2013; Ngo & Lee, 2007) who are perceived to be lazy, culturally deficient (Chhuon & Hudley, 2008), and incapable of success (Yang, 2004).
Neither stereotype adequately explains the complex experiences of SEAA college students (Museus, 2013). These stereotypes reduce their experiences to “binary extremes” (Ngo & Lee, 2007, p. 416) and continue to sustain society’s “prevailing dual perception” (Ngo, 2006, as cited in Chhuon & Hudley, 2008, p. 15) of SEAA groups. The low numbers of these students in higher education and their academic difficulties will remain invisible to educators, policymakers, and researchers if data and analyses on Asian American students continue to be inappropriately aggregated and if SEAA students continue to be aggregated into an “Other Asian” category.

**Trends and Statistics**

According to Han (2005), there is a substantial number of young people of Southeast Asian descent living in this country, with 45% of the SEAA population under the age of 20 compared to 28.5% of the national population. These young SEAAAs either arrived in the U.S. at a young age with their parents or were born in the U.S. Although they may not have experienced trauma firsthand, the phenomenon of transgenerational transmission of trauma has been well-documented by mental health clinicians.

While the negative impact of parental trauma on their children’s mental health among Holocaust victims has been well-documented (Han, 2005; Rodriguez, 2012) and it is likely that the children of SEAA refugees have been negatively impacted by war-related traumas as well, there is a gap in the empirical research and literature on children of Southeast Asian refugees (Han, 2005). A more recent study by a team at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai and the James J. Peters Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Bronx, New York revealed that descendants of Holocaust survivors have “different stress hormone profiles than their peers, perhaps predisposing them to anxiety disorders” (Rodriguez, 2015, para. 1). As Han’s (2005)
study focused on the adolescent children of Southeast Asian refugees, the impact and long-term consequences of war-related traumas on college-age children of Southeast Asian refugees remained largely unknown.

What is known is that compared to the national population, SEAA college students have relatively low rates of degree attainment. Although 28% of the overall national population over the age of 25 hold baccalaureate degrees, only 26% of Vietnamese Americans, 14% of Hmong Americans, 13% of Cambodian Americans, and 12% of Laotian Americans over the age of 25 hold baccalaureate degrees (Museus, 2013). In fact, according to data from the 2000 census, 38% of Vietnamese Americans, 49% of Laotian Americans, 52% of Cambodian Americans, and 59% of Hmong Americans have less than a high school education (Ngo & Lee, 2007).

There are many negative consequences that are associated with the low rates of degree attainment, including “lower lifetime earnings and higher poverty rates” (Museus, 2013, p. 709). These in turn lead to higher incarceration rates. Even as young children, SEAA students may have internalized their lack of success and inability to learn as their own personal or cultural attribute, thereby giving up on education altogether (Yang, 2004). In spite of the low rates of degree attainment among SEAAs, however, they are often denied attention and support in schools because of the “contradictory assumptions that they have no problems or are dysfunctional and do not deserve assistance” (Ngo & Lee, 2007, p. 416).

Factors Contributing Against the College Access and Success of Southeast Asian American College Students

According to Lew, Chang, and Wang (2005), APA students of immigrant backgrounds are less likely than native-born students to possess the social capital to successfully navigate the higher education system. For SEAA college students, most of whom are first-generation college students, their lack of economic, cultural, social, and linguistic capitals is compounded by other
challenges facing refugees and new immigrants. Since many refugees were less educated, illiterate, or may not have attended school before (Brydolf, 2009; Hsu et al., 2004; Ngo & Lee, 2007), had lower English proficiency (Hsu et al., 2004; Ngo & Lee, 2007), and generally also lacked job skills that were transferrable to the U.S. job market when they arrived (Bruno, 2011; Hsu et al., 2004; Ngo & Lee, 2007), they would not have the economic, cultural, social, and linguistic capital to pass on to their children, leaving their children at a disadvantage. Given the paucity of the literature on Southeast Asian refugees and SEAA college students, the adaptation process that they must navigate after their arrival in the U.S. and the effects of their immigration on their short-term and long-term well-being are also largely unknown.

**Lack of capital.** Bourdieu’s (1986) concept of capital encompasses more than financial wealth; it describes a more generalized resource that can be monetary or non-monetary and can take tangible or intangible forms (as cited in Anheier, Gerhards, & Romo, 1995). Bourdieu distinguished between three types of capital: economic, cultural, and social. Another type of capital that is related to social and cultural capitals is linguistic (Kanno & Kangas, 2014; Nawyn, Gjokaj, Agbényiga, & Grace, 2012). Many studies of social mobility and what determines academic achievement and professional accomplishment have focused on the roles of socioeconomic status and family resources that includes the three types of capital (Tramonte & Willms, 2010). Economists and sociologists alike have emphasized the link between family background and level of educational.

According to Tramonte and Willms (2010), “dominant status groups hold economic, political, and symbolical power, and their success depends on the use of their social and cultural capital in strategic ways” (p. 200). The possession of cultural and social capitals gives students an added advantage and is associated with positive educational outcomes (Dumais & Ward,
2010; Padgett, Johnson, & Pascarella, 2012). While higher education researchers have examined how Black and White college students use cultural capital and social capital to facilitate college success, very few researchers have used cultural capital or social capital to examine college access, retention, and persistence for AAPI college students in general (Maramba & Palmer, 2014; Palmer & Maramba, 2015). Existing literature on AAPI college students also does not take into account the retention and persistence of SEAA college students.

**Economic capital.** Economic capital refers to “monetary income as well as other financial resources and assets” (Anheier et al., 1995, p. 862). Typically, the higher a person’s social class or socioeconomic status, the more income that person would have and vice versa. This form of capital is most liquid and can be most easily transformed into other forms of capital. It is more difficult and even costlier to transform cultural and social capital into economic capital.

**Cultural capital.** Bourdieu (1997) further distinguished among three types of cultural capital: embodied, objectified, and institutionalized (as cited in Dumais & Ward, 2010). Embodied cultural capital is the form that is most frequently analyzed in research studies. Swartz (1997) described embodied cultural capital as “the ensemble of cultivated dispositions that are internalized by the individual through socialization and that constitute schemes of appreciation and understanding” (as cited in Dumais & Ward, 2010, p. 247).

The acquisition of cultural capital happens over time and happens in ways that are more disguised than the acquisition of other forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1973, 1997, as cited in Dumais & Ward, 2010). Parents typically socialize and invest in appropriate cultural training for their children. Compared to less-privileged families, upper-class families have more cultural
capital, they acquire cultural capital more seamlessly, and the cultural capital they acquire is more valuable. Cultural capital reinforces the social class structure and maintains the status quo.

**Social capital.** Bourdieu (1986) defined *social capital* as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition—or in other words, to membership in a group” (as cited in Palmer & Maramba, 2015, p. 46). Padgett, Johnson, and Pascarella (2012) described social capital as the “information, values, norms, standards, and expectations for education as communicated to individuals through the personal relationships they share with others” (p. 246). Group participation often reaps significant positive benefits for individuals.

In addition to monetary benefits, individuals with strong social capital are afforded many unique advantages over those with weak social capital (Padgett et al., 2012). In order to maximize their opportunities to attain resources, some individuals may purposely establish relationships with other individuals from more privileged backgrounds (Lin, 2001, 2005, as cited in Palmer & Maramba, 2015). While social capital can be used to facilitate goal achievement and resource gain, it can however, also be used as a “mechanism through which the ruling class seeks to maintain its hegemony” (Lin, 2001, as cited in Palmer & Maramba, 2015, p. 47).

**Linguistic capital.** Linguistic capital is a fundamental component of the larger social capital and cultural capital sets (Kanno & Kangas, 2014; Nawyn et al., 2012). Bourdieu (1991) connected language use to power (as cited in Nawyn et al., 2012), defining *linguistic capital* as “the acquired skills of speaking a dominant or ‘official’ language according to the specifications of those in power” (p. 258). The amount of power a person can claim in the social world depends on one’s linguistic ability and linguistic use (Kanno & Kangas, 2014). Children who
align their home language use with their school language use, for example, have an apparent advantage over those who do not. As such, native or native-like proficiency in academic English in the U.S., for example, is a highly desired form of capital (Kanno & Kangas, 2014).

People who are unable to speak the dominant language or unable to speak it fluently are perceived as inferior to those who speak it fluently, and they are positioned as the outsider (Kanno & Kangas, 2014). Their bilingualism is devalued and they may come to accept their limited opportunities as a result of their own linguistic deficits. This happens to immigrants even after they have achieved functional bilingualism, leaving them isolated from their receiving communities and creating intergenerational tensions between second-generation immigrant children and their parents and older siblings or relatives with limited dominant language ability.

**First-generation college students.** It is not clear how broadly first-generation status should be defined as there is a lack of consensus among researchers when it comes to the definition of first-generation status. There are variations in the definition of first-generation status among researchers depending on the type of data that is available and how the question regarding first-generation status is being asked. There is, however, a general consensus among researchers that there is a strong association between students’ interest level in college and the choices that students make regarding college and their parents’ educational attainment (A. A. Smith, 2015).

A *first-generation college student* can be defined as a student “whose parents have not attended college” (Dumais & Ward, 2010, p. 250) or “whose parents have earned a high school diploma or less” (Irlbeck, Adams, Akers, Burris, & Jones, 2014, p. 154). The U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Postsecondary Education (2011), for the purpose of the Federal TRIO Programs that provide resources and assistance to individuals from disadvantaged background
who are preparing for higher education and to students who are attending institutions of higher education, defines a first-generation college student as:

An individual both of whose parents did not complete a baccalaureate degree, or...in the case of any individual who regularly resided with and received support from only one parent, an individual whose only such parent did not complete a baccalaureate degree. (p. 9)

While the definition has a big impact on how many such students are included, there is not a big difference in how they fare in higher education (A. A. Smith, 2015). Regardless of the definition, first-generation college students enroll in college and graduate at lower rates compared to other students, and they are also less likely to pursue a four-year, baccalaureate degree.

According to new research from the University of Georgia’s Institute of Higher Education, while students whose parents have never attended college may have a lower level of interest in attending college compared to students with at least one parent who had attended college, students with only one parent who had attended college are still at a disadvantage when it comes to actually enrolling in college (A. A. Smith, 2015). Researchers from the Center for Community College Student Engagement at the University of Texas at Austin emphasized the need to have a better understanding of this population and the dynamics at play. Furthermore, the idea of a first-generation student has changed from what it was five decades ago. It may be tricky to determine whether or not a student is a first-generation college student if the student has a sibling or a close adult relative who has attended college.

In general, a first-generation college student is also more likely to come from a lower-income family, socialize less in high school, have lower standardized scores, lack access to information about college and career options, be less academically prepared for college, have not learned critical learning skills, lack important study and time management skills, start at a
community college or attend college part-time, work full-time, live off campus, participate in fewer co-curricular and extra-curricular activities, and have fewer resources and less support (Dumais & Ward, 2010; Irlbeck et al., 2014; Padgett et al., 2012). Overall, first-generation college students have lower enrollment rates, academic and social integration levels, grade point averages, and retention and graduation rates (Dumais & Ward, 2010).

When a first-generation college student arrives on a college campus, the student is entering into a different cultural experience (Irlbeck et al., 2014). In addition to entering and adjusting to a new school and environment, the student is also learning a whole new culture that involves unspoken rules and cultural norms (Dumais & Ward, 2010; Irlbeck et al., 2014). First-generation college students may receive less encouragement from their parents to attend college (Irlbeck et al., 2014), and even if their parents are supportive, they are not able to offer them much assistance in adjusting to and navigating the academic bureaucracy of college (Dumais & Ward, 2010; Irlbeck et al., 2014; Tang, Kim, & Haviland, 2013). They may feel out of place and intimidated and decide that college is not for them (Dumais & Ward, 2010; Tramonte & Willms, 2010).

The Role of Culture on Southeast Asian American College Students’ Success

Even though SEAA students and other marginalized groups may lack the traditional forms of capital, there are other forms of capital that they possess or have inherited and can utilize that traditional cultural capital theory does not value or recognize (Yosso, 2005). The traditional cultural capital theory uses White, middle-class culture as the standard and “refers to an accumulation of specific forms of knowledge, skills, and abilities that are valued by privileged groups in society” (Yosso, 2005, p. 76). This deficit approach and racialized assumption omit the voices of communities of color; they permeate the society and school systems. As a result,
students, parents, and communities of color are viewed as culturally deficient and expected to change to conform to the dominant group’s standards.

**Community cultural wealth.** Yosso (2005) conceptualized *community cultural wealth* as an alternative way of looking at cultural capital for communities of color through the lens of critical race theory (CRT). Community cultural wealth is the “array of knowledge, skills, abilities, and other contacts possessed and utilized by communities of color to survive and resist macro and micro forms of oppression” (Yosso, 2005, p. 77). The cultures, traditions, values, and knowledge of communities of color contribute toward the community cultural wealth that can nurture and empower students of color. Instead of being treated as liabilities, they should be treated as assets.

CRT expands the traditional White, middle-class view of cultural capital to include other forms of knowledge, skills, and abilities that are valued by marginalized groups within society. In addition to Bourdieu’s (1986) forms of capital, communities of color can nurture cultural wealth through other forms of capital such as familial, aspirational, navigational, and resistant capital. Yosso (2005) argued that schools need to move away from the outdated assumption that students of color are culturally deficient and lack the social and cultural capital necessary for social mobility.

**Cultural validation.** Another theory that does not take into account the histories and lives of communities of color or the experiences of students of color is Tinto’s (1993) theory of student’s social integration (Maramba & Palmer, 2014). Tinto’s (1993) theory encourages college students to separate themselves and become independent from their families and home communities in order to successfully integrate into college. Research studies on racial and ethnic minority students, however, have found *cultural validation*, which “involves recognizing,
respecting, and appreciating students as well as their families and communities” (Rendón, 1994, as cited in Maramba & Palmer, 2014, p. 517), to be a salient factor in their college retention and persistence. SEAA college students, who are critically underrepresented in higher education, already face a wide array of challenges in accessing and succeeding in college, and separating them from their main support network that lies outside of the campus environment could actually have a detrimental effect to their transition to and integration on campus.

Maramba and Palmer (2014) have found cultural validation to be very important for meeting SEAA students’ needs and in having a positive impact on their college success. Specifically, cultural validation helps fulfill the needs of the SEAA students in Maramba and Palmer’s (2014) study for (a) cultural knowledge through Asian American studies courses, ethnic studies courses, and courses with a focus on race and social justice issues, (b) cultural familiarity through connection with individuals who share or are familiar with their cultural backgrounds, (c) cultural expression through involvement in campus ethnic organizations, and (d) cultural advocacy through various opportunities to give back to the SEAA communities back home. Through all those opportunities, SEAA students learned about their own ethnic identity, found support in one another, and gained confidence in themselves.

Although Chhuon and Hudley (2008) and Tang, Kim, and Haviland (2013) did not use the same term of cultural validation in their studies of Cambodian American students, their study also found those students’ transition into the college environment to have been bolstered by maintaining contact with their family and friends back home. Additionally, both formal and informal forms of institutional support are significant for the students’ integration into campus life and their persistence. Positive contact with faculty members and involvement in ethnic-
based student organizations validated the students’ cultural heritage, nurtured their cultural pride, and helped them develop a sense of belonging on campus.

**Cultural community connections.** Museus, Shiroma, and Dizon’s (2016) study also investigated the role of culture in shaping SEAA students’ college experience and the influence of connections to cultural communities on their college experience. Specifically, their findings revealed three types of cultural community connections that are interconnected: (a) physical cultural connections, (b) epistemological cultural connections, and (c) transformational cultural connections. The researchers found these cultural community connections to have a positive influence on SEAA students’ educational trajectories and support their college persistence. The SEAA students in their study reported being able to connect with those from similar cultural backgrounds, have opportunities to learn about their own cultural communities, and have opportunities to give back to their cultural communities, and these connections were critical to their persistence and success in college.

**Alternative forms of capital for Southeast Asian American college students.** Tang et al.’s (2013) study on Cambodian American students built upon Yosso’s (2005) model of community cultural wealth to identify other important sources of capital for first-generation college students that are distinct from Bourdieu’s (1986) traditional forms of capital. The researchers identified familial and aspirational capitals that could serve as an extension of cultural capital. They also identified navigational capital that could serve as an extension of social and linguistic capitals.

**Familial and aspirational capitals.** Yosso (2005) defined familial capital as the “cultural knowledges nurtured among familia (kin) that carry a sense of community history, memory, and cultural intuition” (p. 79). Even though the parents of first-generation college students could not
help them navigate the journey to and through college, they may be able to provide them with “consistent non-academic support” (Tang et al., 2013, p. 12) such as motivating them, instilling the value of education in them, stating their expectations for them to attain higher education, making sure they follow through on their efforts to achieve their academic goals, and holding them accountable for their performance. In general, however, the students’ family members may disapprove of their participation in extra-curricular activities as they do not see the educational benefits of involvement on campus.

The students also drew upon their aspirations for a better life and the belief that a college degree would lead to a better quality of life to motivate them despite the obstacles that they had to overcome (Tang et al., 2013). Yosso (2005) called this aspirational capital, “the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers” (p. 77). Even though they may lack the objective means to attain their goals, parents “allow themselves and their children to dream of possibilities beyond their present circumstances” (Yosso, 2005, p. 78), nurturing a culture of possibility and maintaining high aspirations for their future.

Navigational capital. Yosso (2005) defined navigational capital as the “skills of maneuvering through social institutions” (p. 80). The students in Tang et al.’s (2013) study recognized the benefits of extra-curricular activities because of the important role that their peers play in connecting them to their language and culture, in validating their presence on campus, in helping them navigate their college experience, and in providing them with social support on campus. Students’ participation in ethnic-based and cultural organizations helps them develop navigational skills that could be vital to their academic success and persistence, especially when they are part of an underrepresented group on campus (Chhuon & Hudley, 2008; Tang et al.,
These organizations also help strengthen students’ familial capital by enabling them to better relate to their families and culture.

**Programs and Services for Southeast Asian American College Students**

Higher education administrators, staff, and faculty at various institutions across the country have started to recognize the needs of SEAA students and made efforts to ensure the success of SEAA students on their campuses. Support services that exist for SEAA students range from student-led organizations such as University of California at Berkeley’s Southeast Asian Student Coalition and Yale University’s Alliance for Southeast Asian Students to offices such as University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee’s Southeast Asian-American Student Services and University of Washington’s Southeast Asian Community, Education, and Leadership Network. University of Michigan, Ohio University, and Northern Illinois University are just a few examples of institutions of higher education in the Midwest that have a center for Southeast Asian studies that offer foreign language courses as well as courses exploring issues in culture, history, philosophy, politics, economics, religion, and literature, among others.

At the national level, there are organizations such as the Southeast Asia Resource Action Network (SEARAC), a national organization that advances the interests of SEAAAs, advocates for the disaggregation of achievement and education attainment data for AAPI ethnic student groups, and supports community organizing for education policy reform (http://www.searac.org). The organization was founded in 1979 to facilitate the relocation and transition of Southeast Asian refugees into their receiving communities but has evolved into an organization that provides advocacy and policy leadership for the SEAA community and publishes original research. SEARAC also engages in coalition work and is involved with organizations such as the National Council of Asian Pacific Americans (NCAPA), CARE, the AANAPISI Work
Group, and Refugee Council USA. SEARAC continues to work with community members and policymakers to advocate for SEAA students and address the needs of SEAA students.

**Conclusions and Implications for This Study**

A review of the literature revealed the diversity and complexity of the APA population and APA subgroups’ experiences and history, a modest but growing body of literature on APA and SEAA undergraduate students’ experiences in higher education, a gap in our knowledge of this population, the need to disaggregate the ethnic groups under the APA umbrella to provide a deeper and clearer understanding of each subgroup (Chhuon & Hudley, 2008; Her, 2014; Maramba & Palmer, 2014; Palmer & Maramba, 2015), and the need to further conduct empirical investigation and qualitative exploration on the experiences of this population.

APAs are found at both the highest and lowest levels of the achievement and educational attainment spectrum (Brydolf, 2009; Poon, 2010) as well as income spectrum (S. J. Lee et al., 2009). SEAAs’ experiences are also shaped by polarized stereotypes of model minority and deviant minority (Chhuon & Hudley, 2008; Museus, 2013; Ngo & Lee, 2007). Finally, traditional theories that use White, middle-class culture as the standard do not take into account marginalized groups’ cultural values, traditions, and beliefs (Maramba & Palmer, 2014; Yosso, 2005). These are all topics that warrant further exploration.

In spite of the growing awareness of and scholarship on the complexity of APA student experience in higher education, there is limited research on SEAA college students whose families have come to the U.S. as refugees. The majority of the existing research on APAs focused on the structural overrepresentation and higher performance and on success indicators that have led to the aggregated APA population being labeled a “model minority.” It continues to reinforce a one-dimensional perspective of APA needs on college campuses. As a result, the
importance of considering APAs as a group and SEAAs as subgroups that should be included in the discourse of historically marginalized population has been minimized and overlooked.

Although there are intragroup differences, gender role expectations and gender differences, disparate income levels, different educational levels, and dissimilar immigration status and circumstances, as well as a long history of APA oppression, aggregated data and statistics often lump all APAs together as if they have the same traits, stereotyping and labeling them as the model minority. These factors have rendered APAs and their oppression invisible, particularly for those who do not fit the model minority stereotype. While APAs represent one of the fastest growing populations in higher education and in the U.S., as a group, they are underserved in higher education as the misunderstood and marginalized model minority.

This study provides a better understanding and sheds light on the experiences and specific needs of this invisible minority and the various barriers and challenges faced by first-generation college students of Southeast Asian descent, whose families have resettled in the United States as refugees, throughout their college journey. This study also delves into the circumstances surrounding SEAAs’ forced immigration and how their experience influence their college experience. Finally, this study explores the impact of community or lack thereof for SEAA college students living in low ethnic concentration areas.

In addition to allowing student affairs professionals to better serve the specific and distinct needs of these students, the knowledge produced by this study assists policymakers in examining the intentions and rationale behind the policies, not just the statistics of the policies. With the knowledge produced by this study, student affairs professionals and policymakers have a better understanding and are better equipped to address the issues surrounding the lack of programs and services for SEAA students.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Chapter Overview

In Chapters I and II, I highlighted the practical and research problems as well as the gap in the current literature as it pertains to understanding the experiences of first-generation college students of Southeast Asian descent from families that have resettled in the United States as refugees. Chapter I served as an overview of the study, describing the problem and the purpose of this research study, and introducing the research questions that guided this study. Chapter II synthesized the current literature on Asian Pacific American (APA) and Southeast Asian American (SEAA) immigration history, demographics, intragroup differences, current issues and challenges, as well as the importance of disaggregating the data on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs).

In this chapter, I provide an overview of the methodology used in this study, specifically the phenomenological approach that was utilized and details including participants and sampling, the data collection and data analysis procedures, as well as trustworthiness and quality assurance procedures. In addition, I discuss my researcher subjectivity and reflexivity and noted the limitations and delimitations of this study.

Overview of Methods

This phenomenological study explored the experiences of first-generation college students of Southeast Asian descent in the Midwest from families that have resettled in the
United States as refugees. Specifically, this phenomenological inquiry developed a deeper understanding about the experiences of these students and the meaning of their college experience. The phenomenological exploration of these students also allowed for a deeper dive into the way in which these students’ experiences may reflect the nuance of their family’s forced migration.

This study was guided by this overarching question: What is the experience of first-generation college students of Southeast Asian descent in the Midwest whose families have resettled in the United States as refugees? Three additional sub-questions guided this inquiry:

1. Where and how do these students’ cultural background and refugee or forced migration status influence their life aspirations and expectations for their college experience?
2. Where and how do these students’ cultural heritage and refugee or forced migration status influence how they view and conduct themselves as college students?
3. What is the impact of community or lack thereof for SEAA students living in a low ethnic concentration area and how has that influenced their college experience?

In this chapter, I describe the design of this study that is framed by an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach. Next, I describe the context and setting of the study as well as the participants and sampling procedures. I then outline my methods and procedures for data collection and analysis. During the epoché phase of this inquiry, I disclose my connection with this topic and particular population and how I controlled for this research bias. I also discuss the challenges to qualitative research and my procedures to assess reliability and validity. Finally, I disclose the limitations and delimitations of this study.
Research Design

This qualitative design utilized a phenomenological approach to identify “the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants” (Creswell, 2009, p. 13). A phenomenology is the “study of the world as it appears to individuals when they lay aside the prevailing understandings of those phenomena and revisit their immediate experience of the phenomena” (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007, p. 495). As a qualitative researcher, my job is to elicit a more authentic version of participants’ experience of a phenomenon, not just the common or widespread understanding of the phenomenon.

Phenomenological interviews have been quite successfully used in studies about “the challenges of identity development of refugees” (Mosselson, 2006, as cited in Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 149) and can be a suitable approach for exploring the experiences of the SEAA refugee population as well. This phenomenological study sought to, therefore, describe “the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, p. 57) and highlight what they have in common while also noting where and how the sample of participants for this study might also present a range or diversity of experiences.

The IPA approach, in particular, involves a detailed examination of the participants’ lived experience (J. A. Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2013; J. A. Smith & Osborn, 2008). This approach moves away from the “descriptive commitments and transcendental interests…[and toward] a more interpretative and worldly position with a focus on understanding the perspectival directedness of our involvement in the lived world” (J. A. Smith et al., 2013, p. 21). IPA focuses on the participants’ attempts to make meanings out of their experience and on the matter of interpretation. IPA is also concerned with examining how a particular phenomenon appears and
with the particular instances of the lived experience. It is important that a particular experience be “expressed in its own terms, rather than according to predefined category systems” (J. A. Smith et al., 2013, p. 32).

Specifically, the IPA approach was selected because identity is a central concern in IPA studies (J. A. Smith et al., 2013). In IPA research, participants are likely to link the research topic to their sense of self and self-identity. Timotijevic and Breakwell (2000), for example, used the IPA approach to explore how migration impacts the identity of Yugoslavian migrants to the United Kingdom (as cited in J. A. Smith et al., 2013). According to J. A. Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2013), “much of IPA work is around identity changes associated with major life transitions” (p. 163). Because of these striking features of IPA, this approach was particularly salient to an understanding of how SEAAs whose families have resettled in the U.S. as refugees make meaning of their college experience.

**Context and Setting of Study**

The study was conducted with undergraduate students who attended various U.S. institutions of higher education in the Midwest. In order to study the impact of community or the lack thereof for SEAA students, this study focused on the Midwestern states of Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, and Ohio, where there are lower ethnic concentrations of SEAAs, but not too low that there would be severe challenges in recruiting participants.

**Participants and Sampling**

This study utilized a criterion sample of eight SEAA undergraduate students enrolled in U.S. institutions of higher education in the Midwest. The population in this study was limited to undergraduate students who have self-identified as SEAA, are of Cambodian, Hmong, Lao, or Vietnamese descent, have attended high school in the U.S., are first-generation college students,
and whose parents had been accepted into the U.S. under refugee status. Criterion sampling was used because it “works well when all individuals studied represent people who have experienced the phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, p. 128) and “includes all cases that meet some criterion [and is therefore] useful for quality assurance” (Creswell, 2007, p. 127; Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 111).

It was also important to find a sample that is fairly homogenous, “for whom the research question will be meaningful” (J. A. Smith et al., 2013, p. 49). The participants in this study granted me access and represented a particular perspective of the phenomenon being studied. J. A. Smith et al. (2013) recommend a sample size between three and six participants for a student project using the IPA approach but do not have a specific number for doctoral studies.

As the primary concern of IPA studies is quality and not quantity, I started my study with eight participants to see if I would reach saturation, with plans to increase my sample size if I did not reach saturation through the first eight participants. To maintain feasibility of a dissertation study, I capped the sample size at 14 participants, with plans to recruit two additional participants at a time and to acknowledge my remaining limitations to saturation after full analysis of the data has been completed.

Recruitment and Sampling Procedures

There were three main participant recruitment methods. First, I solicited the assistance of faculty and staff members who worked closely with SEAA college students at institutions of higher education in the Midwest. I disclosed my social identity and high level of personal interest to gain access from these individuals (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). This was especially important in my study as I would be approaching individuals who were scholars and advocates of APA and SEAA students. Furthermore, because of the purposive sampling methods used in
IPA, participants might be more difficult to access and it was important for me as the researcher to establish a rapport with these individuals who worked closely with my potential participants (J. A. Smith et al., 2013).

Second, I recruited participants through social media by posting in the various APA and SEAA interest groups I belonged to and pages I followed on Facebook, such as “Southeast Asian Student Coalition [SASC],” “Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC),” “Midwest Asian American Students Union (MAASU),” “Asian Pacific Americans in Higher Education,” “Research on the Education of Asian and Pacific Americans (REAPA),” “Association for Asian American Studies (Official AAAS site),” and other similar or related groups and pages. Finally, I recruited participants using the snowball sampling method through each participant I interviewed and through my personal contacts. In order to acquire my sample, three sampling methods were employed: criterion sampling, maximum variation sampling, and snowball sampling.

**Criterion sampling.** In order to obtain the criterion sample of SEAA undergraduate students, I solicited the assistance of individuals who worked in or with Asian American studies programs, Asian Pacific American student organizations, multicultural resource centers, and ethnic studies programs, as well as faculty members from other academic departments who have expressed a teaching or research interest in issues and experiences of Asian Americans or SEAAAs on their faculty profile page. I asked those faculty and staff members to distribute an email solicitation for participation in this study through their departmental listservs or other electronic means to recruit participants who matched my study’s criteria. I also asked them to post flyers throughout their departments and around campus.
The criteria for participation in my study were clearly listed in the emails, posts, and flyer (see Appendix C) to make sure that only people who have experienced the phenomenon would be included in my study. Specifically, students who were interested in participating in my study were directed to follow the link in the email or flyer that would take them to an online consent form and short demographic questionnaire (see Appendix D). Their responses to the survey questions helped me determine whether or not they indeed matched the criteria to be included in my study. They were assured that if their responses did not match the criteria for the study, their information would not be recorded or retained.

**Maximum variation sampling.** This study also utilized a maximum variation sampling strategy to select participants with the most diverse variations among a larger group of potential participants that already match the study’s criteria (Creswell, 2007; Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Merriam, 2009). I wanted to make sure that I have a varied sample so that I could gain a better understanding and representation of SEAA students (Chhuon & Hudley, 2008; Palmer & Maramba, 2015). In this phenomenological study, differences among subgroups were noted along with commonalities.

In order to provide a deeper and clearer understanding of each SEAA group and SEAA students’ educational attainment, it is important to further disaggregate the ethnic groups within this sub-category of APAs (Chhuon & Hudley, 2008; Her, 2014; Maramba & Palmer, 2014; Palmer & Maramba, 2015). Due to the larger population of Vietnamese Americans and Hmong Americans in the U.S. and in the Midwest compared to Cambodian Americans and Laotian Americans (Hmong National Development, Inc. [HND], 2013; Pfiefer, 2000a, 2000b; Southeast Asia Resource Action Center [SEARAC], 2011), I knew it was highly likely for me to have an oversampling of Vietnamese Americans and Hmong Americans. It was, therefore, important
that I took extra measures to ensure that each Southeast Asian subgroup was represented in my study. I was intentional in seeking out a sample that represent different Southeast Asian ethnic backgrounds (Maramba & Palmer, 2014).

I also attempted to seek out a gender-balanced sample. This is because there are different and intense gendered stereotypes associated with Asian men and Asian women (Balón, 2004) as well as different gender role expectations for Asian men and Asian women (Dundes, Cho, & Kwak, 2009); gender has been found to be a salient factor for SEAA families as well (Ngo & Lee, 2007). There is also a disproportionate representation of men in higher education leadership positions within the Asian and Asian American umbrella group (S. M. Lee, 2002), resulting in a severe shortage of mentors and positive role models for women of Asian descent.

Compared to Asian males, the Asian females in Dundes, Cho, and Kwak’s (2009) study were twice as likely to be influenced by their parents in their decisions surrounding college and graduate school. There are also significant barriers to educational persistence for SEAA females, with males having a higher cultural status and gaining status through education, while females face cultural pressure to marry and have children (Ngo & Lee, 2007). APA scholars have found APA women in higher education to “endure spaces of difference that are gendered and sexualized, as well as racialized” (Hune, 2006, p. 20). The gender balance would allow me to note any gender differences, or lack thereof, in the participants’ higher education experience.

**Snowball sampling.** Snowball sampling was also employed to recruit additional participants. I asked each participant I interviewed to refer me to other participants who might match the criteria (Merriam, 2009). This strategy was very helpful in my study since it was challenging for me to locate potential participants who match my study’s criteria and give me a varied sample. Using the snowball sampling strategy, I identified additional participants from
the current participants who knew other members or organizations in their community who
might be information-rich (Creswell, 2007; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). I also asked my
personal contacts who identified as Asian American or SEAA to refer me to potential
participants who might match the criteria for participation in my study.

**Informed Consent Process**

Students who were interested in participating in the research study were directed to a
consent form and short demographic questionnaire (see Appendix D) to help me determine if
they matched the criteria for the study. The students were informed of the fact that they might or
might not be invited to participate based on their responses as well as the study’s need for
maximum variation. Before they could fill out the demographic questionnaire, they have to give
consent by signing their names electronically. If their responses did not match the criteria for the
study, their information was not be recorded or retained. The students had the opportunity to
contact me and ask me questions before signing the consent form electronically. I discussed how
to respond to the questions received from potential participants with my dissertation chair if I
was not able to answer them.

Before beginning each interview, I asked the participant to read and sign a consent form
(see Appendix I), which I had previously emailed to him or her. If and when necessary, I
reassured participants that the interview was confidential and completely voluntary. I let
participants know that they had the right to not answer any question and to let me know if they
felt uncomfortable during the interview. I reminded the participants that I might say very little
throughout the interview process because I wanted to focus on listening to them. Finally, I made
sure that participants knew that they might stop the interview and leave at any time without
penalty if at any point during the interview they had a change of mind about participating. Once the informed consent form had been signed, we would officially begin the interview.

**Data Collection**

A semi-structured in-depth interview process provided me as the researcher with the parameters that specifically addressed the research topic but at the same time the flexibility to explore and discover new and unexpected sources of information (Merriam, 2009). The interview protocol for this proposed study included a few open-ended questions that could be asked in no particular order, were cross-culturally adaptable, and could be altered as appropriate as the interviews progressed (see Appendix J). Because I analyzed the data from each interview before conducting the next interview, the findings from each interview helped shape the questions for the next interview as appropriate.

While I have gathered my data through interviews, as a qualitative researcher, I was the key instrument of data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009). The success of the interviews depended on my interpersonal skills as the researcher (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). It was, therefore, important for me to identify and monitor my biases and subjectivities to see how they might be shaping my collection and interpretation of the data throughout this study. It was also important for me to find a “comfortable ‘research persona’” (J. A. Smith et al., 2013, p. 67) for myself.

An in-depth face-to-face interview was conducted with each participant to allow for a more detailed examination of the participants’ lived experience (J. A. Smith et al., 2013; J. A. Smith & Osborn, 2008). Each interview took approximately one to two hours, depending on how much each participant had to share and how frequently short breaks were taken. Participants were asked to block off at least three hours for the interview, even if they expected
the interview to be shorter. This would allow for travel time. I emailed an electronic copy of the consent form (see Appendix I) for the participants to review when I confirmed the interview date, time, and location with them.

The first part of the interview focused on getting to know the participants, particularly their personal and ethnic identities as well as their and their families’ refugee resettlement experiences. The second part of the interview focused on connecting what the participants shared in the first part of the interview to their college experience. The structure as well as the order of topics to be covered in the interviews were intentionally designed to progress to more sensitive topics as trust develop between me and the participants.

The main purpose of these questions was to encourage the participants to focus on the phenomenon and to reflect on their experience and the implications of the phenomenon in their college experience. After all, a qualitative research interview can be aptly described as “a conversation with a purpose” (J. A. Smith et al., 2013, p. 57). It was important that I showed the participants that I was interested in them as individuals and in their experiences, and that there were no right or wrong answers to the interview questions (J. A. Smith et al., 2013).

Participants were asked probes to acquire additional detail or clarification throughout the interview. Additional prompts were also added for subsequent interviews if repetitive and consistent issues came up during previous interviews. I contacted participants, as necessary, with follow-up questions after the interviews to clarify the information that they had provided or to encourage them to dig even deeper and further reflect upon the meaning of their experience.

**Pilot Interviews**

Western Michigan University, a large public institution in the Midwest with a 1.62% Asian American undergraduate student population in 2014 (Western Michigan University, Office
of Institutional Research, 2014) and a 1.83% Asian American undergraduate student population in 2015 (Western Michigan University, Office of Institutional Research, 2015), was selected as the site to conduct pilot interviews so that problematic areas in the data collection method could be uncovered and corrected. No significant changes were made to the data collection method that warranted a resubmission to the Human Subject Institutional Research Board (HSIRB) for approval. One student who matched the criteria was recruited to participate in the pilot study. This participant was not be included in the actual study.

**Interview Procedures**

Before the interviews began, I introduced myself and disclosed my background and motivation for conducting the study. I walked each participant through the informed consent process and answered any questions that came up. First, participants were reminded of the estimated duration of the interview, which was one to two hours. Participants were also informed that the interview would be audio-recorded and that some written notes might be taken throughout the interview. Participants were asked to select a pseudonym at the beginning of the interview. Participants were then reminded that an interview protocol (see Appendix J) would be used and that I would refer to the protocol throughout the interview as a guide.

Next, I reassured participants that the interview was confidential and their participation was completely voluntary. I let participants know that they had the right to not answer any question and to let me know if they felt uncomfortable during the interview. I reminded the participants that I might say very little throughout the interview process because I wanted to focus on listening to them. Finally, I made sure that participants knew they could stop the interview and leave at any time without penalty if at any point during the interview they had a change of mind about participating. Once we had established these things, we officially began
Throughout the interview process, I drew upon my own cultural experiences to find commonalities with the participants to put them at ease and to gain trust.

**Participant confidentiality.** Although anonymity might not be possible due to the nature of the study, strict measures were taken to ensure confidentiality. To protect participants’ confidentiality, the face-to-face interviews were conducted in a private location on each participant’s campus, such as a conference room, meeting room, or a classroom. It was important to pick a location that was comfortably familiar to each participant but also safe for all parties, including me (J. A. Smith et al., 2013).

At the beginning of the interview, participants were instructed to choose a pseudonym that would be used throughout the study to refer to them so that their real names did not have to be used. I cautioned them against choosing pseudonyms that might make them identifiable to others who knew them well. These pseudonyms were used to protect the participants’ identities, give them anonymity in my final report, and ensure their confidentiality was not breached (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

**Interview setting.** The location of the interview was also free from any distractions or interruptions. All cellular phones and other electronic devices were set to silent for the entire duration of the interviews. Each interview took one to two hours and was audio-recorded. Some short written notes were also taken to allow me to identify opportunities to probe or ask follow-up questions or to help shape the questions for the next interviews as appropriate, although I was mindful not to let this intimidate or distract the participants.

**Exit strategy.** To be mindful of reciprocity when planning an exit strategy (Marshall & Rossman, 2011), at the conclusion of the interview, I presented each participant with a $25 movie theater gift card, gave an opportunity to the participant to ask any additional questions he
or she might still have about the study or my background, and offered to send the participant two to three articles related to the topic of my study if he or she was interested. Participants who needed support after the interview were provided with access to appropriate support on their respective campuses and resources online. Immediately following each interview, field notes of the observation and my reactions to the interview were recorded in a researcher’s journal.

**Transcription.** The interviews were transcribed with the help of a transcription software called Express Scribe. This transcription software features variable speed playback and plays the MP3 audio file format (http://www.nch.com.au/scribe) in which the interview audio files were saved. Playback can be controlled using either the mouse or hotkeys on the keyboard. This transcription software works with speech recognition software to convert speech to text as well. I did not use a speech recognition software, however, and the free version of Express Scribe served the transcription needs of this study adequately. I used this transcription software to play the audio at a lower speed whenever necessary as I typed the transcripts from each interview in a Word document. I was also able to bookmark certain points of each audio file for later reference or to jump directly to at a later time.

Although the IPA approach does require a verbatim and semantic record of the interviews, it does not require a particularly specific “record of the exact length of pauses, or of all non-verbal utterance” (J. A. Smith et al., 2013, p. 74). This is because the main focus of analysis in IPA is on the interpretation of the meaning of the content of participants’ accounts and not to analyze the conversations. I transcribed all the words that were spoken and included all notable non-verbal utterances, significant pauses, and hesitations when relevant as well. According to O’Connell and Kowal (1995), there is no point in transcribing information that will not be analyzed (as cited in J. A. Smith et al., 2013).
Data Analysis

Once the interviews were transcribed, I began the data analysis process. I began analyzing data from the first interview and determined the level of saturation. I used the constant comparative method of data analysis to saturate the categories, continually revising, modifying, and amending emergent themes, checking them against the data, and continuing to interview participants until the new information I obtained provided no further insight into the categories (Creswell, 2007; Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Rudestam & Newton, 2007). I compared one segment of data to another to find similarities and differences, grouping data together to form categories (Merriam, 2009). While the constant comparative method is commonly used to build a grounded theory, it does not necessarily have to result in a substantive theory and is widely used in other types of qualitative studies as well.

I continued to analyze data from each interview before proceeding to the next interview and used the findings from each interview to help shape the questions for the next interview as appropriate. This allowed me to recruit additional participants as needed as I conducted the interviews instead of waiting until I had finished all eight interviews. If necessary, I would recruit two additional participants at a time, capping my sample size at 14. When I began to see or hear the same patterns repeatedly in the interviews, I knew that I had saturation of data (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

My data analysis process included a combination of J. A. Smith et al.’s (2013) steps to IPA analysis and Creswell’s (2007) steps to phenomenological analysis, adapting and combining them when and where necessary. J. A. Smith et al.’s (2013) suggested steps are: (1) reading and re-reading, (2) initial noting, (3) developing emergent themes, (4) searching for connections across emergent themes, (5) moving to the next case, and (6) looking for patterns across cases.
Creswell’s (2007) suggested steps are: (1) describing the researcher’s personal experiences of the phenomenon under study, (2) developing a list of significant statements, (3) clustering significant statements into themes or meaning units, (4) writing a textural description, (5) writing a structural description, and (6) writing a composite description of the phenomenon that incorporates both the textural and structural descriptions.

**Describing Personal Experiences**

First, it was important for me, as the researcher, to set aside my personal experiences with the phenomenon as much as possible so that I could focus on the study and the participants (Creswell, 2007). I wrote a full description of my own experiences that were relevant to my motivation to conduct this research study, thereby bracketing off my experiences from those of my research participants (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). By setting aside my own experiences as much as possible, I could then take a fresh perspective toward the current phenomenon that I was studying (Creswell, 2007). This way, I was able to have my findings conform to the data and not to my assumptions.

**Reading and Re-reading**

In this step, I immersed myself in the original data and listened to the audio-recordings as I read the transcripts for the first time. It was my goal to make sure that the participants became the focus of my analysis. As I read these transcripts, I made notes that I could go back to later so as not to distract myself from the remaining data. At that point, I was beginning the process to enter the participants’ world and a phase when I would be actively engaged with the data. I reread the transcripts to help me “gain an understanding of how narratives can bind certain sections of an interview together” (J. A. Smith et al., 2013, p. 82). This also gave me a better appreciation of how I have built rapport and trust with my participants during the interviews.
Initial Noting

My aim in this step was to produce a set of notes and comments on the data that were comprehensive and detailed. J. A. Smith et al. (2013) suggested using a hard copy of each transcript with wide margins to do the analysis and write comments. The left margin can be used for initial comments and notes while the right margin can be used for emergent themes in the next stage, or vice versa. I did this using the comments feature in Word instead. These comments and notes were date stamped, allowing me to document my data analysis process.

This step was further broken down into three discrete processes, each with a different focus: (a) descriptive comments, which were focused on describing the content; (b) linguistic comments, which were focused on examining the specific use of language; and (c) conceptual comments; which were focused on “engaging at a more interrogative and conceptual level” (J. A. Smith et al., 2013, p. 84). I worked on each section of the transcript and first annotated the section with descriptive comments, went back to examine it and annotated it with linguistic comments, and revisited it once again to annotate it with conceptual comments.

In Vivo Coding

The coding step is the “formal representation of analytic thinking” (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 212). According to Saldaña (2013), “qualitative inquiry demands meticulous attention to language and deep reflection on the emergent patterns and meanings of human experience” (p. 10). I strived to come up with codes and categories that were as refined as possible by engaging in several cycles of coding, rearranging, reclassifying, adding, or dropping categories as necessary.

While coding using qualitative computing packages may seem easy, it can be a trap for researchers (Richards, 2015). Software tends to revise or remove seemingly extraneous
categories but at the same time does not have a restriction on the number of categories, so it often stops emerging ideas and can also significantly delay a project. Throughout the coding process, I kept reminding myself that all coding must have a purpose and not to let coding become a routine. I also reminded myself to do all the descriptive coding efficiently and strived for a good balance between topic and analytical coding.

I used in vivo coding as my coding method because this method is particularly helpful for novice qualitative researchers who are learning how to code data (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014; Saldaña, 2013). In vivo coding is also known as “literal coding” or “verbatim coding” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 91); it uses “words or short phrases from the participant’s own language in the data record as codes” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 74). It refers to “categories named by words occurring ‘live’ in the data, when people studied themselves using those words” (Richards, 2015, p. 113). It was, therefore, an appropriate method for highlighting the participants’ voices (Miles et al., 2014; Saldaña, 2013).

**Writing Analytic Memos**

In this step, I used analytic memo writing to organize my thoughts on how the data were coming together and used the original literature review to stimulate my thoughts (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Saldaña (2013) likened analytic memos to researcher journal entries or blogs where the researcher would write freely about what is going on through his or her mind whenever anything related to and significant about the coding and data analysis processes comes to mind. Analytic memos act as prompts and triggers for a researcher when the researcher reflects on the deeper and complex meanings of a code. Saldaña (2013) distinguished analytic memos from field notes, which are the researcher’s written documentation that may include the personal and subjective responses to as well as interpretations of an observed encounter.
According to Marshall and Rossman (2011), “writing notes, reflective memos, thoughts, and insights is invaluable for generating the unusual insights that move the analysis from the mundane and obvious to the creative” (p. 213). Writing helped me identify connections across and gaps in coded data and kept me focused on my study. Keeping notes also helped me keep an account of all the design decisions I made in the field. It was also important for me to remember that my own comments and reflections were data as well, because “qualitative data are not collected, but made collaboratively by the researcher and the researched” (Richards, 2015, p. 52).

**Developing Emergent Themes**

This step involved an analytic shift from working with the transcripts to working with my initial notes (J. A. Smith et al., 2013). I analyzed my comments to identify and develop emergent themes. I found and listed significant statements from the interviews, or horizontalized the data, placed equal value on every statement or piece of data from the interviews, and developed a list of statements that were nonrepetitive and nonoverlapping (Creswell, 2007). At this point, my “uncoordinated collection of ideas [was] transformed into a filing system” (Richards, 2015, p. 131).

According to Richards (2015), looking for in vivo categories is a valuable technique. I used this technique to name my categories using words that the participants themselves used during the interviews. The themes reflected both the participants’ original words and thoughts and my interpretation of the meaning of the content of their account (J. A. Smith et al., 2013). The themes also “[brought] together a range of understandings relating directly to both participant and analyst” (J. A. Smith et al., 2013, p. 92). It was important to give the categories clear and distinct names so that they were not misleading (Richards, 2015). I also used descriptions to help remind me of definitions and how I wanted each category to work.
Searching for Connections and Pattern Across Cases

Once I established a set of themes within the transcripts, I organized them to see how they would fit together. I moved themes around to form groups of related themes (J. A. Smith et al., 2013) called meaning units or clusters of meaning (Creswell, 2007). Some themes fit well with others while others needed to be discarded. I looked for patterns across participants’ transcripts to figure out how a theme in one transcript could help illuminate another transcript (J. A. Smith et al., 2013).

Writing Descriptions of the Phenomenon

The next steps included writing descriptions of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). The first description was the structural description. This description focused on what the participants experienced and included some verbatim examples. The second description was the textural description. This description focused on how the experience happened and included some contextual elements. The third and last description was the composite description, which incorporated both the textural and structural descriptions. This description presented the essence of the participants’ experiences and my interpretation of their experiences.

Researcher Subjectivity and Reflexivity

My role as the researcher with regard to the participants was limited to that of interviewer and observer. It was, however, important for me to reflect on my part in this research study and to recognize my biases, interests, and areas of ignorance (Richards, 2015). As a researcher, I might be looking through a lens that was broken and obscured in places and that gave me distorted images (O’Connor, 2007, as cited in Saldaña, 2013). O’Connor (2007) noted that this was not just reflection, but refraction, and described it as “a perspective that acknowledges mirrored reality and the researcher’s lens” (as cited in Saldaña, 2013, p. 50).
Reflexivity required that I became aware of my relationship to what I chose to study, why I made that choice, where I was in this research area and what I brought to it, and my relationship with the setting, the people, the social structures and knowledge, as well as the assumptions and ideologies that provided context for these people’s lives (Richards, 2015). Reflexivity also allowed me to confront and challenge my own assumptions and to recognize “the extent to which [my] thoughts, actions, and decisions shape[d] how [I] research[ed] and what [I saw]” (Mason, 2002, as cited in Saldaña, 2013, p. 42). I engaged in a continuous process of reflection on myself as a researcher and on my research relationship throughout this research study.

It is important to note that my decision and motivation to conduct this research study was guided by my personal and professional interests and experiences. Throughout the research process, I was mindful of my own experiences, perceptions, expectations, values, beliefs, and judgments that could influence my subjectivity toward the participants and my interpretation of the data. I was careful not to assume that I understood the participants’ experiences or that they would be able to relate to me just because we shared one or more aspects of social identity (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). I also did not assume that the sharing of one or more aspects of social identity would guarantee that the interviews would go smoothly.

**Family and Cultural Background**

I am a former international student whose native language is not English, a first-generation immigrant who was born and raised in Malaysia, and a naturalized U.S. citizen. Depending on the context, I may self-identify as Chinese American, Chinese-Malaysian American, Southeast Asian American, or Asian American. I attended college and graduate school at a predominantly White institution where I had experienced racial discrimination.
When I first arrived in the U.S., I was baffled by the racial stereotypes placed upon me as an Asian woman, as I simply did not understand the context or historical roots of those stereotypes. Ever since then, I have been curious about the experiences of other Asian and APA students who do not fit the stereotype of the model minority.

I grew up in multiethnic, multilingual, multicultural, and multi-religious Malaysia in a family in which traditional cultural values were upheld and English was not spoken as a first language. Malay is the medium of instruction in Malaysian public schools and English is taught as a second language. Most ethnic Chinese in my hometown speak Chinese Cantonese in social and business settings. I spoke Chinese Hakka with my parents, younger brother, and most of my relatives, but I also spoke Chinese Cantonese and Chinese Mandarin with some of my cousins.

My maternal great-grandparents were immigrants from China; they left due to the political instability in China at the time. They converted to Christianity when Malaysia was under British rule. My paternal grandparents were Buddhists and immigrants from Hong Kong when it was still a British colony, although my paternal ancestors arrived and resettled in Hong Kong in the early 1700s. My grandparents left Hong Kong for better economic opportunities in Malaysia.

I am the first person in my family to go to college. Although my mother only has a high-school education and my father did not finish high school, academic excellence, especially in math and science, and eventual college completion were expectations that they set for me and my younger brother at an early age. They believed that hard work was the key to educational success and that educational success would in turn lead to social mobility and success in life. Because of my culturally unconventional academic and career paths, to this day, I still have trouble explaining to my mother what I do for a living or what my academic degrees are.
I also have distant relatives by marriage who are first- and second-generation Cambodian Americans, although I only know most of them in passing. My husband’s cousin’s wife’s parents were from Cambodia. From what I was told, they have resettled in the U.S. as refugees after the Vietnam War and their three children were either born in the U.S. or came here when they were very young. None of them has earned a four-year college degree and they were not able to assist me with recruiting participants for this study. Most of their extended family live in the West Michigan area. My husband’s cousin often talked about the hardships his parents-in-law had endured before, during, and after immigrating to the U.S.

**Professional Goals**

My professional goal in designing and conducting this research study was to provide myself with the knowledge and skills needed to better support and serve as an advocate for SEAA college students and other underserved student populations. As a student affairs professional and a doctoral student, I recognized that there might be some degree of power differentiation and a hierarchy of voices and values. That was why I put emphasis on the importance of building respect and rapport with the participants during the interviews. I alluded to our shared cultural traits when and where appropriate to establish trust and to encourage them to share their stories with me. I was, however, mindful not to undermine the participants’ freedom of choice or behave in such a way that the participants would feel pressured or intimidated into compliance.

**Bracketing**

In this research study, I made a conscious decision to make no assumptions that any findings would “prove” something or will be transferable to other APA or SEAA subgroups or to all SEAAs or APAs. Throughout the study, I “reflexively engage[d] with and discuss[ed] the
value judgments and personal perspectives that [were] inherent in the data collection and in analysis” (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 255). The audio recording of the interviews helped me verify if a respondent had made a particular statement so that I would not go far from the evidence when interpreting the data. The purpose of bracketing my prior ideas was not so that I would approach my data with an empty mind, but rather, with a deliberately open mind (Richards, 2015).

A researcher’s journal was also maintained to serve as another method for triangulation. Not only did the field notes serve as self-reflections for what would or would not work (Marshall & Rossman, 2011), they also chronicled the times when I felt that my interpretations could be based on my own experiences and were not reflective of the participants’ voices. By bracketing my personal experiences and positioning myself as an Asian American female immigrant, I was able to better reflect on and evaluate my own interpretations of the participants’ stories and actions and separate my personal insights from the collection of data (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

**Trustworthiness and Quality Assurance**

While the concepts of reliability, validity, and generalizability do not carry the same connotations in qualitative research as they do in quantitative research, qualitative researchers still need to ensure that their approaches are consistent and reliable and that the findings are based on analytical research (Creswell, 2009; Rudestam & Newton, 2007). In qualitative research, reliability refers to the consistency of the researcher’s approach across different researchers and projects. Validity, or internal validity, refers to the process of checking the trustworthiness and accuracy of the findings. “Trustworthiness is gained when researchers show their data were ethically and mindfully collected, analyzed, and reported” (Carlson, 2010, p.
Generalizability, or external validity, refers to the transferability of the results to other settings.

**Importance of Assessing the Quality of Qualitative Research**

J. A. Smith et al. (2013) also addressed the importance of maintaining high quality in IPA studies. According to J. A. Smith et al. (2013), the discussion about the assessment of the quality of research among qualitative researchers has been “prompted by the dissatisfaction with qualitative research being evaluated according to the criteria for validity and reliability which are applied to quantitative research” (p. 179). While it is important to maintain a high quality in qualitative research, the same set of criteria that are used to assess the quality of quantitative research cannot be used to assess qualitative research. In order to maintain the high quality of qualitative research, Yardley’s (2000) four broad principles should be followed: sensitivity to context, commitment and rigor, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance (as cited in J. A. Smith et al., 2013).

As a researcher, I showed sensitivity to context at every stage of the research process (J. A. Smith et al., 2013). I showed sensitivity to the participants’ social-cultural environment, to the existing literature, and to the material I have obtained from the participants. I also demonstrated commitment and rigor by being attentive to the participants during the data collection and data analysis processes and by being thorough and systematic with how the study was conducted. I enhanced transparency and coherence by clearly describing each stage of the research process and by eliminating ambiguities and contradictions in my writing. Finally, I ensured that my research would tell the reader something that was important, interesting, and useful.
As the researcher, I openly and honestly discussed how my background may influence my subjectivity toward the participants and my interpretation of the data. I made a conscious decision to make no assumptions that any findings would prove something or be transferable. The description of the setting would be as detailed as possible so that readers could be transported to the setting and the results would become more realistic and richer.

**Challenges in Qualitative Research**

Qualitative inquiries seek to gather in-depth information about the human experience and interpret meaning (Carlson, 2010). By nature, these things often change and transform continuously, and the qualitative researcher needs to remain flexible and adaptable throughout the research process. Marshall and Rossman (2011) noted that design flexibility is an important feature of qualitative inquiries and suggested that researchers think of the proposal as an initial plan but keep in mind that unforeseen circumstances could change this initial plan.

Furthermore, due to the “variations in research design, protocol, and paradigm” (Carlson, 2010, p. 1102) in qualitative inquiries, qualitative researchers may unintentionally create many problems that undermine the trustworthiness and quality of their research. Qualitative research often includes “interpretative recommendations rather than systemic requirements” (Carlson, 2010, p. 1102) and this presents qualitative researchers with many surprises, unusual experiences, and unique challenges. Fortunately, there were steps that I was able to take to assess and improve the trustworthiness and quality of my research.

**Procedures to Assess Reliability and Validity**

In addition to mitigating the potential detrimental effects of unacknowledged assumptions through reflexive bracketing, a number of procedures were employed to check the reliability and validity of the findings. To ensure consistency, I checked transcripts for obvious mistakes that
might have happened during transcription and for shifts in meanings of codes that might have happened during the coding process (Creswell, 2009). Codes I developed were reviewed multiple times to ensure consistency. Raw data were coded in ways so that another researcher could understand the themes and reach similar conclusions (Rudestam & Newton, 2007). The specific procedures to ensure accuracy that were appropriate for this study include: member checking, peer review or debriefing, and external audit. Each entity viewed and interpreted its work through a different lens (Carlson, 2010).

**Member checking.** Participants were asked to review the written narrative and interpretations derived from the information to verify that they thought the specific descriptions or themes were accurate or plausible (Merriam, 2009). This was an important way for me to rule out the possibility of misinterpretation and to identify my personal biases. There were various options for member checking and I expressed my expectations clearly to the participants in order to avoid problems later on (Carlson, 2010). After each interview, the participants received an email with specific directions for their part of the process and what functions I did not expect them to perform (see Appendix L).

According to Richards (2015), however, feedback from participants regarding my interpretations should be considered as additional data instead of being treated as a simple process of validation of my interpretations. While the findings were derived from the participants’ experience, I might sometimes use different words to describe their experience, but if the participants were unable to recognize their own experience in my interpretation, then I would need to do some fine-tuning so I could better capture their perspectives (Merriam, 2009). Fortunately, this did not happen and I did not have to fine-tune my interpretation. At the end of
my study, I integrated all the different ideas into one unified account and explained how I arrived at my conclusion (Richards, 2015).

**Peer debriefing.** Throughout the course of the study, a peer debriefer who held impartial views of the study was also asked to review the study and pose tough questions about the data collection, analysis, and interpretation processes and to assess whether or not the findings were plausible based on the data (Merriam, 2009; Rudestam & Newton, 2007). The peer debriefer for this study was an active researcher who was “well-versed in topics of the success of college students of color” (Palmer & Maramba, 2015, p. 50). She recently graduated from her doctoral program in educational leadership and was the director of a program geared toward underserved college student populations.

At the beginning of my data collection process, the peer debriefer received an email with specific directions and expectations for her part of the process (see Appendix M). I scheduled regular meetings with the peer debriefer and we used these meeting dates to serve as deadlines that kept us both moving and on track to meeting our goals. In addition to our meetings, we also communicated weekly through email.

“Sharing coded field note excerpts and discussing…dilemmas about coding and analysis generate peer support and may even help…find better connections between categories in progress” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 36). When I have discussions with my peers, I have the opportunity to articulate and clarify my thinking process and emergent ideas. I used the feedback I received from the peer debriefer to consider possible gaps or misinterpretation in my initial analysis, make any necessary revisions, and improve the trustworthiness and quality of my study. I also discussed how to handle the feedback received from the peer debriefer with my dissertation chair.
**External audit.** Finally, an external auditor with no relationship to the project reviewed the entire project to provide an objective assessment at the conclusion of the study (Creswell, 2009; Rudestam & Newton, 2007; J. A. Smith et al., 2013). The external auditor’s role was to “review the materials and assess the findings and interpretations for consistency” (Rudestam & Newton, 2007, p. 114). The external auditor for this study was also an active researcher who was familiar with issues faced by marginalized populations. She recently graduated from her doctoral program in higher education and worked as a postdoctoral researcher at an institution of higher education.

At the beginning of my data collection process, the external auditor received an email with specific directions and expectations for her part of the process (see Appendix N). I also scheduled regular meetings with the external auditor and communicated with her regularly through email. I created an audit trail to keep careful documentation of all components of my study for my own review and also for the external auditor to review (Carlson, 2010).

Having an external auditor review and assess the project was a step further from just keeping an audit trail. My audit trail included any “field observation notes, interview notes, journals, records, calendars, and various drafts of interpretation” (Carlson, 2010, p. 1103). The external auditor went through the data and was able to follow the steps outlined and come to the same conclusions (Rudestam & Newton, 2007; J. A. Smith et al., 2013). Doing this was good discipline for me as a researcher, because I had to put myself in the place of someone who would have to make sense of everything that I had done (J. A. Smith et al., 2013). I discussed how to handle the feedback received from the external auditor with my dissertation chair.
Limitations and Delimitations

This study has several limitations and delimitations. This study was confined to the SEAA undergraduate student population in the Midwest. The population in this study was limited to undergraduate students who have self-identified as Southeast Asian American, are of Cambodian, Hmong, Lao, or Vietnamese descent, have attended high school in the U.S., are first-generation college students, and whose family had been accepted into the U.S. under refugee status.

The scope of this study was limited by number of samples that may have been smaller than originally anticipated. The data collected and provided by the registrar’s office of each institution was also limited to how race and ethnicity were defined and categorized at each institution as well as to students’ self-disclosure of their race and ethnicity when filling out their college applications, since the disclosure of race and ethnicity is optional when applying to college. For the purpose of this study, I did not focus on what role pre-migration socioeconomic status and educational level played in SEAA students’ post-migration adjustment, college experience, and ethnic identity development, although this could provide a different perspective to the study.

Furthermore, the responses of the participants were only as “accurate” and in-depth as their interest in answering the interview questions and their degree of self-awareness and willingness to disclose personal information. The success of the interviews depended “primarily on the interpersonal skills of the researcher” (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 118). As a novice researcher, I made sure that I was very well-prepared before I began conducting the interviews. Finally, the knowledge about and the presence of a researcher might have also affected the behavior of the participants.
In addition to unrecognized bias, possible cultural miscommunications might have impacted analysis and led to misinterpretation, resulting in the failure to recognize the implications of the study. Most importantly, while I am a member of a racial minority, I am operating in the dominant group’s language and using its research protocols, standards, and traditions; therefore, the study might have failed to account for cultural norms exhibited by SEAA students. As a result of this, I might have made differential judgments about SEAA students and non-SEAA students based on the stereotypical assumptions I have about SEAAs and thereby reinforced and supported social attitudes that link all APA students to the model minority stereotype.

**Summary**

In this chapter, I provided an overview of the methodology used in this study, specifically the phenomenological approach that was utilized and details including participants and sampling, the data collection and data analysis procedures, as well as trustworthiness and quality assurance procedures. In addition, I discussed my researcher subjectivity and reflexivity and noted the limitations and delimitations of this study.

In Chapter IV, I provide an in-depth analysis of the participants’ responses and present the major findings of this phenomenological study. Specifically, I share the participants’ narratives to contextualize the themes that emerged and review the major themes identified through the in-depth data analysis process.

In Chapter V, I discuss the connection of the findings to the research questions as well as compare and connect the five major themes that emerged from the data collection and analysis to the current literature. These five themes provide a basis for understanding the lived experiences of SEAA college students and provide valuable information in understanding how their
experiences reflect the nuance of their family’s refugee and forced migration experiences. I also discuss the limitations of the study, the implications of the findings for higher education practitioners, and areas for future research.
CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Chapter Overview

In Chapters I and II, I highlighted the practical and research problems as well as the gap in the current literature as it pertains to understanding the experiences of first-generation college students of Southeast Asian descent from families that have resettled in the United States as refugees. Chapter I served as an overview of the study, describing the problem and the purpose of this research study, and introducing the research questions that guided this study.

Chapter II served as a synthesis of the current literature on Asian Pacific Americans (APAs) and Southeast Asian Americans (SEAAs). I presented a thorough exploration and an analytical summary of the immigration history, demographics, intragroup differences, current issues and challenges, as well as the importance of disaggregating the data on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs).

In Chapter III, I provided an overview of the methodology used in this study, specifically the phenomenological approach that was utilized and details including participants and sampling, the data collection and data analysis procedures, as well as trustworthiness and quality assurance procedures. In addition, I discussed my researcher subjectivity and reflexivity and noted the limitations and delimitations of this study.

In this chapter, I provide an in-depth analysis of my participants’ responses and present the major findings of this phenomenological study. Specifically, I present the participants’
narratives to contextualize the themes that emerged and review the major themes identified through the in-depth data analysis process.

**Overview of Purpose and Research Questions**

According to Creswell (2007, 2009), in a phenomenological approach, participants describe, in their own voice, the essence of their lived experiences about a phenomenon. In the context of this study, analysis of the participants’ stories resulted in a deeper understanding of their experiences as first-generation college students of Southeast Asian descent in the Midwest, whose families have resettled in the United States as refugees, and how their experiences reflect the nuance of their family’s forced migration.

This phenomenological study gives voice to the unique experiences and perspectives of these participants and provides an opportunity for their voices to be heard. Specifically, the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach focuses on the participants’ attempts to make meanings out of their experiences (J. A. Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2013). The interview questions were designed to encourage the participants to focus on the phenomenon and to reflect on their experience and the implications of the phenomenon in their college experience.

To explore this phenomenon, the following overarching question was posed: What is the experience of first-generation college students of Southeast Asian descent in the Midwest whose families have resettled in the United States as refugees? Three additional sub-questions were also used to guide this inquiry:

1. Where and how do these students’ cultural background and refugee or forced migration status influence their life aspirations and expectations for their college experience?
2. Where and how do these students’ cultural heritage and refugee or forced migration status influence how they view and conduct themselves as college students?

3. What is the impact of community or lack thereof for Southeast Asian American (SEAA) students living in a low ethnic concentration area and how has that influenced their college experience?

**Summary of Participants**

The results of my phenomenological study were developed through data collected from eight face-to-face, in-depth interviews with undergraduate college students attending seven institutions of higher education in the Midwestern states of Indiana, Michigan, and Ohio. The interviews took place between November 2015 and September 2016 on each participant’s campus. The participants’ demographic information and their student information are presented in table form in Appendix O.

This study’s sample of six men and two women ranging in age from 19 to 29 provided a rich blend of demographics, personal experiences, and perspectives. Three of the participants self-identified as Vietnamese American, two as Hmong American, one as Cambodian American, and two as multiethnic Asian American. All but one participant grew up speaking a language other than English at home and did not learn English until they started their formal education. One participant did not recall ever speaking another language other than English at home.

Seven out of the eight participants were second-generation Americans who were born in the U.S. to first-generation immigrant parents. The only participant who was not born in the U.S. came to the U.S. as a young child, or as a 1.5-generation immigrant. A 1.5-generation immigrant is defined as an immigrant who arrived in the new country as a child, specifically, a child who was “between six and 13 years of age” (Zhou, 1997, p. 65).
Three out of the eight participants were seniors, three were juniors, one was a sophomore, and one was in college for his second bachelor’s degree. Six were attending a public institution while two were attending a private institution. Two of the participants had a major in the social sciences (anthropology and sociology), two in the life sciences (biological sciences, biology, and psychology), two in the business field (international business and management), and two in the engineering field (mechanical engineering and computer science). Three of them received a full-ride or close to full-ride scholarship to fund their education while the rest funded their education with other scholarships, grants, loans, savings, current income, and/or other education benefits.

Out of the eight participants, two were out-of-state students, and two were transfer and non-traditional students. A defining characteristic of a non-traditional student is being over the age of 24 (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], n.d.). Another main characteristic of a non-traditional student is having delayed entry to college by at least one year after graduating from high school (Ross-Gordon, 2011). These were the two criteria used to define the non-traditional students in this study. Two participants matched these criteria.

While attending college, three of the participants still lived at home with their family and the other five lived off-campus. Six of the participants were actively involved on campus, either by participating in student organizations and attending campus events or by engaging in on-campus employment opportunities in various programs that provided support and services to underserved student populations. Two of the participants had minimal or no involvement on campus due to their busy schedules, although they had previously participated in student organizations or attended campus events when their schedules allowed.

Approximately 30 institutions of higher education in Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, and Ohio were determined to be ideal recruitment locations because they have an Asian American
studies program, an APA liaison or representative in their multicultural affairs or diversity programs office, a relatively large Asian American student population, at least one active Asian American student organization, or a strong focus on promoting resources, services, education, and advocacy to its APA student population. The contact persons for each department, program, and student group were then identified. I emailed over 300 faculty members, staff members, administrators, and student leaders at those institutions asking for their referral for participants or participation. I also posted the participant recruitment flyer (see Appendix C) on the Facebook page or in the Facebook group of each department, program, and organization that has a Facebook page or group.

I also emailed representatives from various Asian American communities, religious, and professional organizations in those four Midwestern states. Additionally, I posted the participant recruitment flyer (see Appendix C) to various APA and SEAA interest groups’ Facebook page and group. Finally, I emailed and called my friends, acquaintances, and colleagues who were Asian American activists and had a connection to various APA and SEAA groups and populations to further assist me in the recruitment of participants.

A total of 21 students completed the demographic questionnaire to express interest in participating in the study. Approximately 10 other students expressed interest in participating by email or by phone. Out of the 31 potential participants, 10 matched the criteria for the study, although two did not respond to multiple emails requesting an interview. Ultimately, eight participants were interviewed.

Five of the eight participants found out about the study from their student organization, either having seen the recruitment flyer on their student organization’s Facebook page or having received an email from their student organization. Two of the participants were referred by
another student who had already participated in an interview. One participant found out about the study after receiving an email from an administrator at his institution.

**Narrative Participant Profiles**

This phenomenological exploration afforded me the opportunity to engage with these undergraduate students and build trust with them as I developed a deeper understanding about their experiences as first-generation college students of Southeast Asian descent in the Midwest whose families have resettled in the United States as refugees. The first part of the interview focused on getting to know the participants, particularly their personal and ethnic identities as well as their and their families’ refugee resettlement experiences. The second part of the interview focused on connecting what the participants shared in the first part of the interview to their college experience.

I had deep and meaningful conversations with undergraduate students who spoke about their lived experiences as children and grandchildren of refugees and how their childhood and college experiences reflected the nuance of their family’s forced migration. For some of the participants, some of the topics that came up during the interview were topics they had not previously thought about but have now developed an interest in exploring further. Their narratives below provide the reader with a description of the essence of their stories.

**Ailee**

Ailee is a 19-year-old second-generation Cambodian-Thai-Vietnamese American woman. She is a sophomore pursuing a Bachelor of Business Administration degree in international business and management at a large, public university. She is the middle of five children and lives at home with her parents and siblings. She identifies primarily as Cambodian because her parents spoke only Cambodian with her while she was growing up. They do not speak Thai or
Vietnamese. Although Cambodian is her first language and she can still understand it, she does not really speak it anymore except occasionally with her grandparents, who are not fluent in English.

Ailee considers herself traditional because she says her parents are very strict and she does not party. The only parties she attends are the ones hosted by her family. Although she and her family go to the Buddhist temple a lot and she believes that there is a god, she does not consider herself religious, nor does she identify specifically as a Buddhist. She considers going to the temple as a cultural rather than religious practice, and she also goes to church with her Christian cousins and prays to Jesus.

Ailee’s parents left Cambodia when her mother was a child and her father was in his early teens. Her mother is still traumatized by the horrific scenes she witnessed during the war; she could not forget the smell of the dead bodies under which she had to hide in order to not be discovered by the Viet Cong soldiers. Her paternal grandfather fought in the war and was unable to leave Cambodia with the rest of the family when they left, although the family eventually reunited. One of her aunts was born in the refugee camp while another aunt was left behind in Cambodia. The families went from one refugee camp in one country to another and eventually ended up in the U.S.

Ailee’s mother started elementary school in the U.S. while her father continued his middle school education after coming to the U.S. Her mother graduated from high school while her father obtained his high school equivalency diploma. When the families first arrived in the U.S., her grandparents had an especially hard time learning English and adjusting to their new host culture. They were not used to having electricity and running water, so they had to rely on their sponsors to help them figure out how a lot of basic services worked.
Ailee’s father has worked in the same factory for as long as she could remember. Her mother had worked various factory jobs until she was laid off by the last employer. Her father has a hearing impairment and has been having difficulty at work, but her mother also started having health issues since she was laid off and has not been able to seek other employment in the same field. Her mother then completed a certificate program in cosmetology and started working in that field. Unfortunately, it turns out that she is allergic to all the chemicals she was working with, so she had to quit her job. She is now unemployed.

Although Ailee’s parents have stressed the importance of education while she was growing up and was supportive of her decision to attend college, they were not able to help her with her college and financial aid applications. Fortunately, her high school and her older sister, who had recently graduated from another institution of higher education in the same state, were able to help her. Although her parents aspired for her to be a doctor, she was more interested in traveling and learning different languages. She did apply to a few different institutions, but chose her current institution because it offered her the most generous financial aid package.

Ailee lived on campus during her first semester but has since moved back home because it is cheaper for her to commute to campus. She is also working full-time and is responsible for helping her aunt and uncle take care of their two children, whom she babysits at night while they work and whom drops off at their school during the day. Because of her busy schedule, she does not have time to socialize or participate in extra-curricular activities on campus, although she does attend cultural events once in a while.

Ailee enjoys her classes and likes her major so far. She also says that her professors and advisors are nice and supportive. She acknowledges that once in a while a professor may be having a bad day, but she says she understands that happens to everyone every once in a while.
She does feel annoyed whenever classes get canceled at the last minute because she has to commute to campus. While she is aware of campus resources, she does not feel the need to use them. She typically goes to her friends for advice. She does not remember meeting any administrator so far and says it is because she does not spend a lot of time on campus.

Although Ailee does not spend a lot of time on campus, she does feel connected to campus through her fellow students and the staff she encounters. Furthermore, although her campus student population consists of only about 2% Asian Americans, she does see many Asian American and other Cambodian American students on campus, some of whom attended high school with her. She has not encountered any racial discrimination while on campus and says that everyone is very nice and accepting toward her. Nevertheless, she thinks that most people have limited knowledge of the diversity that exists between and within the Asian American population. Her pet peeves are people not knowing what Cambodian is or where Cambodia is and being confused for other Asian ethnicities. She also wants people to know about the struggles that refugees went through and that not every Asian person is the same.

Ailee believes that her institution provides adequate support to SEAA students because there are cultural events that cater specifically on this population. She wishes, however, that those events could be publicized more—she had to search for the events on Facebook and does not see a lot of flyers on campus or receive any email about them—and that those events could attract more diverse audiences. Even though those events are open to public, attendance is low and the people who attend them are mostly Asian American students.

Anna

Anna is a 21-year-old second-generation Hmong American woman. She is a junior pursuing a Bachelor of Arts degree in anthropology at a very large, public research university.
She is the fifth of 11 children, the second girl, and the third child born to her parents in the U.S. She lives at home and helps take care of her younger siblings. Hmong is her first language and she still speaks it at home, although her family speaks English more and more nowadays.

Anna says that her family’s religion and cultural practices set them apart from other Hmong Americans. Many Hmong Americans converted to Christianity in the refugee camps or after coming to the U.S., but her family still practices Shamanism and her mother is a shaman. She does not consider herself to be traditional overall, having adapted to mainstream American culture, but says that this aspect of her life is definitely traditional. Unlike her mother and older sister, she is not very involved with the local Hmong community.

Anna’s father was in his early teens when he crossed the Mekong River on a raft with his family to leave Laos for Thailand. He was a child soldier and he lost his left hand and left eyesight when a bomb blew up in his hand. He told her that many people drowned as they attempted to escape from the horrors of the Vietnam War, because they could not swim. Her maternal grandfather swam across the river as he carried her mother, who was a newborn at the time. Her parents spent the majority of their childhood and teenage years living in the refugee camp, where they met. Her mother was 13 years old when her parents married and her oldest brother was born a year later. Her second oldest brother was also born in the refugee camp.

Prior to the Vietnam War, the Hmong people lived in the jungle where they lacked access to basic services such as running water. When Anna’s parents first arrived in the U.S., they experienced culture shock that was exacerbated by the language barrier. Her mother never received any formal education and still does not know English very well. She would take whatever factory job she could get to support the family, as her father was unable to work due to his disability. Her father received some education while in refugee camp and was a language
and math teacher there. He attended community college in the U.S. briefly but had to stop out to stay home and take care of the kids.

Anna’s family has lived in the same apartment complex since her parents and two oldest siblings arrived in the U.S. She describes it as a community made up of mostly Hmong and Vietnamese refugees, people of color, and low-income families. It was not necessarily a bad neighborhood, but in recent years the conditions have worsened. Because all the kids in her neighborhood and in her schools were from low-income families, she did not realize how poor her family was until she started attending college.

Anna’s parents never talked to them about college. Her high school was a low-performing school and the main priority was graduating as many students as possible. She did not receive much information about college from her high school. Two of her older brothers had attended a career college and were able to help her older sister with her financial aid application. She in turn was able to help Anna with hers. Her older sister also attends the same university and that was the only institution she had applied to. In hindsight, she realized that she should have applied to more than one institution, but she did not know any better back then.

As a first-generation college student, Anna has also struggled with choosing a major. She has switched majors many times before she found one that was the right fit for her. Her older sister went through a similar process as well. She loves her current major and current academic department, as the professors are much nicer and the academic advisors more helpful and less judgmental about her grades and her being on academic probation. Nevertheless, she is also constantly painfully aware of the fact that she is the only Asian American in all of her classes. Furthermore, while Asian American students make up 5% of the total student population at Anna’s institution, there are probably no more than 20 Hmong American students on campus.
Both Anna and her sister live at home and commute to campus because of financial reasons. They did not drive or have their own car so their father would drop them off first thing in the morning and they would not be able to go home until late in the evening. In order to save money on food while on campus, they would have to pack their meals every day. Anna now has a driver’s license and helps pick up her younger, school-age siblings from school. She does not mind living at home and the responsibilities that come with it, although she would have loved to live on campus if she had a choice.

Anna is very actively involved on campus, mostly because she already spends so much time on campus daily anyway. She participates in the Asian American student organization and other multicultural student organizations, and she feels very connected to campus. She also holds multiple on-campus student jobs year-round to help her family out financially. She says that she has become a stronger person through her struggles. She constantly motivates herself toward success by reminding herself of her parents’ sacrifices and of her desire to create a better life for herself and her family.

Anna says that she has many mentors that include her professors, advisors, and work supervisors, but thinks that the institution as a whole could do a lot better in terms of providing support to first-generation, low-income, and Asian American students. She says that many professors and advisors are dismissive of Asian American students’ academic struggles because they do not take into account that many Asian American students are first-generation college students from low-income families.

**Cameron**

Cameron is a 21-year-old second-generation Vietnamese American man. He is a senior pursuing a Bachelor of Science degree in biological sciences and psychology at a mid-size,
private religious research university. His family lives in the South and he had never been to the Midwest until he went for a college visit to his current institution of higher education during high school. He is the oldest of four brothers. Vietnamese is his first language and he grew up speaking Vietnamese, but he gradually stopped speaking it to his parents after he started kindergarten. He still has basic conversational proficiency in the language and plans to enroll in medical Vietnamese courses while in medical school. He aspires to be a doctor.

Cameron was raised Catholic but no longer identifies with the religion. He describes himself as an atheist. His parents still think he attends church weekly. He does not consider himself traditional, although he acknowledges that it is inevitable for some aspects of his life to be traditional due to his upbringing and the fact that his parents grew up in a different country. His parents expect him to pay for his youngest brother’s college education and he thinks that is reasonable. He also plans to instill some traditional cultural values in his future children. When it comes to politics, he and his parents are at the opposite ends of the spectrum. He admits that his father is a conservative with racist views who watches CNBC and Fox News all day.

Cameron’s parents came to the U.S. as refugees after the Vietnam War. They were a young married couple of about 20 years old when they left their small farming village in Vietnam after losing the farm in the war. They then worked in the big city, making tofu and raising pigs to save up money for the boat ride out of Vietnam with other family members. It took his mother three attempts before she was able escape; she was captured and sent to reeducation camp twice before her final, successful attempt. Prior to being accepted into the U.S., his father and mother spent time in refugee camps in the Philippines and in Singapore respectively. They ended up coming to the U.S. separately, his father six years before his mother.
After coming to the U.S., Cameron’s parents earned their high school equivalency diplomas. They worked several odd jobs to pay the bills while they learned English and were eventually able to attend community college. His mother ended up staying home to take care of the kids shortly after that, however, while his father landed a job at a major technology corporation. After his father lost that job, his family moved around quite a bit. As a result, he switched schools a lot, sometimes in the middle of the school year. Aside from the families they met at Vietnamese churches, they did not have many Asian friends. He struggled with making friends in middle school and was bullied. Finally, his father decided to stop uprooting the family and began commuting to other states for new jobs. Because they were so far away and he worked long hours, he could only go home once every few weeks.

As a first-generation college student, Cameron had not thought about applying to college or taking the SAT until his senior year in high school. His parents were unable to guide him through the college selection process or help him with his financial aid application, leaving him confused and frustrated as he tried to figure things out. He has high expectations for himself to be successful and he wants to be a good role model to his younger brothers and to take care of his parents when they are older.

Cameron applied to his institution of higher education because the girl he was dating applied there. It was one of the several schools he had applied to, but it was not his institution of choice. He ended up choosing it over his original dream school, however, because of the profound sense of welcome that he had felt during his college visit. An Asian American student hosted him while he was there and told him about the Asian American student organizations there. He also met other Asian American students who had told him about other opportunities to get involved. To top it off, the institution offered him a generous financial aid package.
Cameron participates in a few Asian American student organizations and in the Latino and Black student organizations at his institution. He also works in an office that recruits diverse students and first-generation and low-income students. He has developed a great sense of belonging on campus, has a strong support system, and has good relationships with his professors, advisors, supervisors, and peer mentors. He has close friends who are Vietnamese, Latino, and Black.

While Cameron has never experienced any overt racism on campus, at times he does feel out of place. He has had numerous experiences with microaggression throughout his college career. He does not consider the local community to be very diverse, although he says that there is a small Vietnamese community in town and that there are plenty of ethnic restaurants and grocery stores that are close to campus. While approximately 6% of the student population is Asian American, there is only a small number of Vietnamese American students, and he has not met any other SEAA students on campus. In addition to being a racial and ethnic minority, his lower socioeconomic background also becomes apparent to him whenever his more well-to-do peers talk about doing things that he could not afford to do.

Cameron’s overall college experience has been positive. When prompted, however, he does have feedback to the staff, faculty, and administrators about how to make his campus more inviting and supportive toward SEAA students. First, he thinks that there should be more Asian American representation in the student government. Second, he believes it is important for the institution to disaggregate data on Asian American students and to become more aware of SEAA students’ struggles. Finally, he wishes that there were a way for students from specific ethnic backgrounds to get in touch with faculty and staff members from the same ethnic backgrounds.
Eric is a 22-year-old second-generation Cambodian American man. He is a junior pursuing a Bachelor of Business Administration degree in management at a large, public university. He is a non-traditional student who worked for several years after high school before deciding to continue his education. He is the middle of three children and lives at home with his siblings and mother. His parents are separated. Cambodian is his first language and he still speaks it, but mostly to his grandmother. The rest of his family members speak a mixture of English and Cambodian. He describes his Cambodian as very Americanized.

Eric is not sure if he should consider himself traditional or not. He says that being Buddhist is a big part of the Cambodian culture, but his family is Christian. His mother converted to Christianity after coming to the U.S. while his father practices both Christianity and Buddhism. Most of his cousins and extended family members are Buddhists. He still celebrates Cambodian festivals and visits the temple because his cousins and friends go there. He attends Cambodian church regularly, is actively involved in church, and considers God to be a big part of his life, although he would not say that he is really religious.

Eric’s parents left Cambodia for Thailand with their respective families when they were teenagers. They had to leave because of the impacts of the Vietnam War and spent several years in a refugee camp before being sponsored by the churches in their current city to come to the U.S. Because of the churches’ involvement, there is a big Cambodian community in their city now. His maternal grandmother and his mother are constantly telling him about the unsafe and unsanitary conditions in Cambodia—they had no clean running water—and how life is so much easier in the U.S.
Eric’s mother graduated from high school in the U.S., although she struggled academically and almost did not graduate. Her English language skills were still poor after graduation and she was afraid to look for jobs. His father earned his high school equivalency diploma after coming to the U.S. Both his parents have been working in factories since then. In spite of what his grandmother and mother had told him about how life was so much worse in Cambodia, he thinks many refugees who came to the U.S. did not realize that not everyone could achieve the American dream.

After graduating from high school, Eric was not interested in going to college. He says that while his parents did talk about college while he was growing up and he has cousins who were attending college, they never pressured him to attend college. Even though his high school teachers and counselors did discuss college with the students, he had no interest in going then. He ended up working in the same factory his mother works in. One day, he came to the realization that he did not want to be doing that for the rest of his life and he decided to continue his education.

Eric attended a community college for a couple of years before transferring to his current institution. He decided to attend his current institution because he wanted to still live at home and the campus is about 30 minutes from his house. His older sister and a few of his friends also attend the same institution. He did apply to a few other institutions but regretted doing that because he already had his mind set on his current institution. His parents were not able to help him with the college application process, but fortunately for him, his sister was able to. He is determined not to take out loans and pays for college with the money he has saved up from working in the factory, and he still works off campus to support himself.
Eric feels indifferent about his major and classes. He says that while he does not hate them, he does not love them either. He picked his major because it was practical and he thinks it would be easier to get a job in that field after graduation. He thinks that some of his professors are more caring than others. He does not see the need to talk to an advisor because he could register for his classes online.

Eric does not feel particularly connected to his campus, although he does attend events organized by the Asian American student organization on campus. He is also planning to start an Asian American InterVarsity Christian fellowship on his campus next year. He was a lot more involved at the community college as there was a slightly larger Asian American student population there. While he has not experienced any racism on his current campus, he has heard stories from his sister and friends. Overall, he does not give it a lot of thought and mainly focuses on going to his classes and working.

Because Eric grew up and still lives in a fairly large Cambodian American community while his campus student population consists of only about 2% Asian Americans, he sometimes feels self-conscious and out of place while on campus. He has not met any other Cambodians aside from his friends who are also attending the institution. He says that he feels uncomfortable and hesitant about attending campus events where he may be the only Asian person in the crowd. He prefers to hang out with other Asian Americans, to whom he feels like he could better relate.

His institution should recruit more SEAA students, Eric mused, but how would they actually do that and what would they do afterward to make the students feel comfortable? Perhaps they could organize more Southeast Asian events or have more Asian American staff and faculty in general, he suggests. He says that he would definitely feel more comfortable approaching staff and faculty members of Asian descent.
Eric thinks that White people in general do not understand the struggles of first-generation Asian American college students. He feels burdened by the model minority stereotype because he is not book smart and has had to work twice as hard as others to go to college. He says that if he could start over and did not have to live at home, he would most likely consider an institution with a higher Asian American student population, because he thinks that he would feel a greater sense of community there.

Jackie

Jackie is a 26-year-old second-generation Vietnamese American man. He is a senior pursuing a Bachelor of Science degree in mechanical engineering with a minor in mathematics at a large, public research university. He is the second of five siblings and the oldest son. He lives one hour away from his parents and goes home frequently. Vietnamese is his first language but he stopped speaking it after he started school because he was the only Asian in his class and there was no one to speak it with. He says he could still understand it.

Jackie was raised Catholic and still goes to church once in a while. He says that he is not as traditional as his parents would like him to be, but he thinks that he is still traditional in some aspects of his life. He says that as the oldest son, it is important for him to be good role models to his younger siblings. While the schools he attended were not very diverse, his family attended and still attends a Vietnamese church and he participated in many youth activities at church growing up. He says that their family gatherings often include other Vietnamese families from church.

Jackie’s parents came to the U.S. in their late teens and they met on a refugee boat. His maternal grandfather and his brothers were involved in the Vietnam War and the family had to leave after the war ended to avoid persecution. His grandparents to this day still refuse to talk
about what happened during the war because they were so traumatized by the experience. Many of their friends did not make it out of Vietnam alive.

Jackie’s parents completed their high school education after coming to the U.S. They also attended English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. The language barrier initially caused many basic tasks in their daily lives to be difficult and they were not able to move around without an interpreter. They lived in poverty until they had learned English, attended community college, and found better-paying jobs. His father still works in a factory while his mother has two jobs, one at a factory and another at a massage parlor.

As a child, Jackie felt an immense pressure to be smarter than his non-Asian peers. He attributes this to his internalization of the racial stereotype of Asians as the model minority. To add to the pressure, Jackie’s father was also constantly reminding him that he should do things that he was not able to do and to make him proud. Graduating from high school has been one of his proudest accomplishments so far, as most of his extended family members have never gone to college. Along with his older sister, they would be the first generation in his family to go to college.

Jackie chose his current institution of higher education because his older sister was attending the institution and many of his friends wanted to go there as well. He also liked that he could learn to become more independent yet not be too far away from home. His older sister ended up stopping out and attending a community college closer to home while it has been taking him a lot longer than he had expected—over eight years—to graduate. He hopes to graduate after the next semester.

Jackie’s mother initially advised him to major in computer science because she thought the job market for a career in that field was good. He ended up changing his major because he
was more interested in machines. He feels somewhat indifferent about his classes and major, however, saying that while some professors are nice, others are mean, and he does not think that the administrators do much to help resolve conflicts between professors and students. He does have a good relationship with his advisors and the friends he has made in his various classes.

Jackie says that he was a loner during his first few years in college and would always go back to his room to study after classes. In the past few years, he has met a small group of Asian and Asian American friends and has become a lot more outgoing since then. He joined an Asian American student organization of which most of his friends are members and was the vice president of that organization last year. Aside from those friends, he says he has not met other Asian American students on his campus, which has an Asian American student population of less than 2%.

Jackie says that he has never experienced any overt racism on campus, but has friends who have experienced it. He remembers being treated differently more frequently in elementary and middle schools because of his cultural background, but not so much in college. He has, however, experienced microaggressions and being stereotyped in college. He welcomes the opportunity to get more involved with the Asian American student community in college as he did not get the chance to do that in school when he was younger.

Overall, Jackie’s college experience has been mildly positive. When asked, he says that he would like to offer some feedback to the staff, faculty, and administrators on how to make his campus more inviting and supportive toward SEAA students and Asian American students in general. First, he thinks that the university should inform incoming Asian American students about the various opportunities to get involved with multicultural student groups on campus. Second, he believes it is important for the university to increase the number of Asian American
staff so that Asian American students could see faces that they could relate to. He says that he would have felt more welcomed during first-year orientation had he met at least one Asian American staff there.

Rocky

Rocky is a 29-year-old second-generation Hmong American man. He is a junior pursuing a Bachelor of Science degree in biology at a very large, public research university. He is a non-traditional student and has served in the military. His family lives in another Midwestern state and he is the oldest of six siblings. As a result of a devastating family tragedy a few years ago, he ended up as the legal guardian of his minor siblings. He still supports his younger siblings financially. Hmong is his first language, and while he still speaks Hmong to his siblings, they prefer to speak English with one another.

Rocky was raised Christian and used to be religious, but he no longer practices any religion after experiencing the family tragedy. He considers himself politically conservative and somewhat traditional, although he also indicates that he is pro-choice. He mentions putting family first as a one of the most important Hmong cultural traits. He grew up in an area with a low Asian American population and is not close with his ethnic community. His parents made it a point to move away from their large ethnic community in another Midwestern state because gangs and drugs were prevalent within that community. He says that the area he grew up in was not a bad area, but it was also not the best area to live in with its increasing crime rates.

Rocky’s father was a child and his mother was 15 years old when they came to the U.S. with their families after the Vietnam War. They left Laos by crossing the Mekong River using bamboo rafts and spent time in a refugee camp in Thailand prior to being accepted into the U.S. His paternal grandmother wanted to leave Laos because her children were being recruited to be
child soldiers. His maternal grandmother often recounts being mistreated by the Thai military and police while they were at refugee camp. When his extended family first arrived in the U.S., they had a hard time finding work due to the language barrier. They also struggled with getting acclimated to the mainstream culture and basic services such as running water.

Rocky’s father was previously married. His mother met and married his father soon after she turned 18 and he was born a year later. His father attended vocational school and worked as an electrician, but he is now in prison. His mother did not finish high school because his father did not want her to go to school or to work due to cultural beliefs, but she eventually earned her high school equivalency diploma and found work in a factory. She is no longer alive.

When Rocky was in elementary school, his father was able to help him with his schoolwork, but his grades started slipping in middle school as his father was no longer able to help him. He was not able to attend after-school tutoring sessions because the school was five miles away from his home and his parents were not able to arrange for transportation for him. He remembers being bullied in school and not having many friends. He eventually fought back and ended up getting in trouble a lot in school.

Rocky did not think he would be able to afford college, so he decided to join the military after graduating from high school. He had not seriously considered attending college until several members of his unit were injured during a deployment and he realized he did not want to be a soldier for the rest of his life. His younger siblings did not have much interest in pursuing higher education, although two decided to enroll after he started attending college. They have since stopped going.

The military veteran office at the community college Rocky attended helped him with his college and financial aid applications. He is paying for college using the G.I. Bill education
benefits, but he may have to stop out after the next semester as he is running out of benefits and
does not want to take out loans. He plans to work full-time until he has saved up enough money
to continue his education, but he has no plans to return to his current institution of higher
education. He hopes to eventually get into medical school and become a neurologist.

Rocky decided to attend college out of state to escape from his family problems back
home, but now regrets his decision because he misses his siblings. He also regrets transferring to
his current institution because a lot of the credits he had earned at the community college did not
transfer. He wishes there had been someone to coach him through the whole process. He chose
to live in the cheapest apartment he could find during his first year at his current institution, but
he regrets that decision as well, as he describes the place as terrible.

Rocky does not feel a strong sense of belonging on his campus and he prefers to keep to
himself. Even though his college experience has been disappointing so far, he does not have any
specific advice on how to make his campus more inviting and supportive to students like him.
He attributes his inability to connect with other students to his age and the lack of respect for his
views from those on campus who have extreme liberal views. He could relate better to other
veterans, although he says that a lot of them like to go out for drinks, so he does not hang out
with them. He has participated in the Vietnamese student association, but while he appreciates
the members’ efforts, he does not really see the value or point in the cultural events and activities
the association puts together. On a campus with an Asian American student population of over
6%, he has not met another Hmong student on his campus.

Rocky thinks that most of his professors are helpful, although he does not have a close
relationship with any of them. He does not understand the purpose of having an advisor, as he
does not think that they are helpful or that they care about the students. He likens administrators
to elusive mythical creatures and does not have a positive opinion of the staff at the multicultural affairs office. While he says that nobody dares to mess with him because of his intimidating demeanor, he has experienced subtle racism on campus.

Steven

Steven is a 27-year-old second-generation Taiwanese-Vietnamese-Chinese American man. He is pursuing his second bachelor’s degree in computer science at a very large, public research university in his home state. He works part-time and is a part-time student. He is the third of four siblings. In spite of his parents’ limited English proficiency, he grew up speaking only English at home and does not speak his parents’ native tongues. His oldest sister is the only sibling who is able to speak Chinese with their father. He was born in another Midwestern state but his family moved to their current town when he was in elementary school.

Steven does not consider himself or his family traditional, although he thinks that his family fits into a number of Asian stereotypes, such as being in the restaurant business and eating “weird” food. He says that his parents, however, did not put emphasis on his and his siblings’ academics and that he was a below average student. He grew up in an area with low Asian American population and was one of the only two Asian American students in his class in high school. He is not close with his ethnic community, does not actively seek out other Asian Americans, and states that he does not find Asian women attractive. His family was not religious but was pressured into attending church by their landlord at one point. They eventually stopped going. He does not really think about religion much.

Steven’s father emigrated from Taiwan while his mother came to the U.S. as a refugee from Vietnam. He is not quite sure why his father decided to come to the U.S. with a few friends to start a new life. His mother came from a family of seven or eight children and left Vietnam by
boat with a few siblings to escape the Vietnam War. They encountered pirates during their voyage but fortunately was left physically unharmed. Most of his mother’s siblings have resettled in other parts of the U.S. while one sibling, who had an intellectual disability, died in Vietnam before the war. His father does not have any other family members living in the U.S.

Both of Steven’s parents came to the U.S. as adults and they struggled and still struggle with the language barrier. His father completed high school in Taiwan and worked as a cook in the military there. His mother did not continue her education past elementary school in Vietnam and worked in factories there until the war started. After they arrived in the U.S., they both worked in Chinese restaurants, his father as a cook and his mother as a server. Neither of them continued their education in the U.S. They eventually bought a restaurant, but unfortunately, their business failed and they had to move to another state to find cheaper housing and other employment opportunities. They still work as a cook and a server in a Chinese restaurant.

Steven describes his childhood as rough and emotional. He remembers being bullied in elementary school, being discriminated against because of his cultural background, and being made fun of because of his facial features. He was aware of his physical differences from his White peers early on and yearned to fit in like “just another American.” After his family moved to another state and he transferred to another school, his race did not seem to be a big issue anymore and he was able to build a pretty solid social circle.

Steven had a full-ride scholarship the first time he attended college. As a first-generation and low-income student, he did not feel particularly prepared for college and lacked a sense of direction. Fortunately, his two older siblings were already in college by the time he graduated from high school and they were able to help him with his college and financial aid applications. He did not apply to any other institution.
Steven chose his institution of higher education for his first bachelor’s degree because he thought it had the best potential for social life and the campus was prettier than another institution he was considering. Some of his friends were planning to attend that institution as well. He chose to pursue a second bachelor’s degree instead of a master’s degree and to attend the same institution again for his second bachelor’s degree because he could graduate relatively quickly with the credits he had already earned from his first degree.

Steven admits that he did not have his priorities right the first time he attended college. He was more focused on having a good social life and fitting in. He found his classes boring and says he did not have a relationship with his professors or advisors and felt indifferent about the administrators. He was, however, pretty actively involved in several student organizations on campus. This time, he still finds his classes boring, although he now knows what his priorities are and is able to stay positive. He is still pretty actively involved on campus as well.

Steven lives off-campus now as he did previously because it is cheaper. He is aware of campus resources but does not use any. He prefers to check out subreddits for academic and career resources or to ask other students in the same field for more information. He is happy with the city’s diversity and the variety of options for ethnic food that comes with it.

On a campus with an Asian American student population of almost 5%, Steven sees other Asian American students on campus quite frequently. His campus also has a high number of Asian international students. He is associated with the Asian American student association and Vietnamese student association, although his priorities are sport-based student organizations. As for Asian American faculty members, he has only encountered a small number of them outside of the sciences. He considers it rare for him to run into an Asian American staff member.
While Steven does not remember experiencing any racism on campus, he has had many experiences of both overt and subtle racism throughout his life. Even though his campus is pretty diverse, he thinks that every student should be required to study abroad so to gain more perspective and perhaps understand what it might feel like to be a minority or odd one out. He looks forward to graduating, getting into Silicon Valley, and not ending up with a dead-end job.

**Tri Quang**

Tri Quang is a 21-year-old 1.5-generation Vietnamese American man. He is a senior pursuing a Bachelor of Arts degree in anthropology and sociology with a minor in Japanese at a small, private liberal arts college. He grew up in another Midwestern state, where his family still lives. He is the youngest of four siblings and the only son. Although Vietnamese is his first language, his parents forced him to speak English at home after they came to the U.S. because they believed that mastery of the English language was the key to success. He still speaks Vietnamese to his family but wishes he could read and write in the language.

Tri Quang describes his immediate family as very unconventional and different from other Vietnamese refugee families in many ways. He cites his sexual orientation as an example. Being queer is a salient part of his identity but this subject is still very taboo in their culture. He came out to his mother during his sophomore year in college and she and his sisters have been surprisingly very accepting and supportive. His family still practice ancestral worship but they are not particularly religious.

Tri Quang came to the U.S. with his immediate family when he was around five years old. Most of their extended family had already come to the U.S. as refugees after the Vietnam War. His grandfather had to leave because of his involvement with the South Vietnamese army and was considered a threat to the communist regime. His parents, who met at the high school
where they were a principal and a French teacher, were considered intellectuals who were also a threat to the regime. Had they stayed, they would have been placed in reeducation camps and tortured, like one of his aunts who were caught while trying to escape by boat.

When Tri Quang and his family first arrived in the U.S., they looked so poor that random strangers would give them food. They lived in a bad part of town where he said it was normal for him to hear gunshots and live next to drug dealers. Even though his parents earned their bachelor’s degrees in Vietnam, their degrees did not transfer and they had to attend technical schools to be able to find jobs in the U.S. His mother used to work in a bakery and later in printmaking, and is now a dental hygienist. His father worked in aviation manufacturing but passed away when he was in seventh grade. At the time, he was working third shift seven days a week, often with overtime. His immune system was weakened due to stress and he died from pneumonia.

Tri Quang grew up in an ethnic enclave of Vietnamese refugees and had many Vietnamese friends growing up. He made a conscious choice to not become involved in his ethnic community, however, because of the competitive and gossipy nature of the parents. He also deliberately applied to only colleges outside of his home state because he wanted to get out of the stifling environment. He describes his hometown as very diverse but also very segregated. He and his family have experienced blatant racism numerous times when he was growing up.

Even though Tri Quang is a first-generation college student, his sisters and a cousin had already started their college careers when he was college-bound, and they were able to forge a path for him to follow, particularly with attending college out of state. Many in his ethnic community expect their children to live at home while they attend community colleges or state universities. He applied to various liberal arts institutions but chose his current institution
because it offered him a full-ride scholarship. He laments the fact that a liberal arts education is not understood by his family and that his accomplishments are not valued by them.

Tri Quang was shocked to find himself as the only Vietnamese American student on campus during his first year in college, even though the campus has an Asian American student population of over 6%. He met another Vietnamese American student during his second year, but they did not get along. He tried to befriend the Vietnamese international students, but they did not think he was Vietnamese enough. Ironically, he often gets mistaken for an international student by his advisors and professors in spite of his numerous attempts to clear things up with them. He says it must be because of his “exotic” name.

While Tri Quang has not experienced any overt racism on campus or in the community, he has had numerous experiences with microaggressions throughout his college career. His biggest pet peeve is when others appear surprised by his choice of major, as they assume all Asians to have a poor mastery of the English language and to only go into STEM fields. He also complains about professors assuming that he does not need help because he is Asian. In addition to being a racial and ethnic minority, his lower socioeconomic status often becomes apparent to him as he could not always afford the same things that his peers could afford.

Tri Quang feels very negatively about the administrators, who he thinks are self-serving, only care about the college’s reputation, and do not care about students’ well-being. He surmises that he was only recruited so that the institution could boast about having first-generation, low-income students of color. He says that students like him would have a higher chance of success if they attend a bigger public university with a bigger Asian American student population. He wishes there would be more Asian American faculty, staff, and administrators on his campus, specifically those who are not just of East Asian descent. He also believes it is important to
disaggregate data on Asian American students and for studies and reports on marginalized
groups to include Asian Americans within their samples.

Tri Quang’s overall college experience, however, has been positive. He is currently the
president of the Asian American student organization and a member of an environmental
advocacy student organization. He has also held several paid student leadership positions on his
campus. He loves his classes and his major and he has a strong support system on campus that is
made up of other outspoken Asian Americans, his academic advisor, senior thesis advisors, and
professors. He is looking forward to graduation in a few weeks and starting a teaching career in
New York City.

**Emergent Themes**

I used an inductive approach, also known as emergent analysis, to answer my research
questions (J. A. Smith et al., 2013). In addition to analyzing the participants’ responses to my
open-ended interview questions to find themes, I also used the major findings of this study to
address my research questions and connected the research questions to the emergent themes.
The data analysis process was conducted in six primary stages as outlined in Chapter III.

After I transcribed each interview verbatim but before I read the interview transcripts for
the first time, I reminded myself that I needed to set aside my personal experiences with the
phenomenon and my motivation to conduct the research study, thereby bracketing off my
experiences from those of my research participants (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). As I listened
to my participants once again and read the interview transcripts for the first time, I was able to
immerse myself in the data and make my participants the focus of my analysis. I was humbled
by their trust in me and by their willingness to talk about sensitive topics and relive difficult
moments in their lives. I was thankful that I was able to build a rapport with them.
As I reread each interview transcript, I highlighted blocks of text that stood out to me and made some notes and comments on the data using the comments feature in Microsoft Word. With each rereading, I highlighted additional blocks of text and made additional notes and comments. Next, I engaged in several cycles of in vivo coding to highlight the participants’ voices (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014; Saldaña, 2013). Throughout the coding process, I wrote analytic memos to organize my thoughts on how the data were coming together and used the original literature to stimulate my thoughts (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). These reflective memos helped me identify connections across and gaps in my coded data and acted as prompts and triggers when I reflected on the deeper and complex meanings of a code.

Next, I copied parts of the transcripts with their associated codes and pasted them into another Word document under various headings. These headings served as my initial clusters of meaning and they reflected the key phrases and statements that were significant to the study. In my initial review, I found 32 similar concepts, phrases, and statements from the interviews that reflected my participants’ descriptions of their experiences. I cross-referenced these groupings and categories and refined them, through several cycles of coding, to 19 clusters. These clusters were further refined and grouped into broad thematic categories. In subsequent reviews of these broad thematic categories, my notes, and the transcripts, I was able to further crystallize the broad thematic ideas into distinct common themes.

At the conclusion of the data analysis process, five strong themes emerged: (1) the journey is difficult, (2) family circumstances guided academic choices, (3) childhood community has an influence on college experience, (4) support, inclusion, and a sense of belonging foster college success, (5) and the legacy of trauma is embedded in their everyday lives. Table 9 presents a breakdown of the themes and the definition of each theme. These five themes capture
the essence of the experiences of the first-generation college students of Southeast Asian descent, whose families have resettled in the United States as refugees, as well as how their experiences reflect the nuance of their family’s forced migration. The elements related to each overarching theme are also discussed in detail on the following pages.

Table 9

**Emergent Themes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thematic category</th>
<th>Thematic description</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theme One</td>
<td>The journey is difficult</td>
<td>Sources of struggle related to the participants’ childhood poverty; lack of college awareness, access, and preparation; difficulty navigating college; and experiences of microaggression and racism.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme Two</td>
<td>Family circumstances guided academic choices</td>
<td>Decisions the participants made, guided by their family circumstances, that contributed to the theme, including which institution to attend and which career path they wanted to take.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme Three</td>
<td>Childhood community has an influence on college experience</td>
<td>Circumstances that contributed to the theme, including having grown up in an ethnic enclave or diverse community, having grown up in a predominantly White neighborhood, and having attended ethnic churches while growing up.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme Four</td>
<td>Support, inclusion, and sense of belonging foster college success</td>
<td>Sources of support for the participants on campus, including higher education professionals, supportive services, as well as friends and peers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme Five</td>
<td>The legacy of trauma is embedded in their everyday lives</td>
<td>Experiences as descendants of refugees and first-generation college students that contributed to the theme, including parents’ refugee experience, family’s resettlement challenges, dilemma of being caught between two cultures, motivation for attending college, and the importance of telling their stories.</td>
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**Theme One: The Journey Is Difficult**

A reoccurring theme that emerged was that the participants had difficult life journeys. The stories that the participants shared with me were ones of struggles, but of optimism and
resilience as well. Each shared with me bad childhood memories of their parents working long hours, of growing up in poverty and unsafe neighborhoods, or of being ostracized and bullied at school at a young age. Each also recalled their stressful college and financial aid application processes, for which they lacked preparation and during which their parents were unable to provide them with any guidance, information, or help. Their struggles continued in college, although they were optimistic that their future would get better once they earned their college degrees. In spite of their optimism and seeming indifference, their experiences of microaggression and racism did bother them, some to a greater extent than others.

**Childhood poverty and struggles.** One of the most poignant memories of the participants’ childhood was of their parents working long hours to make ends meet. Four of the participants regretted not being able to spend more time with one or both of their parents due to their parents’ long work hours or work-related living arrangements. Another vivid memory of their childhood was of growing up in poor and unsafe neighborhoods where drugs, violence, and gang activities were prevalent. Five of the participants also recalled being bullied in school or how they struggled with fitting in at school. These experiences of childhood poverty and struggles were one of the various conditions that contributed to the theme.

**Parents working long hours.** All of the participants’ parents worked in unskilled labor positions and/or worked long hours to make ends meet. As the oldest of four boys, Cameron was thrust into the role of “man of the house” while he was still in high school. He remembered having to take on a lot more responsibilities at home after his father, who was previously laid off, found more work in another state. He reminisced:

[My father] did find more work, but it was in [another state], so he’d do this commute where he would, he had an apartment in [that state], drive down for five hours to like [the city], stay there for like two weeks, come back for like a whole weekend, five-hour drive, five-hour drive back. Kinda like that, he'd come back like twice a month or so….By my
junior year, he’d found a new job in [another state] that paid better, so he went all the way to [that state]. He only came back like once a, every few months then.

Another participant, Rocky, pointed out that he was a good student in elementary school because his father was able to help him with his schoolwork; however, by the time he started middle school, his father was no longer able to help him due to his limited academic skills. He wanted to continue doing well and asked his father for permission to stay after school for tutoring, but his father would not let him. He started to lose motivation in school after that and his grades suffered through middle and high schools. Later on, he found out that:

Apparently the only reason why [my father] didn’t let me stay after school’s because he didn’t have the means to facilitate transportation for me to be picked up from school since both parents worked ‘til like, you know, eight-, twelve-hour shift, so, had they just told me that, I would’ve just walked home instead of just, you know, not go to after-school tutoring sessions.

To this day, Rocky still deeply regretted not being able to attend those after-school tutoring sessions. He told me that although the school was five miles away from his home, he would not have thought twice about walking home had his parents just given him permission.

Tri Quang recalled not being able to spend a lot of time with his father when he was growing up, because “when I was at school, he was sleeping, and then when I went to sleep, he was at work.” He insisted that his father’s premature death was caused by overwork and stress:

[My dad] passed away when I was in seventh grade, and it was from an autoimmune disease, but the doctors pretty much pointed it to stress. They said that it was first, he first got caught with pneumonia, but his autoimmune system was like, not fighting back the pneumonia, so that kind of like, worsen, and like it wasn’t like responding like to the medicine, the treatment, and a lot of that had to do with the, the stress level, the stress level he was under, because he would work like seven days a week, like overtime, and like, yeah, and we would basically never see him. He had the night shift too, like the third shift.

Steven was the only participant whose parents did not teach him and two of his siblings their native languages, even though his father spoke Mandarin Chinese and his mother spoke the
Chinese dialects of Mandarin and Cantonese as well as Vietnamese. He said that it was because they were too busy working in their restaurant. He expressed his disappointment:

My older sister speaks Chinese primarily with my dad. My older brother, younger sister, and I do not speak Chinese. I do not recall ever speaking Chinese ever, as some children speak their parents' language and lose it later. So [in] our household English is mainly spoken, despite my dad's English being a low level and my mom not being fluent. I like to think my dad and sister have a closer connection due to her ability to speak Chinese.

Growing up in poor and unsafe neighborhoods. Three of the participants recalled growing up in bad neighborhoods where drugs, violence, and gang activities were prevalent. In order to prevent their children from joining gangs and getting in trouble, Rocky’s parents moved the family away from their home state. He was grateful that they did. He stated:

I’ll always remember my parents always reminding us that we don’t live in [the state where I was born] because, I think we realized that it would, you know, it was always going to be trouble when [the Hmong people are] all together, that the gangs would eventually formed.

He felt indifferent about their next home, noting, “I wouldn’t say it was a bad area, it’s just maybe not exactly the best place to live at.”

Tri Quang still could not believe how poor they were when his family first arrived in the U.S. He divulged, “when we first arrived, we looked poor, that like, a random like stranger came up and gave us like food, and at that moment, I was just like, oh, that’s like that’s so nice, like oh my god.” Furthermore, they lived in a poor and dangerous neighborhood with other SEAA refugees. He recalled:

[My parents] were able to secure an apartment in like a very sketchy area of town, like super, super sketchy, and I remember hearing gunshots as a kid. Like often, it was like normal for me to hear gunshots. I remember a lot of people were breaking into our cars, lot of people broke into…several other apartments. I actually remember like really strange things like, I think my next-door neighbor was a drug dealer…. [My parents] would never like let us go out unless they were watching us. I remember I had to, the school bus didn’t come to my area of town because it was so dangerous.
Anna’s family of 13 has lived in the same neighborhood and same apartment since her parents came to the U.S., and the neighborhood has become increasingly unsafe in recent years. She noted that they have seen increased incidents of “people doing bad stuff I guess, if you wanna say that, you know, shooting and stuff like that, fighting…and sexual harassment too…that’s why we’re trying to look for a house, to find a safer place to live.” She added:

We don’t like, my little brothers, we don’t let them out, ‘cause, you know, parents don’t always take care of their kids and their kids grow bad, and, you know, ‘cause like, my little brother, he was at the park, and like some kid was, either choked him or trying to choke him or something, and so we don’t let them out without supervision.

**Experiences of being bullied.** Three of the participants, Cameron, Rocky, and Steven, shared that they experienced race-based bullying in elementary and middle schools. Cameron’s family moved a lot when he was younger and as a result, he had trouble adjusting to his new schools and struggled with making friends. In middle school, he was bullied and he did not enjoy going to school because of that. He said, “I would just like dread waking up every morning, going to school, I wouldn’t want to go to school at all.”

Steven was also bullied in elementary school and made fun of by other kids because of his physical appearance and cultural background. He revealed, “I think as a child, when I witnessed other kids making squinty eyes at me and no one else that I clued in that I might be different. Or how my parents did not speak English fluently.” He also realized that the food his family ate was considered weird by his peers.

Rocky stood up to his bullies and ended up getting in trouble at his school. He acknowledged:

Just being of a different skin color, I often was bullied by other people during school. I think that when other students saw how often I was picked on, it dissuaded them from wanting to have anything to do with me. Plus I didn’t exactly help myself when I eventually fought back against the bullies. Of course, I’d get in trouble with the school administrators and teachers, but I think the other students were scared of what I would
This most likely was a result of me no longer taking any sort of bullying and wanting to always resolve the issue with my fists.

**Lack of college awareness, access, and preparation.** When it comes to higher education, the participants’ parents were unable to provide them with any guidance or help. In Anna’s, Eric’s, Rocky’s, and Steven’s households, academics were not emphasized. Steven gave this as an example of how his family was not traditional like the stereotypical Asian family. He said, “my parents were not very strict with our academics to the point where I identify my academic success in K-12 as average to below average.” Cameron noted, “being first-generation college student I didn’t really think about college at all until middle of junior year….so senior year I came in vastly unprepared to apply to college.” He did not realize he had to write essays or to take the SAT test until his classmates started signing up for it. He recounted how stressful and confusing the college application process was because his parents could not help him.

Anna described her school district as “not very high [in academic performance] at all, and there was a lot of talks about shutting down the schools, ‘cause the schools weren’t high, so, I don’t think I had that background to even know what college was.” She told me that at her high school, “college wasn’t really talked about. We were just kinda like, you go or you don’t go.” She added, “I didn’t really know much about college at all. Like I didn’t know that it wasn’t free, like I didn’t know that you had to pay.” She found the financial aid application process to be confusing and overwhelming. Her parents didn’t know much about college either and were unable to help her at all. Another participant, Eric, said that when he asked his parents for help with college-related matters, “they didn’t have a clue how to go about it.”

Fortunately for Anna, her three older brothers had experience applying for financial aid after attending community and career colleges, and they were able to help her older sister, who in turn, helped her. Likewise, Ailee, Eric, Jackie, Steven, and Tri Quang were able to seek help and
advice from their older siblings or cousins who were attending college. Eric said, “[my sister] kinda know[s] how to do it, otherwise I would have been lost. Like I would be extremely frustrated with stuff….it would have been extremely difficult for me, like I wouldn’t know how to do anything.”

Eric said that while his parents did mention college to him, “they never really pushed me into it.” He was not motivated to attend college at first and after graduating from high school, he ended up working in the same factory where his mother worked. He eventually decided to attend community college and then transferred to his current institution. Rocky, another participant who did not attend college after graduating from high school, started at a community college before transferring to a four-year institution. He told me, “I did consider attending college when I was in high school. But like many high school students, I was uncertain how I’d pay for it…I only started considering going to college while I was in the Army.” He also added that none of his younger siblings had much interest in school.

The struggles continue in college. As first-generation college students from low-income families, the participants were able to attend college because of the generous financial aid packages they received from their institution of higher education or other education benefits for which they qualified. Steven and Tri Quang received full-ride scholarships while Cameron received almost full-ride scholarship to attend college. As a veteran, Rocky received education benefits from the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs that funded his education.

While financial aid helped provide college access to the participants, they still arrived in college unprepared to navigate the multiple systems of the higher education culture. When asked to describe his experience as a first-generation college student, Steven described himself as having a “lack of direction, no previous experience to really draw off of, a new world.”
Similarly, Anna lacked direction and had trouble finding a major that was right for her. As a result of being in multiple majors that were not a good fit for her and taking courses that she did not enjoy, her grades suffered significantly. She shared:

I started premed, to engineering, to anthropology, and so, I mean, I looked at every, I looked at like so many departments. I looked at criminal justice, psychology, like computer science, like engineering, I looked at every, not everything, but you know, a lot of majors, and so, it made it even more difficult to try to figure out my thoughts on like is this really what I want to do, at the same time take care of school and academic….so, it’s just been a long, crazy ride of changing majors, you know, trying to figure out what I actually wanted to do with [the majors].

Jackie also ended up switching majors. He started with a major that his mother picked for him, but it was not a good fit for him. It has taken him a lot longer than he would have liked to graduate from college. He has been in college for eight years at the time of the interview.

Rocky also struggled throughout his college journey due to the lack of information and guidance. Specifically, he wished he had someone to guide him through the college application and transfer processes. He lamented:

I regret coming here. I wanna say, it’s only, it’s only because a lot of the transfer, a lot of the credits I earned at the community college along with being in the military, a lot of it didn’t transfer. I didn’t even think even half transferred, so, it’s very, you know, disheartening to realize, you know, all that hard work amounted to nothing.

He was not sure how he was going to afford college after completing the current academic year. He said:

I think my last semester might be this coming spring because I’ll be running out of funding from the post-9/11 GI Bill, and I don’t exactly wanna take out a loan because the mortgage is already a hassle to pay.

He added that he should probably have attended college in his home state, if only he had someone to coach him through the process and help him come up with a better plan.
Ailee, Anna, and Rocky had to juggle school, work, and family responsibilities, and at times, life could get overwhelming for them. Ailee and Anna also lived at home with their large families and commute to campus daily. Ailee, who worked full time, shared:

Right now I take care of my little cousins after work late at night, ‘cause my aunt and uncle have work first, well, for now my aunt’s working first [shift], but because of their schedule, they need somebody to babysit at night, so I would be babysitting. So I have to do that, deal with that, with school, work, and babysitting.

She admitted, “I would schedule my class around [my little cousins’] schedule, so I can take the oldest one to school, and then their mom would take the youngest one when I go to class.”

Anna worked multiple jobs on campus and helped take care of her younger siblings. As she struggled with navigating college and dealing with the stress of juggling her family obligations, she had to keep reminding herself of her priorities:

I’ve had to like literally pick and choose these battles and you know, they’re different every day, but, you know, it’s something I have to make, because I can’t like, I can’t not pick them up from school, you know, my little brothers, you know, and like I just can’t.

Out of all the participants, Anna was the most forthright with me about her struggles and she said it gave her a feeling or catharsis and empowerment. Throughout her interview, she used the word “struggle” 15 times and the word “suffer” four times.

Even though Rocky was attending college in another state, he could not escape his responsibilities at home. As the oldest sibling, he ended up as the legal guardian of his minor siblings after a family tragedy, and he still supported some of his younger siblings financially. He took out a mortgage to buy them a house after their mother died and their father went to prison. One of his younger brothers had special needs, and there was a lot of legal paperwork involved with every decision he made. He did not fully trust his other siblings to take care of his brother with special needs. He also constantly worried about their finances and what would happen if his other siblings messed up the paperwork.
For six of the participants, their socioeconomic status was always present and prevalent in all aspects of their college life. Ailee, Anna, and Eric lived at home with their families and commuted to campus daily because they could not afford to pay rent. Rocky thought he could save money with his apartment choice, but he admitted, “I just tried to pick I guess the cheapest place I can get and sure enough, you know, I got exactly what I paid for.”

When Tri Quang, who attended a private liberal arts college on a full-ride scholarship, first stepped foot on his campus, he realized, “I felt immediately like there was class markers everywhere.” Cameron, who also attended a private institution on a scholarship, described how he would feel out of place or unwelcomed on campus, because “it’ll be a different conversation like they’ll be talking about their vacation homes, where they’re traveling [to] for spring break, like going to Europe, stuff like that, stuff that I can’t do.” Even Anna, who attended a public institution, still felt self-conscious about coming from a low-income family. She shared:

I’m the only one who comes from, you know, a low-income family, you know, in this class, ‘cause everyone has nice cars, so you know, I think about even like my academic, you know, my economic background….I was seeing people with money, students with successful parents, etc. that I felt like I was comparing myself a lot of them. It took a toll on me emotionally and mentally.

**Experiences of microaggression and racism.** While all the participants shared a positive outlook on life, that did not make them immune to the microaggression and racism they have experienced in their everyday life since they were little kids. In fact, some of their earliest childhood memories were of the racism or microaggression that they have experienced in school, as alluded to previously, and of their parents’ experiences of racism that they have witnessed. While these childhood experiences may be unpleasant at best, they have prepared them to deal with similar situations during adulthood.
Ailee recalled struggling with accepting her racial identity as a child because she was the only Asian kid in her neighborhood and elementary school:

When I was little, I didn’t like it because of all the, like rude people that I went through in elementary, so, I always hated being Asian when I was little...there wasn’t a lot of, where we lived, there wasn’t a lot of, any, like any other races, so it was just, majority of them were Caucasians, so yeah, it was a struggle, but I didn’t say anything to my parents, which wasn’t good, but I didn’t [tell] them.

Cameron, Jackie, Rocky, and Steven also remembered being one of the only or very few students of Asian descent in their schools and how they were always painfully aware of the fact that they came from a household where a different kind of food was eaten or a language other than English was spoken as the primary language. Jackie shared, “I was always seen as the kid who was different because I grew up in a different culture than my American peers.”

While Tri Quang grew up in an ethnic enclave and attended school with other children of refugees, he and his family still encountered racism in their everyday lives outside of their ethnic community. He illustrated the blatant racism that his family has experienced in his home state:

I remember a guy like rolled down window. This was like when I was like eight or nine, and like he shouted to my family like, “Go back to your country, refugees!” But like, something like that happened. I remember some other instances when I speak in Vietnamese to my mom in the grocery market. This White lady pulls up and she’s like, “Speak English!” And I don’t know, I was only like seventh grade, but like I told her off mega time….I can go on with the racial encounters I’ve had, but like, they’ve been pretty like, directly like racist. There’s like no question about it.

Even though he grew up among other SEAA refugees, he remembered his home state as being very conservative and “very White.”

These childhood experiences of microaggression and racism have prepared the participants to deal with similar situations during adulthood. In their everyday adult life, they still encountered these incidents, both on and off campus. Rocky shared an incident during which he reacted to someone who made a racist comment about him on campus:
I was speaking in Hmong to him [on the phone] and I was just taking my time and I think this girl was behind me, and she’s like, “Oh, I can’t believe all these, you know, Asian people. They always walk so damn slow, always talking on the phone.” I stopped talking, I like stopped talking, I turned around, told her, “How about you learn to shut the…” You know, I just, and just instinctively, you know, just curse at her and she’s, and just went about my business.

Eric could not find the exact words to describe what he experienced at work, but he knew he felt like he was being treated differently because of his background. He said that his coworkers, the majority of whom were White, often put off a vibe that made him “feel like they think that I don’t understand or something.” He said, however, that it did not bother him, because “I’m not really concerned about what people think.”

Cameron described an incident in class during which he had experienced second-hand microaggression:

One day I was sitting in the lab like writing my report and these two guys in front of me were taunting. The TA was in the room but they were just complaining like out loud, really loudly about how like they can’t understand a thing this guy is saying like he shouldn’t be teaching if he can’t speak English. And like I had the same TA and like I always, I’ll understand him, you know, perfectly well, but, it was, they kept saying things yeah, like, “can’t speak English,” stuff like that, and you know, those were like meant to be, they said it pretty aggressively, so like, it was kinda meant to be offensive to him specifically.

Even though he was not the target of the taunting, he was reminded of the same kind of taunting that his parents frequently received in their everyday lives:

I too felt I guess a little bit uneasy about it, because my own parents, you know, speak heavily accented [English] and there’s probably people who’d say the same thing about them, like, like, “This damn lady walked into the store today, tried to ask me a question and I couldn’t understand a thing she’s saying.” Or “I work with this guy and like it’s hard to work with him because he doesn’t speak English well.” Things like that, and, I don’t know, just felt very uncomfortable with the situation.

He said that while his campus was generally very welcoming, “stereotypes and microaggressions get passed around” and occasionally there were slight racial tensions on campus.
While some stereotypes may seem harmless or even positive, they could still have a harmful effect on their recipients. Jackie admitted:

I grew up trying to learn and trying to be smart at things that normally people in my age group would need time to comprehend. There was also that Asian stereotype that Asians were smart and good at math and science.

He also grumbled about his friends’ ignorance: “Sometimes my friends would ask if I have ever eaten dog, but a lot of the time Americans would mistake me for Chinese because apparently we all look alike.” Ailee had similar grievances:

Not many people know that not every Asian is like the same, like not everybody’s Chinese. Like I want them to know that like there’s different ones like…they didn’t know what Cambodian was, ‘cause we’re so small. Like literally, I name off Japanese and stuff and then it was like, yeah, Cambodian, they’re like, “What’s that?” I’m like, “It’s in Asia.” That I wish people would know that like that, not just the bigger ones that’s always talked about.

Tri Quang was getting really tired of being mistaken for an international student by his school’s administrators:

Everyone thinks I’m [an] international student…I’ve got[ten] multiple emails from the administration like the center of international students keeps on emailing me on like international student events. So I’m just, and I’ve told them like multiple times like I’m not international…They probably see my long name, they’re like, he [has] too much of a different, exotic name. He must be from somewhere else.

It also annoyed him when others did not believe he would be capable of excelling in his field. He complained, “I once had someone like react really like surprised when I said I was an anthropology major. They’re like, ‘Oh my god, like, you must be so good at English, because that’s a lot of reading and writing.’”

In spite of all these negative experiences that left a lasting impression on them, the participants generally did not make a big deal out of them. They seemed to have accepted these experiences as inconveniences that were part and parcel of life as descendants of refugees and immigrants in this country. Like their parents, they generally felt lucky to be here and chose to
focus on the positives. Rocky summarized his experience growing up in an area with very few Asian Americans as “that was generally the normal, I guess, thing, so I just accept it, just try to do the best I can with it.” Steven also added, “things used to bother me a lot more. I mostly have gotten over it, as many people genuinely do not know any better.”

Tri Quang vented, “I think definitely people treat me differently but it’s like whether or not I can sense it….Argh! Yeah, I think professors assume that I need less help.” However, he conceded, “I think I’ve become like so used to it that I just don’t notice that anymore, or I don’t care, actually I don’t care anymore.” Because the participants have lived in the same situation every day of their lives, they have gotten used to those situations and learned to ignore them. Instead, they focused on their futures and the things that were within their control.

**Theme Two: Family Circumstances Guided Their Academic Choices**

For all of the participants, their family circumstances guided their decision on their college choice or academic major. These circumstances included what they went through during childhood, personal experience of poverty, as well as their family’s refugee and resettlement experiences, family obligations, and financial situations. Some of the participants chose their institution because of its proximity to their home while others chose their institution type due to financial reasons. Others chose their institution or major because of a family story or childhood experience that motivated them or for practical reasons.

**College choice.** The participants’ family circumstances guided their decision on their college choice, including the type of institution and the proximity of an institution to their home. Eric and Rocky, who were both non-traditional students, started at a community college to save money and because they were still unsure of which four-year institution they wanted to attend at the time. For Ailee, Anna, and Eric, proximity to home was an important factor for their college
choice. They chose their institutions of higher education because they were within one hour’s drive from their home. According to Eric, there were a few colleges that were within driving distance from his home, and those were the only ones he applied to. He ended up choosing the same institution his older sister attended.

Ailee was glad that she took the possibility of commuting to campus into consideration when she made her college choice. She tried living off campus for one semester but decided that it was too expensive, and she moved back in with her parents the following semester. She told me, “[I live] back home with my parents. So I have to drive back and forth, but it’s cheaper.” Anna wished she could experience living on campus or at least had the option of not having to live at home, as she would have been able to focus more on her studies. She admitted:

If I had a choice, I would definitely have lived on campus. I think it would have made my grades a little bit better, would have [given] me a different experience in terms of just being more focused, but, you know, like I’ve said, I’ve had to pick and choose [my battles].

She and her sister lived at home because “tuition would be way too high. And so we just commuted back and forth.”

Rocky and Tri Quang, on the other hand, wanted to use college as an opportunity to move away from home. As noted when discussing the first theme, Rocky had a lot of responsibilities back home. He chose to attend college out of state to get a break from all those responsibilities. In hindsight, he realized he should have attended college closer to home as he missed his siblings and had much harder time fulfilling his responsibilities while he was so far away from home. He did not plan to return to his institution for the following academic year, and was only going to complete the current academic year because he had already paid for a full year’s rent.

Tri Quang had a different reason for wanting to attend college out of state. He shared:
I wanted to get out of [my home state] for a lot of reasons. [It] is very conservative, it’s very White, it’s very, a lot of the schools in [my home state] are, there, actually there are no liberal arts institution in [my home state]. They’re all very religious-based, and I know I didn’t want to go [to one of those schools]. I wanted to get out of [my home state], I wanted to be more independent. So, I chose to apply to all the schools that were out of state.

He ended up choosing his current institution because if offered him the most generous financial aid package. He added, “I wanted to get out of [my home state] ‘cause I thought the Southeast Asian enclave that I lived in was so stifling, like I thought I couldn’t… be who I am in that, such a tight community.” He did not come out to his family until he was in college and while his immediate family turned out to be very supportive, he felt like he would not be able to be himself within their local community because his being gay was “such a taboo matter” within his ethnic community. He told me that the older generations liked to gossip and that they were very traditional. He did not plan to move back to his home state after graduation.

Cameron was not planning specifically to go out of state for college, but he ended up going to college not only in a different state, but in a different region altogether. As discussed in the first theme, Cameron’s family moved around a lot when he was younger due to his father’s jobs. As a result, he had struggled with finding a sense of belonging at every new school he attended. When he went to his current campus for a weekend visit, he felt a “profound sense of welcome that I hadn’t felt in any other places, because growing up we’d moved around a lot, sometimes switching school in the middle of the year, which was really difficult.” He described how the same recruiter who went to his high school a few months ago met him at the airport to take him to campus. The recruiter remembered his name and what he wrote in his application. He felt “a sense of community that I really craved” on that campus and decided to turn down his dream school for his current institution that same weekend.
Academic major. The participants’ family circumstances also guided their decision on their academic major. Eric saw college as a means to an end. His main goal for attending college was to not end up working in the same factory job, like his mother, for the rest of his life. He took a practical approach when choosing his major in business management. When I asked him about his classes and his major, he responded:

My major is okay, so I mean, I’m not gonna be like, “Oh, I love it.” It’s not something that I’m gonna say that I love, you know. I mean people always say, go to school for what you love, but I guess my main mantra is more of a go to school and get into something you can find a job in.

He added, “I don’t hate it, so, I mean, I worked in a factory for like, for years, so I, you know, so I can deal.”

As for Cameron, ever since his mother told him the story of how her father died back in Vietnam, he knew he wanted to be a doctor when he grew up. He revealed:

[My mother’s] father died from, he had kidney stones and then they had a surgery but they had to do it without anesthesia, ‘cause in this village they didn’t really have anything. She says he died from the pain, which is pretty terrible. It was like one of my motivations to become a doctor, actually. He was, I think he was only in his 40s at the time, like early 40s. And so my maternal grandmother basically raised eight children, alone, because she also had very little family in the area.

Because of this, he chose a major in biological sciences and psychology and planned to go to medical school after graduating from college.

Theme Three: Childhood Community Has an Influence on Their College Experience

The community in which the participants grew up, whether it was in an ethnic enclave or diverse neighborhood or in a predominantly White neighborhood, had an influence on their college experience. While all the participants had an overall positive experience in college, those who grew up in an ethnic enclave or diverse neighborhood generally had a harder time adjusting to college in terms of dealing with the initial culture shock in college. They were more likely to
seek out other Asian American students or join Asian American student organizations. On the other hand, those who grew up in a predominantly White neighborhood struggled more with their identity development during their formative years, although their family’s participation in ethnic churches had a positive influence on their identity development.

**Grew up in ethnic enclave or diverse neighborhood.** Anna, Eric, and Tri Quang initially struggled adjusting to college as they had never stepped out of their ethnic enclave or diverse neighborhood that served as a cocoon or comfort zone for them. When Tri Quang first arrived on his college campus, he realized, “everyone here is so like White, and like I’ve never seen so [many] White people before. Really, I’d never, because my high school was diverse. So, my college experience here was just like the shock factor.” He found himself to be the only Vietnamese American on his college campus during his first year there. He felt isolated and alone when he first arrived on his campus, as he had trouble connecting with Asian international students and with his American peers of non-Asian descent.

While Tri Quang had an overall positive college experience, he did feel resentment toward his school’s administrators due to his initial experiences of isolation and culture shock that left a lasting impression on him. He believed his institution recruited students like him as a marketing stunt, so that they would be able to brag about the number of low-income, first-generation students of color they enrolled. He wished they had been “completely honest, maybe be explicit and be like, ‘Hey, we don’t really have people like you at this school, so you would be like the only Southeast Asian person here, but if you’re okay with that…yeah, come here.’”

The college environment was a big change for Anna and Eric as well, who were used to being around other SEAA students from refugee backgrounds in their schools. When they first stepped foot on their college campuses, they quickly realized that there were very few students
from their ethnic backgrounds on campus or that they were the only Asian American student in
their academic department. Anna, who grew up in a diverse and low-income neighborhood,
admitted, “I didn’t learn that my family was in poverty until college. And so, I guess like I
didn’t know, you know, what that word was.” Because she grew up around other families who
were in the same socioeconomic class, she was oblivious to how social stratification and income
inequality had influenced her family’s daily lives.

Furthermore, even though nobody in particular made Anna feel unwelcomed on campus
or in her academic department, she was constantly self-conscious of the fact that she was the
only person of Asian descent in the department. She shared, “I don’t want to say [I feel]
insecure, but I do always think about, okay, I’m the only Asian American and it’s a little weird,
like you know. I think about it a lot though.” She was often hesitant to participate in any field
trips organized by her department because she did not want to be the only Asian American
person on the trips. As for Hmong American students, she said, “there’s probably only like 15 or
20 Hmong students here” on a campus of almost 40,000 undergraduate students.

Likewise, Eric was hesitant to attend any campus events or join any student organizations
because he felt uncomfortable around White people, even though he knew that was not a good
reason for not participating. He admitted:

Sometimes, I mean like I know I shouldn’t…sometimes I would think like, “Oh, if I go to
any event, I’m like, oh, it’s gonna be just a bunch of White people.” Not that that’s a bad
thing, but just like, I don’t know, but yeah.

He used to be actively involved in the Asian American student organization at his community
college, but “coming here, I’m like nervous like going to like events and stuff because I don’t
know how they’ll, I don’t know if the majority is gonna be like White people.” He felt “like
being here with a majority of White people, you know, it’s difficult to like, they don’t understand
what we [Asians] go through.” Eric shared that he had not met another Cambodian American student on campus, aside from the two people he already knew from high school.

Both Eric and Tri Quang said that if their circumstances had been different, they would have chosen another college with a higher Asian American or SEAA student population. Eric told me that if he did not have to live at home and commute, he would have looked for an institution with more Asian American students, because “it feels more of a community.” Tri Quang believed that he would have had a smoother transition to college if he had gone to a public institution with a big Asian American or SEAA student population as a strong built-in support system.

In order to find community while on campus, Anna, Eric, and Tri Quang sought out Asian American student groups so they could connect with other Asian American students. Anna became very involved with the Asian American student organization and met many other Asian American students. During this time, she developed a stronger sense of ethnic identity. She told me, “that was just that point, being involved with that student organization, which is the point that just made me realize who I was as a person.” Growing up in a diverse neighborhood, she did not give too much thought about her ethnic identity, but being in an Asian American student organization helped her reflect on and learn more about her own ethnic identity.

Tri Quang also became actively involved with the Asian American student organization on his campus and even served as the president the previous year. He first joined the organization because he “wanted to find a community for myself to fit in, because I felt kind of lost when I first came here.” He described the organization as a support system for the Asian American students on campus. He also majored in East Asian studies, although he eventually dropped the major because it would have taken him much longer to graduate. He wished his
institution would offer a Southeast Asian studies major, as he said that would have given him a voice to talk about his experiences.

**Grew up in predominantly White neighborhood.** Ailee, Cameron, Jackie, Rocky, and Steven realized that they were different from their peers as young children, as they grew up in predominantly White neighborhoods and were one of the very few Asian American students in their schools. Even though, as revealed in the first theme, some of the participants experienced discrimination and bullying as children, these experiences prepared them to deal with similar situations in the future. They knew how to navigate the education system and their daily lives as ethnic minorities, so the lack of diversity on their college campuses was of no surprise to them.

While growing up, Ailee, Rocky, and Steven struggled with their ethnic identity and searched for acceptance and belonging. Ailee’s family was one of the first few Cambodian families that resettled in their neighborhood, and she was the only student of Asian descent in her elementary school. She shared, “when I was little, I didn’t like [being Cambodian].” Rocky told me, “the place I grew up at was predominantly Caucasians, followed by African Americans and Hispanics, and then me.” He indicated that people around him were not accepting of him because he did not fit the stereotypes, and that he was not part of any groups when he was a teenager. Steven, who also grew up in an area with very few Asian Americans, experienced race-based bullying in elementary school. Other kids made fun of his appearance and told him that the food he ate was “weird-smelling or tasting.” Later in middle school, he found acceptance in a social circle and “felt like I was just another American.”

In college, while Ailee, Rocky, and Steven were aware that their specific ethnic groups were underrepresented on campus, this did not really bother them. Ailee felt that in general, “everybody’s just nice and everything here, so they’re like open and want to talk to me, just
because of my ethnicity. And they didn’t judge me for who I was and I like that when I came here.” It was a welcome change from her experience in school when she was younger. Rocky said that he did not “socialize well” and preferred to stay away from most people. In spite of the few incidents of microaggression and racism he had experienced on campus, he insisted that he had never felt uncomfortable or unwelcomed on campus. He claimed, “I [am] pretty thick-skinned. I generally just keep to myself. People seem to stay clear from me.” Steven, likewise, had not felt uncomfortable or unwelcomed on campus in spite of the occasional “race-based insults” and other incidents of microaggression he had experienced.

Compared to the participants who had grown up in ethnic enclaves or diverse neighborhoods, the participants who had grown up in predominantly White neighborhoods did not make a strong effort to seek out other Asian Americans on campus or to participate in ethnic student organizations. While Ailee expressed interest in getting involved on campus, due to her busy schedule, she had not been able to participate in any student organization, although she did take the time to attend cultural events on campus. Rocky and Steven did participate in the Vietnamese student organization on their respective campuses, although Rocky did not really see the point in participating in ethnic student organizations while Steven preferred to participate in sports-based student organizations. Steven in particular attributed this lack of interest in ethnic student organizations to the following reason: “I think my upbringing of never really associating with other Asian Americans closely could be a reason I don’t actively seek out Asian Americans.”

Attended ethnic churches. Although Cameron and Jackie also grew up in predominantly White neighborhoods, their family attended ethnic churches and were actively involved with church activities. Both Cameron and Jackie were exposed to the Vietnamese language, music,
food, and culture through their church. This served as a factor that positively influenced their identity development. In spite of the low number of Asian American families in their neighborhood and Asian American students in their schools, they were able to develop and maintain a strong Vietnamese and Asian American identity.

In college, both Cameron and Jackie actively sought out Asian American and diverse student groups to find community, because being Vietnamese and Asian American were so central to their identities. Cameron admitted that when he had more “exposure to other Vietnamese people and the culture, I definitely took it for granted.” Now, he missed being able to celebrate his culture. He shared:

At a school being like only 10% Asian, and then if you look at Vietnamese students, maybe a few dozens in total, can make it difficult to celebrate your background….There aren’t many Vietnamese or Vietnamese American students [here in college] and so it can be a struggle sometimes to be able to, I guess feel at home or celebrate my culture or just, you know, eat the food that I love, unless I really seek it out.

He added, “I now have a much stronger sense of identity from coming to a place many would consider to be like a privileged White institution.”

**Finding community within student organizations.** For those who grew up in an ethnic enclave or diverse neighborhood and for those who attended ethnic churches, being able to make connections with those who shared or were familiar with their cultural background and interests helped them create a sense of community while on campus. The participants’ involvement in Asian American student organizations played a valuable role in the development of their social and cultural identities. Cameron professed:

Being Vietnamese and being Asian are so central to who I am though, I needed that community, so I joined the Asian American Association and the Vietnamese Student Association, a few others, because I wanted to meet other students who had the same background and those with same experiences as me. Just easier to relate, and you know, be easier to find someone who, say like, “Oh, who wants to go and eat phở with me?”
Like Cameron, Tri Quang also joined the Asian American student organization at his institution to find community with other Asian Americans and to fill a void. He said, “I wanted to find a community for myself to fit in, because I felt kind of lost when I first came here.” Even Steven, who did not actively seek out other Asian Americans, admitted, “if they are Asian American, then we might have some childhood hazing we can bond over.”

Jackie expressed similar sentiments, “I started exploring other [student organizations] such as the Asian Pacific Student Association. I got more involved in the Asian community in general because I wanted to connect to more people of my kind and experience the culture firsthand.” Eric could not find a similar student organization in which he had participated at his community college, so he decided to start one at his current institution. He told me:

We’re actually trying to create Asian intervarsity at the school, and, and we’re doing that for next year, so I’ll be leading it, so me and someone else, so I’m excited for that….I thought Asian intervarsity, that sounds, I don’t know, I guess like ‘cause you wanna be like around our people, you know. It feels more comfortable.

Eric added:

Finding community is difficult, so yeah. And usually I would look for Asians, to be honest. Just because, like, we feel like we have a, more connection, you know, compared to someone else, ‘cause, especially being like first-generation Asian to go to college or whatever, we can relate to each other a lot more….With other Asians, we connect easier.

**Theme Four: Support, Inclusion, and Sense of Belonging Foster College Success**

All participants brought up the important role that caring agents and support system played in their college adjustment and success for Asian American students, particularly for SEAA college students who are academically and economically disadvantaged. These individuals, supportive services, and departments often served as a safe space for participants where they felt connected, supported, validated, and valued, and they helped the participants cultivate a sense of belonging. Furthermore, as all the participants were first-generation college
students whose parents lacked college-related information and resources, the participants often
turn to their friends, peers, professors, advisors, work supervisors, and other mentors for advice
and support.

**Higher education professionals.** Professors, advisors, and other higher education staff
who are understanding and supportive made a big difference to the participants. Ailee gushed,
“some of my professors knew where I was coming from.” This helped her feel supported on
campus. She commuted to campus from home and had a busy schedule due to working full-time
and having to take care of her young cousins, so it was important to her that her professors
understood her circumstances and could be lenient with her. Rocky, who was thinking about
stopping out after the following semester due to financial constraints, credited some of his
professors for helping him make it as far as he did in college: “Having professors there, you
know, understanding of that, and also know you at an individual level, and it helps out.”

Likewise, Anna talked about the sense of support and community from her academic
department through bonding with a professor and having an advisor who understood where she
was coming from:

I love my advisor from my department. She’s amazing, like, you know, again, I jumped
around with majors a lot, so I’ve met plenty of advisors, and none of them have been as
great as her. Like she’s understanding, you know, she doesn’t shun me for having a bad
grade. She’s like, you know, “Well, you’re doing good in this course, how about try this
course?” And so...she motivates me to do better. She doesn’t look down on me or
anything. And like, you know, I often feel like when my past advisors, they would look
down on me, I would just look down on myself. And so with her, she doesn’t look down
on me and she just consistently motivates me to like, “Well, how about try this class?”
You know, or ways that can help you. And so my advisor is amazing.

Like Ailee, Anna also commuted from home and had the responsibility of caring for her younger
brothers. It was important to her that her struggles were validated and not minimized or
overlooked by her professors and advisors. Furthermore, Anna counted her work supervisors as
caring agents she could turn to for additional support with a variety of needs. She said that she would go to them when she faced personal problems or even for help with proofreading her papers.

**Supportive services.** Academic success programs and support services that included Asian American students helped the participants in this study develop social capital through support, information, resources, advice, motivation, and mentoring. Cameron shared:

My freshman year, there was a senior who I connected with through like a mentoring program in like the multicultural student programs and services here, sort of like the diversity office, who was also pre-med, going to med school, in med school now, and he was the same age range as me, so I’ve asked him like so many questions about med school and the bio major.

Ailee was grateful for the freshman academy support program for showing her what type of campus resources were available and where they were located, in case she ever needed to use them. She acknowledged, “the freshman academy, they showed me the counselors and everything, like lead all of us to see the counselors, where it was and everything, like, it was pretty nice to like know where I can get support.”

Anna was thankful that her participation in a summer transition program for incoming first-year students at her institution helped her later down the road. She and her sister had made a mistake with their financial aid application one year and it resulted in them not being able to receive her funding. This caused her a great deal of stress and anxiety as she and her sister could not figure out how to resolve the issue. She admitted, “we literally selected one wrong thing and like, everything was like almost gone for. We’re like how are we gonna pay this and that? I was stressing out.” Fortunately, a staff member from the program knew somebody in the financial aid office who could help and contacted the person on her behalf.
Anna, Cameron, and Tri Quang were giving back to the programs and offices that helped them. They have worked, or were still working, in programs and offices that serve first-generation and diverse student populations like themselves. Cameron shared:

I used to be student recruitment for diversity and ethnicity, but now I’m still recruiting for first-generation college students and low-income students. A lot of the same group, like an overlap. And so, I help coordinate a program when students come to visit, about 200 a year from all over the country.

Anna worked in a similar program. She told me, “I worked at a program…that was helping incoming, you know, first-year students at [my institution]. I worked that and I worked there for three years.”

Tri Quang was in a position where he was able to incorporate his cultural background into his work and develop and implement programs and activities for an underserved student population. He revealed:

My sophomore year, I became a chaplain intern, which is basically like an interfaith student leader. Worked for the chapel, did multiple programming for the chapel. I incorporated a lot of my cultural background into that, because that space is also a very like White space. There [are] a lot of Christian, a lot of Jewish, people, so I kind of like started like a Buddhist programming.

**Friends and peers.** Friendships and peer support were important in facilitating a sense of belonging and college success as well. While most of the participants have built a strong relationship with their professors, advisors, and work supervisors, as well as within their registered student organizations, some of them were more likely to go to their friends, classmates, and social groups for support with personal issues and general college-related advice. Jackie, who was relieved to be graduating after eight years, shared, “making friends in my classes has been a big help towards earning my degree…Making friends in my classes has helped me form study groups and that has been a big help to get where I am today.” Cameron, who was also looking forward to graduating and was applying to medical school, shared:
I think a lot of my successes can be attributed to really close friends here, ones I can go to in moments of crisis or if I need someone to talk to. I’ve made some really good friends here who I trust, I’ve shared a lot with.

**Theme Five: The Legacy of Trauma Is Embedded in Their Everyday Lives**

A final reoccurring theme that emerged from the data was the participants’ identity as descendants of refugees and first-generation college students. The trauma that their parents, grandparents, and loved ones have suffered still felt fresh in their memories, even though they had not experienced it firsthand. These experiences were at times painful for them to talk about, but it was something that they needed to talk about. It was a part of who they were and they felt proud and lucky to have made it as far as they did in spite of their circumstances. It also made them appreciate the sacrifices that their parents have made to provide them with opportunities and remind them of their responsibility to succeed in education. While the participants did not complain much about the hardships they have endured, they all felt it was important for the stories of their parents’ and their own struggles to be heard.

**Parents’ refugee experience.** The participants’ parents’ refugee experience and traumatic memories shaped their worldview and left indelible marks on their lives. Even though the participants did not experience the war trauma and the loss of loved ones firsthand, most of them have heard those stories from their parents, grandparents, or relatives who have survived the war and they were able to share vivid details of their families’ experiences during the war and their eventual journey to safety and a better life in the U.S. Some of their family members, like Jackie’s grandparents, would just shut down whenever the subject of the war was brought up, because they were so traumatized by what they had witnessed during the war and still could not process the trauma.
Ailee remembered hearing this traumatic story from her mother that she would remember for the rest of her life to remind herself of how lucky she was:

The Khmer Rouge…my mom said when she was little, she was really young, she was like eight, seven or eight, and when that happened. And she remembers dead bodies all over…she told me that she had to hide like under dead bodies, so she remembers the nasty smell and everything. It was really sad, ‘cause she, she was young, so she saw everybody dying right in front of her eyes.

She said that her parents would bring up this story and also talked about how they did not have food back in Cambodia to remind her and her siblings not to waste food. To this day, she would always finish her food. Eric’s grandmother would also use her refugee stories to remind him of how lucky he was. He told me:

[My grandma] always compare[s] it to America, she just said that America was so easy, comparing it to in Cambodia, where everything is like difficult to get, it’s dirty, and like, especially back in the days, it was not, even now it’s not that great, and it’s like, getting water, she told me about getting water and her way of living.

He said it was his grandmother’s way of making him appreciate things more.

Cameron was amazed and humbled by his parents’ resilience to overcome seemingly impossible situations. He pointed out at that the time of their escape from Vietnam, “[my parents] were younger than I am now, which is incredible.” He gave a detailed account of his parents’ experiences as they attempted to escape the horrors of the war. He shared, “they left the village because there was really no life for them there…their tractor had been like, taken by the government and their farm had been burnt.” After being captured and sent to reeducation camp, his mother did hard labor and “stayed in cells, and she’d always tell me about the mice in the cells, and how they’d, they bolted her feet, she was kinda sleeping on a mat on the floor too.”

Cameron was grateful that his mother was able to escape at her third attempt, but shuddered at the thought of what could have happened to her:
This little boat cannot really handle open, open waters. One person, she said she, they were lucky that only one person on their boat was lost, who fell overboard and was like swept away and never seen again. But, you know, whole boats would be lost, things like that. She knows like, personally other people who[m] she grew up with in her village who were lost on the voyage and, you know, just died in the ocean, never seen again, which is really sad to think about like my parents were lucky to make it, I’m lucky to be here.

Because his mother was captured twice, his father ended up in the U.S. first. It took six years before she was able to come here to reunite with him.

Anna and Rocky shared similar stories of how their parents and grandparents crossed the Mekong River from Laos to get to Thailand. Anna’s account painted a grim picture of what happened during that time:

My dad, he crossed over to Thailand like on a raft, but my mom’s side, like they swam across…a lot of people died in the river just crossing over, ‘cause most of them didn’t know how to swim…my mom was like literally just born….she was still a baby, my grandfather had carried her across the Mekong River.

Rocky added, “I guess they tried to use bamboo rafts to get across but I mean, the river was huge and they just carried you off stream. And apparently a lot of people drowned too.” Even though the conditions in the refugee camps were not great, at least their parents and grandparents were safer there. They were able to make the best of their situation while they waited to be accepted into the U.S. Anna and Rocky, along with the other participants, seemed to have learned this type of positive thinking from their parents and grandparents as they encountered every tough situation in their lives.

Tri Quang learned that he could never take anything for granted. Before the Vietnam War, his parents lived a comfortable life. They were college-educated and worked as school administrators. These were the very things that counted against them when the communist forces came to power. Tri Quang lamented:
My dad was considered as like an intellectual, so he was a threat to the regime….he was like, teaching in a French school, so he was kind of like supporting the colonizers in the perspectives of the Viet Cong. So, he was an intellectual and like all those things…all those people who were deemed like at risk of like not being able to like succumb to the regime, they were placed into reeducation camps. And basically reeducation camp was terrible, like people were fleeing on boats rather than go to reeducation camps, because it was more of like a torture camp if they felt like, for any reason that you weren’t, if you were, they would just torture you for no reason.

**Family’s resettlement challenges.** Most of the participants were old enough to have witnessed and experienced their families’ resettlement challenges as they struggled to adjust to their new host culture and environment. All of them cited language barrier, culture shock, and the lack of resources as the main challenges their parents faced after arriving in the U.S. While each family had a sponsor who had helped and supported them when they first arrived, they still struggled to cope with their traumatic experiences and their daily lives.

When Jackie’s parents first arrived in the U.S., they were not able to venture outside their home on their own. He shared, “they had difficulty moving around in the community and trying to read signs in English. They always needed someone, like a translator.” Rocky described the similar challenges that his parents faced:

Not being able to speak the language, not knowing where food is or how to even get it, unable to find work due to language barrier, you know, school, kinda not really even there, I guess also being receptive to Western medicine.

Cameron’s parents’ also mentioned “language, working, like working a job at the same time as taking classes and learning English, not having anything, not having much food, you know even though they were in America.”

Eric’s mother struggled with getting a job after high school due to her low English proficiency. Eric told me:

After graduating from high school, [my mom] still wasn’t like good, good at English and stuff, so she was afraid of looking for jobs, because jobs require you to speak English and
she’s afraid that if she goes into a job and she’s not able to speak it, then she, so she was just afraid to like go to jobs, because she didn’t know how it was gonna be.

Anna’s parents still have not overcome their language barrier either. She said, “even now, my mom knows English, but she’s not fluent in it. My dad knows English, but there’s some stuff where, you know, you’re talking about more about technical stuff like health problems, like that, he wouldn’t understand.” She admitted, “even now [my mom] doesn’t really know like that, you know, like she doesn’t really know our address.”

Ailee’s parents and grandparents had trouble getting used to the new technology in their new country. She told me:

They’re not used to like seeing like washing machines and all that ‘cause in Cambodia, you gotta wash everything by hand and dry everything, you know, like hanging it up. So I guess they weren’t used to that like seeing all of the stuff that we have here, ‘cause they were, Cambodia is like a poor place.

Anna’s and Rocky’s parents had trouble figuring out even basic services such as running water and electricity. Anna shared:

In the refugee camp, you know, houses were, weren’t made out of bricks or anything, so you know, the difference of where to get water, was it out of the toilet or was it out of the sink...And so, just a big cultural shock of what things were, because even when living in, you know, Laos, it was still in the jungle, so they didn’t have all that technology.

Rocky offered, “one of the relatable stories for a lot of the Hmong refugees is not knowing how to try to water the lawn and that they would, you know, just use the water inside the toilet bowl for water.”

In spite of all their challenges, the participants’ parents did not complain about their situation. In fact, they were grateful for having made it to their new country and getting a chance to live a better life. Cameron noted, “they felt very lucky to be here, and so they don’t complain too much.” This sentiment was echoed by the other participants, who have learned how to be positive early in life by observing how their parents dealt with life challenges and saw the future
optimistically. Their positive attitude and powerful coping skills seemed to have been very helpful to them in easing the pressure and stress of dealing with their own life challenges.

**Caught between two cultures.** All but one of the participants shared the sentiment that, as children of immigrants, they were caught between two cultures. They also lamented the loss of their home language. As Anna stated succinctly at the end of her interview: “I continue to struggle between staying connected to my cultural values and expectations of my parents, and trying to adapt and adjust to the American and academic culture and their expectation.”

Cameron also expressed his thoughts on this matter eloquently:

I and a lot of other second-generation Americans, children of immigrants, have this problem. I have this experience of, experience where they’re kinda caught in between some aspects of their lives traditional and some aspects of their lives, say modern, or Western. I’d say I’m definitely more modern, Western for sure, but it’s impossible to escape the tradition when you’re raised by parents who grew up in another country, who came from another country, who are stay put in their tradition.

Eric could not decide if he should consider himself to be traditional or not. He mused, “I live in America, so I’m like Americanized, and… the traditional Cambodian way is like different than what I am, [but] I wanna say I’m traditional…I still follow the Cambodian lifestyle.” He faced this inner conflict because to him, by converting to Christianity, his family lost a part of their cultural identity. He acknowledged:

I’m not a Buddhist. Like most Cambodians are Buddhists, so they do stuff I don’t…I don’t really do that, so I feel like my family, like I see that they go to the temple, they do most of the Cambodian culture, well ‘cause in the Cambodian culture, being Buddhist is a big part of it, so, and I’m a Christian.

Anna, on the other hand, considered herself to be traditional in some aspects of her life, because her family still practiced Shamanism. She said:

I think back to religion, like the Hmong culture is typically Shamanism. And so a lot of them have converted to Christianity in the refugee camp and when they came to the U.S. So I guess I do consider myself traditional, because of still being in that same religion.
She did point out that “the American culture has definitely affected like who I am as a person” and that would be the aspect of her life that she would not consider to be traditional.

Tri Quang, the only participant who was not born in the U.S., attempted to befriend the Vietnamese international students on his campus, but to no avail. He lamented:

I just felt like they had very like pre-conceived notions of me, like Vietnamese American brat….I felt like that was the animosity between us is that like they saw me as like a privileged Vietnamese American that knows nothing about Vietnamese culture, what they deemed as Vietnamese culture. And like we had such different experiences with our heritage that they just felt like, I once had a Vietnamese international student told me, “You’re not Vietnamese, stop saying that you are.” Like directly to my face, so that was like a very like big like splash moment, like, “Oh my god, I can’t believe that happened.” But, so, that, that’s like real moments when I felt really uncomfortable.

This was a constant source of frustration for him. While the administrators kept assuming that he was an international student and thought he was not American enough, Vietnamese international students thought that he was “too American” and would not accept him as one of their own.

The participants also lamented the loss of their home language. With the exception of Steven, who did not recall ever speaking another language other than English, all the participants recalled how they spoke their parents’ native language at home until they started attending school or came to the U.S., upon which they gradually stopped speaking their parents’ native language at home. Now in college, their home language proficiency levels ranged from elementary proficiency to native or bilingual proficiency (U.S. Department of State, n.d.). As Cameron articulated:

A lot of my friends were also second-generation Vietnamese told me they had the same experience, where at one point they were really, really good at Vietnamese, but then once they started school, once they had siblings, they talked at their school all in English, they talked to their siblings only in English, and so eventually they talked to their parents only in English. And their parents will still speak back in Vietnamese, but you will lose the ability to speak, even though you developed the ability to like, understand, which is where I am now.
He regretted this and said he planned to pick up the language again when he attended medical school in the West Coast.

Out of the eight participants, Rocky was the most proficient in his home language; however, he complained, “the problem with speaking Hmong is my siblings, they prefer to more, prefer to keep it to English.” Anna and Tri Quang still spoke their home language with their family members, but they were not as fluent as they used to be when they were kids. Tri Quang, who was born in Vietnam and whose parents made a deliberate choice to speak only English at home after they came to the U.S., expressed his feelings of regret:

I definitely lost a huge part of my, I would say like not fluency, but like academic vocabulary, like the ability to read and write as, as well as someone who was raised and taught in a Vietnamese education system.

Eric, who still spoke Cambodian to his grandmother, admitted, “my Cambodian is really Americanized.”

Ailee grew up speaking Cambodian but at this point in her life, she could no longer have a two-way conversation with someone in her home language. She sheepishly confessed:

I understand, yeah, every time like I meet somebody that’s Cambodian, and they’re talking, don’t really know English, I would understand them, but I wouldn’t be able to reply back to them. Like I, my mom would translate, and like, I know my mom, she’s like, “She understands what you’re saying, but she can’t speak it back.” And my mom would translate sometimes, back to them what I’m saying.

Her grandfather, however, did not speak English, so she would try her best to speak Cambodian to him whenever she visited him.

As adults, the participants have now realized that their home language was a big part of their personal and cultural identity. Some of them appeared to feel a little ashamed or saddened by their lack of proficiency in their home language and expressed their desire to become fluent in their home language again. Even Steven, whose first language was English and who did not
express any desire to learn his parents’ native languages, made it a point to say that his oldest sister had a closer relationship with their father due to her ability to converse with him in his native language.

**Motivation for attending college.** The participants saw college as a path to breaking the cycle of poverty and creating a better life for themselves and their families. They pursued higher education because they understood the sacrifices their parents made and felt the responsibility to pay back their parents by succeeding in education for the sake of their families. Cameron reflected on his parents’ sacrifices: “[My parents] worked hard and sacrificed everything, came to this country so [we] would have a better future.” Because of this, “there is an expectation that when I grow older, I’ll be able to make enough money to send my youngest brother through college.” He added, “since my parents spent all their savings on our college education…me and my three brothers will contribute to their retirement and help them live comfortably.”

Anna’s motivations for attending college was to, in a way, enable her parents to live vicariously through her and to achieve a better future:

I tend to always think about the future that I want. You know, the future that my parents didn’t have. So, I’m always like, well, I don’t want to live this life, so…I’m not saying it wasn’t, it was a bad life, but I want something better for me. Obviously this is the reason my parents came to the U.S.

Tri Quang echoed Anna’s and Cameron’s sentiments: “One of the most unspoken but plainly known sacrifice that my parents made for us [was so that we could] go to college and establish ourselves beyond them.” He added:

I think if you come from such a, you meet such strong adversity early in your life coming here, then you’re pretty much just like, do what you gotta do, ‘cause I know that, I know that for me, when I’m here, I’m like, well, whatever my parents went through was like 10 times harder….I do put that stress on myself. I think that’s why I went to counseling my first year, ‘cause I was so academically stressed, because like I felt so behind.
As first-generation college students, Ailee’s and Jackie’s motivation for attending college was to prove to others that they could do it, because many people in their family and social circle either doubted their abilities or had not had similar accomplishments. Ailee shared:

When I was young, I, always in my head, I would tell myself, you have to do it, you have to graduate to show that, prove to everybody that you can do it, ‘cause when I was young, people thought I wouldn’t graduate [from] high school…just like trying to prove everybody wrong, I can do it, I can graduate [from] college.

Graduating from high school was a big achievement and great source of pride for Jackie. He reminisced:

It was a good feeling because after I graduated [from] high school, we had an open house for me at my house and all family members came. They all congratulated me and kinda made me felt like I actually accomplished something, ‘cause a lot of people who were at the party never went to college. So I just felt like I actually, you know, accomplished something in my household.

Eric and Rocky, the two participants who did not attend college right after high school, were motivated to attend college after having pivotal “aha” moments that solidified their decisions to pursue higher education and make a career change. At first, they felt indifferent about where they were at in their lives, but at some point, they realized that they could not be stuck where they were at forever. For Rocky:

That realization came after an 8-hour mission where I got shot at, our vehicle was blown up, and we had several guys injured. I think it was at that moment that I had a reality check and reminded myself that I couldn’t just be a soldier for the remainder of my life.

As for Eric, he ended up working in the same factory where his mother worked after he graduated from high school. One day, it hit him:

I thought to myself, I don’t wanna do this for the rest of my life…I realized that they have so much other opportunities and if anything I’ll look back at it and be, if I’m older, I’m like, I should’ve [gone] to school, you know. I don’t want to do that, so I decided to start at [community college].
The importance of telling their stories. As discussed in the first theme, all of the participants have experienced microaggression or racism at some point in their lives. While they might not have made a big deal out of those unpleasant incidents and chose instead to focus on the positives, it was also obvious to me that they were irked and at times outraged about being constantly misunderstood, trivialized, stereotyped, and underrepresented, and that they saw the interview as an avenue to vent their frustrations. It was cathartic for them to share their experiences, especially with someone who they believe could relate to them.

They also wished that others would have more knowledge about the diversity within the APA and SEAA populations; therefore, it was important to them for the stories of their parents’ and their own struggles to be heard and for the collective story of their community’s legacy of trauma to be heard. Their struggles and unique stories were a big part of their identity as descendants of refugees from Southeast Asia and first-generation college students, and it was important to them that they receive affirmation and acknowledgement of that identity.

Anna admitted that she participated in this study because she thought talking to somebody about her experiences and her identity would help her. She offered:

It’s important to share and see what others, you know, have to say, or if they’ve been through the same situation, so you, you know, to me, even with me, so I don’t feel alone, ‘cause I haven’t talked about my experience and I have nothing to hide from it, ‘cause I know I’ve struggled a lot, and I feel like it’s another way of empowering others too, to be like, well, I’ve, well, Anna has struggled, I know I can do it too. So that’s something that I also want, you know, others to know.

She explained why it was important for her to talk about her experiences to somebody who understood where she was coming from:

When I try to explain something about my belief, why I missed class, why I can’t hang out due to family problems, or that I don’t have the money or transportation to my American colleagues, friends, professors, etc., I feel like they don't and wouldn’t understand, would judge me, and I even sometime[s] feel like I don’t belong.
She added, “often we don’t speak about…being from a low-income family where, you know, those are stuff that we’re kinda, like I’m not insecure about it anymore, but those are stuff that we often don’t feel like it’s a positive thing.”

Similarly, Ailee wanted to participate “just like so more people know about it. I want to have like more people know what I’ve been through, my family have been through, especially since they were refugees.” Jackie and Tri Quang echoed these sentiments. Tri Quang surmised, “I think that participating and like sharing your voice is like a very important thing.”

Furthermore, Anna was interested in doing more research into the experiences of other low-income, first-generation college students of Asian descent. Rocky was more altruistic in his motives for participating in this study. He stated simply that the findings produced in this study “might not help me, [but it] might help someone.”

Cameron, Eric, and Steven were interested in participating in this study because of its focus on SEAA college students, as opposed to the broader Asian American population. Cameron in particular considered this topic to be a topic of research interest to him as well. He shared that he had recently started a video anthology project to document the stories of his parents and their generation. He further explained:

Topics of inclusion and community for students of racial and ethnic minorities, especially like addressing the model minority myth, trying to distinguish like Southeast Asian students especially, and highlight their unique problems, that’s something that interests me…I think it’s research that’s important and can really help school administrators throughout the country.

Eric did not recall seeing any studies on the SEAA population and was interested to find out more about this particular study.

Finally, Cameron and Tri Quang were adamant that SEAA college students should be recognized as an underprivileged group and to be better represented on college campuses.
Cameron asserted, “Southeast Asians are a group that like historically does not have the same, like privilege that some other Asian groups,” and he did not think they should be grouped together. Like most of the other participants, they recognized the importance of disaggregating the data on Asian Americans because the experiences of each subgroup were so different.

**Additional Findings**

Toward the end of each interview, I asked each participant if he or she had any advice for their institution administrators on how to make their campus more inviting and supportive toward SEAA students. Although the participants generally felt supported and most of them had an overall positive experience on campus, they did have advice that they would like to share with their administrators. While not every participant has an advice readily available, they were all very eager to voice their opinions after they gave some thought to the question.

Increasing the representation of Asian American or SEAA students, faculty, staff, and administrators on campus was one of their strongest messages. Jackie mused:

> I…feel like there should be more Asian American staff in general. During like fall welcome week, there should be more Asian American staff there so that Asian American students don’t feel like they’re in a whole different community. Just to make them feel a little more welcomed, if they, you know, see some faces they could relate to.

He found it ironic that he did not quite feel a sense of welcome during fall welcome week.

Eric admitted that “if they have more Asian teachers or advisors…I think that would be awesome if they had advisor[s] where we could go talk to them about [our experiences]…I think I would feel more comfortable talking to them about it.” He would have liked for his institution to recruit more SEAA students as well. Likewise, Tri Quang wished for “more Asian American faculty and staff, more Asian American administrators. There’s like none.” Steven shared that while there were a higher number of Asian American faculty members in the sciences, he “rarely ever ran into Asian American staff” on campus.
Cameron and Jackie would have loved to be able to contact Asian American faculty, staff, or student groups on campus when they first arrived on their campus. Cameron suggested ethnicity-specific advising and would like to “be able to find a contact list for other people who speak Vietnamese, you know, like between the staff and faculty, and be able to get together and just talk to them if you want to.” Jackie thought that the institution “should have a way to contact or send emails to incoming Asian American freshmen about the Asian [student organizations] and even Asian American [student organizations] to try and build up the community.”

Tri Quang also bemoaned the general lack of support and services for SEAA students, “I feel like a Southeast Asian person, like such as myself would’ve definitely started off stronger in their first year if they went to a big public university with a huge Asian American population, a huge Southeast Asian population.” He said that even though there were professors of Asian descent at his institution, they were concentrated in the foreign language departments. He alluded:

They’re East Asian and for the most part, they have a very poor understanding of Asian American experiences and race relations…they are very traditional. They, it’s very hard for them to kind of understanding social justice issues surrounding those things.

He felt the same about students of East Asian descent:

I feel like a lot of students at this campus because they’re East Asian, they’ve already, their family has already established like economic mobility, they’re very well-established, like they’re, you know, their mothers and fathers have Ph.D.’s. You know, their family is very well off already, they’re very well off. So they, they don’t feel social justice or social matters of campus as, as important.

Eric added, “I feel like as Asian, like Southeast Asian American, like we have that like, ‘oh, Asians are smart,’ or they’re like, they don’t know, we work, I mean, we work twice as hard.”
Cameron, who was well-versed in social justice issues and active in Asian American activism, made a case for disaggregating data on Asian Americans:

Lumping together of different groups even though they’re quite different….Understand the differences in educational attainment of Southeast Asians, differences in income, things like that, so that, they realize that we do sometimes need additional services just like a lot of other students, like we do need help….to recognize that there’s more to it than what’s on the surface, that there’s a different history, one, you know, for Vietnamese American versus Chinese American versus Korean American and so on. We have all gone through different things, in terms of our ancestry, things like ancestors’ experiences in the United States or even before then, yeah, and so like I personally think like Southeast Asian should be considered minority when it comes to things like race-based admissions and some medical schools do view it that way.

**Summary**

In this chapter, I provided an in-depth analysis of the participants’ responses and presented the major findings of this phenomenological study. Specifically, I shared the participants’ narratives to contextualize the themes that emerged, and reviewed the major themes identified through the in-depth data analysis process.

In Chapter V, I discuss the connection of the findings to the research questions as well as compare and connect the five major themes that emerged from the data collection and analysis to the current literature. These five themes provide a basis for understanding the lived experiences of SEAA college students and provide valuable information in understanding how their experiences may reflect the nuance of their family’s refugee and forced migration experiences. I also discuss the limitations of the study, the implications of the findings for higher education practitioners, and areas for future research.
CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Chapter Overview

In Chapters I and II, I highlighted the practical and research problems as well as the gap in the current literature as it pertains to understanding the experiences of first-generation college students of Southeast Asian descent from families that have resettled in the United States as refugees. Chapter I served as an overview of the study, describing the problem and the purpose of this research study, and introducing the research questions that guided this study. Chapter II served as a synthesis of the current literature on Asian Pacific Americans (APAs) and Southeast Asian Americans (SEAAs). I presented a thorough exploration and an analytical summary of the immigration history, demographics, intragroup differences, current issues and challenges, as well as the importance of disaggregating the data on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs).

In Chapter III, I provided an overview of the methodology used in this study, specifically the phenomenological approach that was utilized and details including participants and sampling, the data collection and data analysis procedures, as well as trustworthiness and quality assurance procedures. In addition, I discussed my researcher subjectivity and reflexivity and noted the limitations and delimitations of this study. In Chapter IV, I provided an in-depth analysis of the participants’ responses and presented the major findings of this phenomenological study.
Specifically, I shared the participants’ narratives to contextualize the themes that emerged and reviewed the major themes identified through the in-depth data analysis process.

In this chapter, I discuss the connection of the findings to the research questions as well as compare and connect the five major themes that emerged from the data collection and analysis to the current literature. These five themes provided a basis for understanding the lived experiences of the eight SEAA college students in this study and provided valuable information in understanding how their experiences reflect the nuance of their family’s refugee and forced migration experiences. To highlight the findings of the study, the conceptual framework graphic was revised. In this chapter, I also discuss the limitations of the study, the implications of the findings for higher education practitioners, and areas for future research.

**Connection to Research Questions**

The research questions served as a guideline to discuss the major findings of this study. In addition to the overarching question, three sub-questions guided this inquiry and helped me search for meaning through the lived experiences of the participants. I reviewed the three sub-questions and concluded that the data found over the course of this study answered these research questions. To describe the essence of the phenomenon, I connected the study’s key findings to the research questions by incorporating the emergent themes of this study. A side-by-side comparison between the research sub-questions and the key findings of this study can be found in a table in Appendix P. A comparison to the current literature in the following section also provides additional context.

Through the participants’ responses to the interview questions, I found that they have different interpretations of the concepts of cultural background and cultural heritage. In this study, cultural background refers to the factors and values that shaped the participants’
upbringing and worldview. When I asked the participants to describe their cultural background, they brought up race, ethnicity, immigrant generation, language, religion, music, and food. They described their families’ cultural practices related to the celebration of traditional festivals, their family dynamics, and their families’ involvement with their ethnic communities. Their cultural background was at the forefront of their everyday lives. By contrast, the participants viewed cultural heritage as deeper level of their identity. Throughout the course of the interview process, they engaged in a process of self-reflection and self-discovery that helped them make meaning of their lived experience as descendants of refugees. Their cultural heritage was the legacy of trauma that was embedded in their everyday lives.

The first research sub-question was: Where and how do these students’ cultural background and refugee or forced migration status influence their life aspirations and expectations for their college experience? The participants’ responses to the interview questions suggested that their cultural background, family circumstances, and the community in which they grew up had an influence on their academic paths and college experiences, as demonstrated in the first three themes (the journey is difficult, family circumstances guided academic choices, and childhood community has an influence on college experience). These factors had an influence on the participants during their college selection and application processes, as they made decisions on what type of institution they should attend, which institution they would like to attend, and what major or academic discipline they would like to choose in college.

These factors also had an influence on the participants while they were in college in terms of how they found and created a sense of community on campus, as demonstrated throughout the fourth theme (support, inclusion, and sense of belonging foster college success). Finally, these factors also had an influence on their life aspirations and they used them as their
motivation for attending college, as demonstrated throughout the fifth theme (the legacy of trauma is embedded in their everyday lives).

The second research sub-question was: Where and how do these students’ cultural heritage and refugee or forced migration status influence how they view and conduct themselves as college students? The participants’ responses to the interview questions revealed that they were able to remain positive in spite of their difficult life journeys and that the legacy of trauma and being a descendant of refugees were a big part of their identity, as demonstrated throughout the first theme (the journey is difficult) and the fifth theme (the legacy of trauma is embedded in their everyday lives). According to the participants, this legacy and identity influenced their everyday lives and how they viewed and conducted themselves as college students; it made them appreciate the sacrifices that their parents made to provide them with better opportunities and it constantly reminded them of their responsibility to succeed in education. In spite of the hardships they faced, they remained positive and used their powerful coping skills to help them ease the pressure and stress of dealing with their life challenges.

The third research sub-question was: What is the impact of community or lack thereof for SEAA students living in a low ethnic concentration area and how has that influenced their college experience? The participants’ responses to the interview questions indicated that the community in which they grew up and their community in college had an influence on their college experience, as demonstrated throughout the third theme (childhood community has an influence on college experience). The community in which the participants grew up had an influence on their initial college adjustment, particularly for those who grew up in an ethnic enclave or diverse neighborhood.
Although the participants who grew up in predominantly White neighborhoods tended to have a smoother transition to college, all participants noted the low number of Asian American students or SEAA students, faculty, staff, and/or administrators on their college campuses. In spite of the low ethnic concentration of the campus community, these participants were able to find community through various sources of support that helped them cultivate a sense of belonging on campus, as demonstrated throughout the fourth theme (support, inclusion, and sense of belonging foster college success).

**Summary of Major Findings and Connection to Literature**

In Chapter II, I summarized and synthesized the current literature on Asian Pacific American (APA) and Southeast Asian American (SEAA) immigration history, demographics, intragroup differences, current issues and challenges, as well as the importance of disaggregating the data on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs). In Chapter IV, I provided an in-depth analysis of my participants’ responses and reviewed the major themes identified through the in-depth data analysis process. In this section, I develop meaning around the emergent themes by utilizing relevant literature to connect to the key findings of this study. A side-by-side comparison between the major findings of this study and the current literature can be found in a table in Appendix Q.

**The Journey Is Difficult**

The first theme I presented included a discussion of the various conditions that contributed to the theme. These conditions included childhood poverty and struggles, lack of college awareness, access, and preparation, the participants’ continued and continuous struggles in college, as well as their experiences of microaggression and racism. While the stories that the participants have shared with me were ones of struggles, they were ones of resilience as well.
Their stories provided a better understanding of and shed light on the experiences and specific needs of this population and highlighted the various barriers and challenges faced by first-generation college students of Southeast Asian descent whose families have resettled in the United States as refugees.

These findings paralleled the current literature that found SEAAs to face high poverty rates (Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund [AALDEF], n.d.; Dhingra, 2003; Her, 2014; Lew, Chang, & Wang, 2005; National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander [CARE], 2008; Southeast Asia Resource Action Center [SEARAC], 2011), have lower educational attainment, and lack access to higher education (Her, 2014; Museus, 2013; National Asian Pacific Center on Aging [NAPCA], 2012; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Palmer & Maramba, 2015; Soodjinda, 2009; Yeh, 2005; Yoo, Burrola, & Steger, 2010). The current literature also found that SEAA college students experienced challenges navigating higher education faced by other first-generation college students (Dumais & Ward; Irlbeck, Adams, Akers, Burris, & Jones, 2014; Padgett, Johnson, and Pascarella, 2012; A. A. Smith, 2015; Tang, Kim, & Haviland, 2013; Tramonte & Willms, 2010). Furthermore, the current literature found the model minority stereotype to impose a burden on APA students (Brydolf, 2009; Chou & Feagin, 2010; Diamond, 2008; Kwon, 2009; Ly, 2008; Ying et al., 2001).

The findings of this study supported the current literature. The experiences of the participants in this study as demonstrated throughout this theme echoed what the other researchers found in their studies involving SEAAs, SEAA college students, and first-generation college students. I also found new data that adds to the literature. In spite of the participants’ struggles, they were resilient and optimistic about their future. This finding suggests that with adequate support from their institutions of higher education, these students would have a better
chance of succeeding in higher education. This finding also supports the call for disaggregated data on AAPIs so that their struggles do not remain invisible to educators, policymakers, and researchers.

**Family Circumstances Guided Their Academic Choices**

The second theme I presented included a discussion of the decisions the participants made that contributed to the theme. These decisions that were guided by their family circumstances included which institution to attend and which career path they wanted to take. As first-generation college students, college affordability and access were definitely issues of great concern for the participants. As first-generation college students of Southeast Asian descent whose families have resettled in the United States as refugees, their academic and career choices were also influenced by their family circumstances, which include what they went through during childhood, personal experience of poverty, as well as their family’s refugee and resettlement experiences, family obligations, and financial situations.

These findings affirmed the current literature that geographical proximity is an important factor when it comes to low-income AAPI and SEAA college students’ choice for college, due to their need to fulfill family obligations (Museus & Buenavista, 2016). Current literature did not, however, address how SEAA college students’ family circumstances influenced their academic major or career choices. Findings from this study, therefore, added to the literature by reflecting the nuances that exist in the experiences of SEAA college students. These findings suggest that it is important for higher education researchers to consider factors such as what type of institutions SEAA college students chose to attend; whether or not they chose to live on campus, off campus, or commute to school; whether or not they have family obligations; and what type of majors they chose when exploring the experiences of SEAA college students. This will provide
better insights on how to better support these students and maximize their chances of success in higher education.

**Childhood Community Has an Influence on Their College Experience**

The third theme I presented included a discussion of the different circumstances that contributed to the theme. These circumstances included having grown up in an ethnic enclave or diverse community, having grown up in a predominantly White neighborhood, and having attended ethnic churches while growing up. Those who grew up in an ethnic enclave or diverse neighborhood reported having a harder time adjusting to college in terms of dealing with the initial culture shock on campus and were also more likely to seek out other Asian Americans or join Asian American student organizations. Those who grew up in predominantly White neighborhoods struggled more with their identity development during their formative year, although those who had attended ethnic churches were able to develop a more positive sense of ethnic identity.

The findings of this study attest to current research suggesting that ethnic or diverse student organizations and culturally-relevant events could validate students in underserved populations and mediate their progression toward college success (Maramba & Palmer, 2014). However, while Maramba and Palmer (2014) found cultural validation during college to have a positive impact on SEAA students’ success, they did not address how and if the type of community the students grew up in had an influence on their college experience. In two separate studies, Chhuon and Hadley (2008) and Tang, Kim, and Haviland (2013) found that maintaining contact with family and friends back home could bolster students’ transition into the college environment. Likewise, Museus, Shiroma, and Dizon’s (2016) study found that being able to connect with those from similar cultural backgrounds, have opportunities to learn about their
own cultural communities, and have opportunities to give back to their cultural communities contributed positively to SEAA college students’ persistence and success in college. These studies, however, also did not address how and if the type of community the students grew up in had an influence on their college experience.

Findings from this study, therefore, also added to the literature by reflecting the nuances that exist in the experiences of SEAA college students. These findings warrant further research into how the community in which college students grew up has an influence on their college experience. These findings also suggest that further research is needed on community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), cultural validation (Maramba & Palmer, 2014), alternative forms of capital (Tang et al., 2013), cultural community connections (Museus, Shiroma, & Dizon, 2016), and other similar concepts, as SEAA college students may or may not have come from a community where those types of resources or capitals were available to be drawn upon. For SEAA college students who are not able to draw upon those cultural and community resources, extra measures to help bolster their cultural identity on campus may be able to help ease their transition to and integration on campus.

**Support, Inclusion, and Sense of Belonging Foster College Success**

The fourth theme I presented included a discussion of the different sources of support for the participants while on campus that helped them feel included and connected to campus. These sources of support included higher education professionals such as professors, advisors, and other higher education staff, supportive services such as academic success programs and support services, as well as friends and peers. As first-generation college students, the participants’ parents lacked college-related information and resources and were unable to provide them with
any advice or guidance. These participants, therefore, relied on their support system in college to provide them with advice and guidance.

As Poon’s (2010) and Ting’s (2000) studies revealed, Asian American students did not necessarily feel accepted or a sense of belonging and continued to feel racially marginalized and isolated, even on campuses that have a larger Asian American population. On many campuses, they were not considered an underrepresented minority and were overlooked by or even specifically excluded from programs and services geared toward students of color (Her, 2014; Lew et al., 2005; Osajima, 1995; Yeh, 2005). Due to the prevalence of the model minority myth, APA students are often invisible to and neglected by administrators and policymakers (Brydolf, 2009; Inkelas, 2003b; Osajima, 1995; Poon, 2010). Fortunately for the participants in this study, however, they were able to rely on the caring agents and support system in college to help them navigate the higher education system, feel valued, and develop a sense of belonging.

These findings paralleled the current literature that found SEAA college students who received cultural validation to have a positive impact on their college experience (Maramba & Palmer, 2014). Additionally, current literature also found that caring agents as well as supportive organizations and student services enabled SEAA college students to form social capital and be successful in college (Palmer & Maramba, 2015). Finally, Tang et al.’s (2013) study on Cambodian American students that built upon Yosso’s (2005) model of community cultural wealth identified several important sources of capital for first-generation college students. These sources of capital included familial and aspirational capital that could serve as an extension of cultural capital, and navigational capital, gained through participation in ethnic-based and cultural organizations, that could serve as an extension of social and linguistic capital.
The findings of this study concur with the current literature. The experiences of the participants in this study as demonstrated in this theme echoed what the other researchers found in their studies regarding factors that contribute to the college success of SEAA college students and first-generation college students. This finding affirms current research suggesting that SEAA college students need support, as well as specific programs and services, from their higher education institutions to ensure their success in higher education. This finding also attests to current research suggesting that inclusive programs and services could culturally validate students in underserved populations and mediate their progression toward college success.

I also found new data that adds to the literature. The SEAA college students in my study brought up the importance of increasing the representation of Asian American staff members and administrators, and of faculty members in non-STEM fields, particularly those with awareness, knowledge, and skills around social justice issues. An increased representation of Asian American role models and leaders in higher education would be desirable and helpful, even if they were not specifically of Southeast Asian descent. The participants also advocated for the recruitment and retention of more students, staff, faculty, and administrators of Southeast Asian descent and for the disaggregation of data on AAPIs. Such finding would also support the repeated calls for disaggregated data on AAPIs in order to reveal the barriers and challenges faced by SEAA college students and to provide them with the support and services that they needed.

**The Legacy of Trauma Is Embedded in Their Everyday Lives**

The fifth theme I presented included a discussion of the various experiences that contributed to the theme. They included their parents’ refugee experience, their family’s resettlement challenges, their own experiences of microaggression and racism, their dilemma of
being caught between two cultures, their motivation for attending college, and the importance of
telling their stories. This salient aspect of their identity made them appreciate their parents’
sacrifices and motivated them to succeed in higher education. While they were proud of their
legacy and identity and how far they have come, they also felt that it was important for the
stories of their parents’ and their own struggles to be heard and for the collective story of their
community to be heard.

These findings paralleled the current literature that found SEAA college students and
first-generation college students to draw upon their aspirations for a better life and the belief that
a college degree would lead to a better life to motivate them despite the obstacles they had to
overcome (Tang et al., 2013). This aspirational capital (Yosso, 2005) was apparent throughout
the participants’ accounts of their and their families’ experiences. Ly’s (2008) study also
revealed that APA students may experience cultural dissonance as they are “caught between two
cultures” (p. 24) and have to constantly “negotiate the tension between the dominant norms of
American society and familial and cultural values that affect their development tasks” (Lew et
al., 2005, p. 76).

Additionally, current literature found refugees to have experienced severe migration
traumas and stressors (Bankston & Hidalgo, 2007; Hsu, Davies, & Hansen, 2004; Duffy,
Harmon, Ranard, Thao, & Yang, 2004; V. T. Nguyen, 2012) and faced various resettlement
challenges upon arrival to the U.S. (Beiser & Hou, 2006; Bruno, 2011; Han, 2005; Hein &
Moore, 2009; Nawyn, Gjokaj, Agbényiga, & Grace, 2012; Yang, 2004). Furthermore, current
literature found parental trauma to have a negative effect and long-term consequences on their
children’s mental health (Han, 2005; Rodriguez, 2012).
The findings of this study correspond with the current literature. The experiences of the participants in this study as demonstrated in this theme echoed what the other researchers found in their studies on the experiences of SEAAs, SEAA college students, and first-generation college students. This finding affirms current research suggesting that SEAA college students’ experiences are complex and that SEAA college students need support, as well as specific programs and services, from their higher education institutions to ensure their success in higher education. It highlights the importance for researchers, administrators, and policymakers to disaggregate the ethnic groups under the APA umbrella to provide a deeper and clearer understanding of each subgroup and to address the diverse needs SEAA college students.

I also found new data that adds to the literature. The participants in my study revealed that it was important to them for their stories to be heard. While they did not complain much about the hardships they have endured, they all felt it was important for the stories of their parents’ and their own struggles to be heard. They wished that others would have more knowledge about the diversity within the APA and SEAA populations and that not all Asian Americans fit the model minority stereotype. Their identity as descendants of Southeast Asian refugees and first-generation college students were important to them and it was cathartic for them to be able to share their experiences, especially with someone whom they believe who relate to them. This finding also supports the repeated calls for disaggregated data on AAPIs in order to reveal the barriers and challenges faced by SEAA college students and to provide them with the support and services that they needed.

**Limitations of the Study**

Although approximately 30 institutions of higher education in Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, and Ohio were determined to be ideal recruitment locations and over 300 individuals and groups
were contacted to help with participant recruitment, the respondent pool consisted of only 31 potential participants from three states and only 10 students actually matched the criteria for the study. Furthermore, since all the participants were enrolled in four-year institutions, they did not represent SEAA students who were enrolled in two-year institutions or those who did not attend college at all.

Since disaggregated national data on SEAA college enrollment is not available, I can only assume, based on the available data on educational attainment of SEAAs and the participants’ anecdotal accounts, that the number of SEAAs enrolled in higher education, particularly in four-year institutions, is low. Ultimately, only eight students ended up participating in the study and were interviewed. Unfortunately, I was not able to interview any SEAA college students of Lao descent because only one student responded to my call for participation but did not respond to my repeated requests for an interview. This indicates that there are many more stories that have yet to be told and lived experiences that have yet to be explored. While this qualitative study was able to describe the experiences of the participants, it may be limited by its design. The scope of this study may also have been smaller than originally anticipated.

Finally, to prevent unrecognized bias, I maintained a researcher’s journal and kept referring to the audio recordings and transcripts of the interviews to ensure that I would not go far from the evidence when interpreting the data. By bracketing my personal experiences and positioning myself as an Asian American immigrant woman, I was able to better reflect on and evaluate my own interpretations of the participants’ stories and actions. Despite these efforts, it is impossible to remove all biases from any given study.
Revised Conceptual Framework

In Chapter I, I explained the conceptual framework graphic (see Appendix A) that served as a metaphor for what is known and unknown about the APA and SEAA experience. I used an iceberg as a metaphor for what is generally known (the tip of the iceberg) and unknown (the underwater portion) about the APA and SEAA populations, with an ominous cloud with lightning representing the model minority stereotype. The conceptual framework was derived from the modest but growing body of literature on APA and SEAA undergraduate students’ experiences in higher education.

After analyzing the data and reviewing the themes that emerged, I revised the conceptual framework to include the emergent themes from this study. The result is a new conceptual framework (see Appendix R). In the new conceptual framework, I have added a lifesaver on which the five emergent themes sit. These five themes are some aspects of the experiences of SEAA college students on which this study has begun to shed light. These themes addressed some of the questions that make up the big question mark that represents all the things that remain unknown about the APA and SEAA experience. These emergent themes are now floating above the water surface with the help of the lifesaver, which represents the current research study.

With the findings from each subsequent research study on APA and SEAA populations, we can chip away a little bit more of the underwater portion of the iceberg and bring the invisible aspects of APA and SEAA experiences to the surface. The ominous cloud with lightning bolts that represents the model minority stereotype would also get smaller and disappear. Eventually, the conceptual framework would no longer be represented by an iceberg, but with a more positive metaphor.
Recommendations for Practitioners

This study makes a number of contributions to the higher education profession and practice. It fills a gap in research on SEAA college students and adds to the small but growing amount of literature on SEAA college students by providing a deeper and clearer understanding of the experiences of SEAA college students from refugee background. It addresses the concern for and importance of disaggregating the ethnic groups under the APA umbrella to provide a deeper and clearer understanding of each subgroup and to address the specific needs of the SEAA college student population (Chhuon & Hudley, 2008; Her, 2014; Maramba & Palmer, 2014; Palmer & Maramba, 2015).

Based on the findings of this study, I have four major recommendations for higher education practice: (1) incorporate understanding of lived experiences of first-generation college students of Southeast Asian descent into everyday work, (2) implement initiatives and programs for SEAA students, (3) increase representation of Asian American staff, faculty, and administrators in higher education, and (4) disaggregate the ethnic groups within the AAPI racial category.

Incorporate Understanding of the Lived Experiences of First-Generation College Students of Southeast Asian Descent Into Everyday Work

Student affairs professionals and higher education practitioners who work with SEAA college students must take into account the ways in which these students’ lives are shaped by their families’ backgrounds and experiences (Museus, 2013). They must consider how various cultural and structural factors could contribute to or against the college access and success of SEAA students. To gain a better understanding of these factors, they could review and utilize student development and success theories that are culturally-relevant (Museus et al., 2016). It is important that they pay close attention to how they could culturally validate SEAA students on
their campus and foster their success (Maramba & Palmer, 2014). They must also recognize the
diverse and distinct needs of this population and be mindful not to assume that SEAA students
do not need help and support.

Furthermore, student affairs professionals and higher education practitioners need to examine the roles that culture and non-traditional forms of capital play in the college experiences of marginalized student populations (Maramba & Palmer, 2014). Providing these students with spaces where they can connect meaningfully with others from similar cultural backgrounds can help them cultivate a sense of belonging and community on campus (Museus et al., 2016). Student affairs professionals and higher education practitioners who work in areas such as residence life, orientation, student activities, multicultural affairs, and advising should provide information about multicultural centers, ethnic student organizations, cultural events on campus and in the community to all incoming and current students and to strongly encourage their participation (Maramba & Palmer, 2014; Museus et al., 2016). This may be very helpful to students in developing their cultural identities, especially on campuses with a lower population of APA students or SEAA students. In addition, student affairs professionals and higher education practitioners from departments across campus should provide support and funding to ethnic student organizations, if they have not already been doing so.

Implement Initiatives and Programs for Southeast Asian American Students

Higher education administrators and faculty members must continuously consider ways in which they can better support underserved student populations such as SEAA and first-generation college students. They must secure the necessary funding and institutional support to develop and implement initiatives and programs for SEAA and first-generation college students. Intervention should begin in the early years of high school so that students from marginalized
populations can be put on a path to college success. Furthermore, SEAA college students must not be excluded from participating in existing programs and receiving existing services geared toward students of color and other underserved populations (Her, 2014; Lew et al., 2005; Osajima, 2005; Yeh, 2005).

**Pre-college support.** Higher education administrators must advocate and secure funding for pre-college programs that provide support and services to underserved student populations such as SEAA and first-generation college students (Palmer & Maramba, 2015). These programs help provide these students with access to higher education and prepare them for a successful transition from high school to postsecondary education. Many SEAA and first-generation college students’ parents are unable to provide them with any guidance and help when it comes to college-related matters. While some high schools provide students with information and help with their college preparation and applications, some may not. It is important for higher education administrators to communicate and collaborate with their high school counterparts and with community organizations to provide support and services to high school students, especially those from underserved populations such as SEAA and first-generation college students. This may enable these students to develop the social capital that they need to be successful in college and beyond.

**Ethnic studies.** Higher education administrators and faculty members who are involved with curriculum development and course design must consider offering ethnic studies courses, more courses that address racial, ethnic, and social identities, as well as other courses that discuss cultural stereotypes and social justice issues (Maramba & Palmer, 2014; Museus et al., 2016). These courses focus on the contributions and experiences of racial and ethnic minorities and present their history from the perspectives of the racial and ethnic minority populations. Because
of this, these courses could have a positive effect on these students’ racial and ethnic identity development. Through their participation in these types of courses, students could engage in a process of self-discovery and self-empowerment and make meaning of their personal experiences. Administrators and faculty members must also consider incorporating these types of courses and topics into the curricula for students in all majors so that they may get a more well-rounded education.

**Increase Representation of Asian American Staff, Faculty, and Administrators in Higher Education**

Higher education administrators must make a conscious effort and a commitment to increase the number of Asian American staff who work in various capacities within student services and the number of Asian American faculty members, especially outside of the STEM fields. While there may be a high number of AAPI faculty in the STEM fields, they are underrepresented in non-STEM fields. In their review of the 2004 National Study of Postsecondary Faculty (NSOPF), Yan and Museus (2013) found 43.3% of AAPI faculty at four-year institutions are concentrated in the STEM fields. Only 9.1% of AAPI faculty were in the social science or education fields. By comparison, there was a more even distribution of non-AAPI faculty across all academic fields.

Having more faculty members and administrators overall who may have a research or teaching interest in Asian American issues provides more opportunities for ethnic studies courses focusing on topics related to Asian Americans to be developed and offered. With more Asian American staff and faculty members, it is also be easier for Asian American students to reach out to a staff or faculty member who shares or is familiar with their cultural background and interests. This in turn can play a valuable role in the development of Asian American students’ social and cultural identities.
Furthermore, higher education administrators must ensure that Asian Americans are given the opportunities to increase their representation in academic leadership positions. The gross underrepresentation of Asian American leaders in higher education contributes to the severe shortage of mentors and positive role models for Asian American students. With adequate Asian American role models in higher education leadership positions, Asian American students may find it easier to cultivate a sense of belonging and community on campus and be more likely to seek opportunities to develop their own leadership skills. With more Asian American higher education leaders, it also means that more advocacy can take place for providing more support to Asian American and SEAA student populations.

**Disaggregate the Ethnic Groups Within the Asian American and Pacific Islander Racial Category**

Higher education policymakers need to address the repeated calls by researchers for disaggregated data on AAPIs to reveal the barriers and challenges faced by SEAA college students and other AAPIs from underprivileged backgrounds so that they could receive the support and services that they needed. Important policy changes need to be made in higher education to address the disparities in income levels and education attainment among AAPI groups. To take a positive step toward closing these gaps, higher education policymakers must “examine data in a meaningful way, particularly in regard to the Asian American community, where diversity is often masked when policies only consider the median or average community member” (Ahmad & Weller, 2014, p. 3). When more comprehensive data on this community is collected and more accurate and meaningful data on this population become available, Asian Americans will be better represented and understood by policymakers when making important policy decisions affecting this population.
Recommendations for Future Research

This study revealed many opportunities for future research. While there is a growing amount of literature on SEAA college students, the amount of literature is still small. Replication and supplementary studies that focus on SEAA college students’ experiences and the various factors influencing their experiences will help provide a deeper and clearer understanding and representation of their experiences. As discussed in the literature review, there is limited research on SEAAs who have come to the U.S. as refugees and the various barriers and challenges faced by first-generation college students of Southeast Asian descent, whose families have resettled in the United States as refugees, throughout their college journey. This remains an area of research that needs further exploration.

As noted in the limitations section, this study included only eight participants from seven four-year institutions in three Midwestern states. While this phenomenological study provided a preliminary view of the experiences of SEAA college students, the findings are not intended to be applied to the general SEAA college student population. There are many areas of and factors influencing their experiences that have yet to be explored. Future research should include students from different types of institutions and geographical locations and include targeted efforts to recruit participants of Lao descent.

Another area of research interest would be to explore the experiences of SEAA college students from different immigrant generations. While this study included one participant who was not born in the U.S., this participant was a 1.5-generation immigrant who came to the U.S. as a young child and who shared “many linguistic, cultural, and developmental experiences similar to those of immigrant offspring” (Zhou, 1997, p. 65). The findings of this study revealed
that this participant’s childhood and college experiences were very similar to those of the other participants, all of whom were second-generation SEAAs.

Further examination of the roles that social capital plays in the experiences of SEAA college students is also warranted (Palmer & Maramba, 2015). This study, along with Maramba & Palmer’s (2014) and Palmer & Maramba’s (2015) studies brought up the important role that cultural validation, caring agents, and support system played in the college adjustment and success of SEAA college students. With additional studies that affirm the findings of current research, recommendations can be made to higher education administrators to provide support and services and to develop and implement initiatives and programs geared toward SEAA college students to help them develop social capital and foster their college success.

Finally, while many researchers have called for disaggregated data on AAPIs, more researchers must attempt to provide disaggregated AAPI data even when this present frequent challenges. Disaggregated data on AAPIs that present a more comprehensive picture of AAPI experiences and characteristics can reveal the barriers and challenges faced by SEAA college students and other AAPIs from underprivileged backgrounds. They also provide policymakers with more accurate and meaningful information, based on which they can make important policy changes to address the disparities in the income levels and educational attainment among AAPI groups.

**Final Reflection**

This study offers insights that contribute to the small but growing body of literature on SEAA college students. The participants in this study shared with me their struggles and the traumatic events their families have been through. They honored me with their rich and meaningful stories that were filled with traumatic memories, suffering, hope, pride, gratitude,
resilience, and self-discovery. I am still humbled by their trust in me and thankful that I was able to build a rapport with them. As I recall some of their stories and our intimate conversations, I am still moved by their words and continue to be amazed by their resilience and optimism in spite of the adversities they have faced.

I did find it interesting that many of the participants assumed that I was “one of them” (i.e., of the same ethnic background). They asked me after the conclusion of the interview what my ethnic background was and it turns out that they thought I was either of Vietnamese descent or came from refugee background due to my research topic. I had not specifically mentioned my ethnic, racial, or cultural background in any of the recruitment materials but did mention at the beginning of the interview that I was a first-generation Asian American and first-generation college student. Of course, they could also start making assumptions about my background based on my appearance after they met me.

In any case, I am glad that I was able to build a rapport with the participants and that they were willing to talk about sensitive topics with me and relive difficult moments in their lives. This tells me how important it is for Asian American students to be able to reach out to staff or faculty members whom they perceive to share or be familiar with their cultural backgrounds and interests. Asian American students would be more likely to seek help and cultivate a sense of belonging and community on campus if there were more Asian American staff and faculty members on their campuses.

Another thing I found to be interesting was the fact that more men than women participated in my study. Only two out of eight or 25% of the participants were women. In almost every other study I have reviewed, the majority of the participants were women. I was, therefore, surprised to find that I had only two female participants for my study. I reviewed the
information of all 31 potential participants, including the 21 who did not match the study’s criteria and the two who matched the study’s criteria but did not respond to emails requesting an interview, and found that there were more men than women who responded as well. Since disaggregated national data on SEAA college enrollment is not available, I thought perhaps SEAA women were enrolling in college at a lower rate than SEAA men; however, four recent studies on SEAA college students at four-year institutions included samples of substantially more women than men (Maramba & Palmer, 2014; Museus, 2013; Museus et al., 2016; Palmer & Maramba, 2015).

Throughout the interview process, I had to make a conscious effort to refrain from doing two things. First, I had to refrain from pointing out to the participants that “Americans” included more than just White people and that they had as much right as White people to simply refer to themselves as Americans. This is because many of them would refer to White people as Americans while referring to themselves and those who were from the same ethnic or racial backgrounds as Asians, Vietnamese, Cambodians, etc. Even the participants who were more well-versed in social justice issues, were active in Asian American activism, and had a strong, positive sense of ethnic identity still internalized this belief that Asians were perpetual foreigners no matter how many generations their families have been in the U.S. I hope that one day, they will realize this and claim their rightful place in the U.S. society.

Second, I had to stop myself from tearing up as I struggled to keep my composure during our conversations. As I listened to some of the participants’ stories about the horrors that they or their family members have been through, I had to make a conscious effort not to offer them a hug. I am the type of person who generally does not even like hugs, but as a mother, my instincts were telling me to give them a hug. I also had to make a conscious effort not to offer to
help address a major life challenge they were experiencing around the time of the interviews. As a student affairs practitioner, my instincts were telling me to advise and guide these students. I had to keep reminding myself that my role in this study was that of a researcher. I did email three of the participants with some resources they could explore to address their particular issues or challenges after the interviews.

Finally, an unexpected outcome for this research study was that it has evoked a process of self-discovery and self-reflection for the participants. Anna realized that being poor and coming from a refugee background are nothing to be ashamed of. She was also interested in doing more research into the experiences of students from low-income, first-generation, and refugee backgrounds. Ailee, Jackie, Rocky, and Tri Quang recognized the importance of sharing the stories of their parents’ and their own struggles and for the collective story of their community to be told. The process of sharing their stories was not only cathartic and empowering, but also served an altruistic purpose. As Rocky said simply but earnestly, this study “might not help me, [but it] might help someone.”

Conclusion

The purpose of this research study was to explore and understand the lived experiences of first-generation college students of Southeast Asian descent whose families have resettled in the United States as refugees. The following overarching question was posed: What is the experience of first-generation college students of Southeast Asian descent in the Midwest whose families have resettled in the United States as refugees? Three additional sub-questions were also used to guide this inquiry:
1. Where and how do these students’ cultural background and refugee or forced migration status influence their life aspirations and expectations for their college experience?

2. Where and how do these students’ cultural heritage and refugee or forced migration status influence how they view and conduct themselves as college students?

3. What is the impact of community or lack thereof for Southeast Asian American (SEAA) students living in a low ethnic concentration area and how has that influenced their college experience?

A phenomenological research design was utilized to explore the research questions. Specifically, the IPA approach focused on the participants’ attempts to make meanings out of their experiences (J. A. Smith et al., 2013). The results of this qualitative study were developed through data collected from eight face-to-face, in-depth interviews with undergraduate college students attending seven institutions of higher education in the Midwest. At the conclusion of the data analysis process, five strong themes emerged: (1) the journey is difficult, (2) family circumstances guided academic choices, (3) childhood community has an influence on college experience, (4) support, inclusion, and sense of belonging foster college success, and (5) the legacy of trauma is embedded in their everyday lives.

The findings of this study provided a better understanding of the experiences of SEAA college students. The five emergent themes captured the essence of the experiences of first-generation college students of Southeast Asian descent from families that have resettled in the United States as refugees and how their experiences reflect the nuance of the family’s forced migration. The participants’ narratives provided a description of the essence of their stories. A connection and comparison to the research questions and current literature also provided
additional context. A new conceptual framework was created by combining the findings of this study with the information gathered from an extensive literature review.

Based on the findings, I have prepared a list of recommendations for practice and for future research. Recommendations for practice for higher education staff, faculty, administrators, and policymakers include incorporating their understanding of the lived experiences of first-generation college students of Southeast Asian descent into their everyday work; implementing initiatives and programs for SEAA students; increasing representation of Asian American staff, faculty, and administrators in higher education; and disaggregating the ethnic groups within the AAPI racial category. Recommendations for future research include further exploration into this topic, expansion of the study to include different types of institutions and geographical locations, exploration of the experiences of SEAA college students from different immigrant generations, examination of the roles that social capital plays in the experiences of SEAA college students, and inclusion of more disaggregated data on AAPIs to provide a more comprehensive picture of AAPI experiences and characteristics.

As the body of literature on SEAA college students and other AAPIs from underprivileged backgrounds grows, the barriers and challenges they face are revealed and the disparities in the income levels and educational attainment among AAPI groups also came to light. Furthermore, as our society and our student body continue to become more diverse, there is an increasing need for research on how to best serve and support students from underprivileged backgrounds. The plights of this population can no longer be ignored or misrepresented in higher education practice or research. It is important for student affairs professionals, higher education practitioners, and policymakers to be equipped with more
accurate and meaningful information so that they could better support the needs of this population and help maximize their success in higher education.
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Appendix A

Conceptual Framework Graphic
PURPOSE STATEMENT:
This phenomenological study will explore the experience of first-generation college students of Southeast Asian descent in the Midwest from families that have resettled in the United States as refugees. Specifically, this phenomenological inquiry will develop a deeper understanding about the experiences of these students and the meaning of their college experience through the lens of refugees’ experiences.
Appendix B

Recruitment Email and Social Media Post
Dear colleagues,

My name is Vunsin Hiew Doublestein and I am a doctoral candidate in the Department of Educational Leadership, Research and Technology at Western Michigan University. I am excited to be launching new research project titled: The Experience of First-Generation College Students of Southeast Asian Descent From Families That Have Resettled in the United States as Refugees: Model Minority or Invisible Minority? Participants will be solicited widely through listservs and Facebook groups. Participants will be asked to participate in an interview. Interviews for this study will be conducted face-to-face in-person.

I need your help finding qualified participants across the U.S. Midwest! Please forward this email to college students who might be interested in participating in this study, as well as colleagues who may have access to students who may be interested.

The purpose of this study is to gather some rich stories from undergraduate college students who identify as Southeast Asian American and whose family have resettled in the United States as refugees. To participate in this study, individuals must:

1) self-identify as Southeast Asian American (be of Vietnamese, Cambodian, Lao, and/or Hmong descent);
2) have attended high school in the U.S. Midwest;
3) be enrolled in an undergraduate degree program in higher education in the U.S. Midwestern states of Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, or Ohio;
4) be first-generation college students (i.e., whose parents did not complete a baccalaureate degree); and
5) be a part of a nuclear family that have been accepted into the U.S. under refugee status (i.e., they either came to the U.S. under refugee status as children with their parents or they were born here to parents who came to the U.S. under refugee status).

This study has been approved by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board at Western Michigan University (my home institution). I self-identify as first-generation Asian American woman.

Students who are interested in participating in this study can click this link to complete a consent form and short demographic questionnaire. Students can contact me at vunsin.h.doublestein@wmich.edu if they have any questions; this is the only email address that will be used for this research project. I am also attaching a flyer that can be distributed in printed form.

Thank you,

Vunsin Hiew Doublestein
Western Michigan University
Recruiting Southeast Asian American college students to have a conversation about their experiences!

Your participation will give voice to SEAA college students and inform institutional efforts to better serve the specific and distinct needs of SEAA college students.

Your perspective is needed and valued!

Take advantage of this exciting opportunity to make a difference and receive a $25 movie theater gift card at the conclusion of the interview!

- Are you the first or among the first in your immediate family to attend college?
- Did your family come to the United States under refugee status?
- Did you attend high school in the U.S. Midwest?
- Are you an undergraduate student in the state of Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, or Ohio?
- Do you self-identify as Southeast Asian American (be of Vietnamese, Cambodian, Lao, and/or Hmong descent)?

If you answered YES to ALL these questions, you may be eligible to participate.

If selected for the research study, you will be asked to participate in a face-to-face interview. The interviews will take place on your campus and snacks will be provided.

If you are interested in participating, you can do one of the following:
1) Visit this link: https://survey.wmich.edu/TakeSurvey.aspx?SurveyID=86434p4
2) Email me, Vun Doubblestein, at vunsin.h.doubblestein@wmich.edu.
3) Scan this QR code: Please email me or call me at (269) 267-8731 if you have any questions.
Appendix D

Consent Form and Demographic Questionnaire
Consent Form (Online)

Western Michigan University
Department of: Educational Leadership, Research and Technology
Principal Investigator: Donna Talbot, Ph.D.
Student Investigator: Vunsin Hiew Doublestein, Doctoral Candidate

Project Title: “The Experience of First-Generation College Students of Southeast Asian Descent From Families That Have Resettled in the United States as Refugees: Model Minority or Invisible Minority?”

I am doing a research study. A research study is a way for researchers to find out more information about a particular topic or to answer a specific question. I want to find out more about the experiences of first-generation college students of Southeast Asian descent in the Midwest from families that have resettled in the United States as refugees.

If you want to be in this study, please complete the short demographic questionnaire on the next page. Completing the survey questions indicates your consent for use of the answers you supply.

If you are chosen to participate in the study, you will be asked to participate in an interview. The interview will take one to two hours. The interview will be in, will be audio-recorded, and will take place in a private location agreed upon by you and me.

Potential risks related to your participation in this study is minimal, although they may include physical or emotional discomfort during your interviews. To avoid fatigue, you may take short breaks during the interviews if needed. If you experience physical or emotional discomfort regarding the interview questions, you may stop answering them at any time.

At the conclusion of the interview, I will present you with a $25 movie theater gift card. I will also send you two to three articles related to the topic of this study if you are interested.

When I am done with this study, I will write a report about what I found. I will not use your name in the report. A pseudonym, rather than your real name, will be used throughout the study and in the final report. Confidentiality will be protected to the extent that is allowed by law.

You can choose to stop participating in this study at any time for any reason. You will not suffer any prejudice or penalty by your decisions to stop your participation. You will experience no consequences either academically or personally if you choose to withdraw from this study. The researcher can also decide to stop your participation in the study without your consent.

If your responses do not match the criteria for the study, your information will not be recorded or retained. Additionally, even if your responses match the criteria for the study, you may or may not be invited to participate in the study due to this study’s need for maximum variation. That means this study will utilize a sampling strategy to select participants with the most diverse variations among a larger group of potential participants that already match the study’s criteria. I
will be intentional in seeking out a sample that represent different Southeast Asian ethnic backgrounds and different gender identities.

If you have any questions or concerns about this study, you may email me at vunsin.h.doubblestein@wmich.edu or call me at (269) 267-8731. You may also contact my dissertation chair, Dr. Donna Talbot, at donna.talbot@wmich.edu or at (269) 387-3891, the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board at (269) 387-8293, or the vice president for research at (269) 387-8298.

If you consent to answering the questionnaire, please sign your name electronically:

______________________
Demographic Questionnaire (Online)

For the purposes of research, I must only interview students who match the criteria outlined in my protocol. It is also important for me to be able to understand and describe my participants as fully as possible. Please take a few moments to complete this short demographic survey. Please be aware that I cannot read or use this survey information if it you have not completed the Consent Form.

Name: _______________________________
Email: ______________________________
Phone: ______________________________
Best day and time to reach you: ______________________________________________

1. Do you identify as a person of Southeast Asian descent (Vietnamese, Cambodian, Lao, and/or Hmong)?   ____ Yes     ____ No
   *If yes, what is your ethnic affiliation? ___________________________________

2. Are you mixed race/multiracial or mixed ethnic/multiethnic?    ___ Yes     ___ No
   *If yes, describe your ethnic and/or racial identities: _________________________

3. What is your or your parents’ country of origin? ____________________________

4. Were you born in the United States?    ___ Yes     ___ No
   *If no, at what age did you permanently move to the U.S.?    __________________

5. Did your family come to the U.S. under refugee status?    ___ Yes     ___ No

6. Did you attend high school in the U.S.?    ___ Yes     ___ No

7. In what state do you attend college? ______________________________________

8. In what state do you normally reside when not in college? ____________________

9. Are you currently enrolled in an undergraduate degree program?   ___ Yes   ___ No
   *If yes, what degree are you pursuing? ___________________________________

10. Does either of your parents have a four-year college degree?   ___ Yes   ___ No

11. How old are you?                                                                 

12. What is your gender identity?                                                

Appendix E

Email to Potential Participants Who Match the Criteria
Dear [participant’s first name],

Thank you for your interest in participating in the research project to learn more about the experiences of first-generation college students of Southeast Asian descent in the Midwest from families that have resettled in the United States as refugees. Based on your responses to the demographic questionnaire, you match the criteria to participate in the study. I look forward to hearing your thoughts and learning about your experience.

For me to schedule a time to speak with you face-to-face, I need you to do three quick things within the next two days:

1. Please choose a pseudonym (fake name) that represents your personality and respond back to this email with your choice. This pseudonym will only be used for the purpose of scheduling an interview. We will choose another pseudonym for you at the beginning of the interview.

I plan to be on your campus for interviews on [dates and times]. To help with scheduling, I have set up an online calendar with numerous time slots for your convenience.

2. Please visit this link to choose a time that works best for you. Please use your pseudonym so others do not know your identity. You will receive an email reminder of your interview date and time a few days before the interview.

3. Once you have selected a date, please identify and secure a private location on your campus, such as a conference room, meeting room, or a classroom, for the interview. If this pose any problem to you at all and you are not able to secure a room on your campus, please let me know and we will try to figure something else out.

Our face-to-face interview will take approximately one to two hours. We will take short breaks as necessary. Please make sure you block off at least three hours for the interview, even though the interview may take less time than that, and please account for travel time when scheduling.

You will be asked to review and sign a consent form prior to participating. An electronic copy of the consent form is attached for your review. We will review a hard copy of the consent form together before you sign it. During the interview, I will be asking a series of semi-structured, open-ended questions.

If I do not hear back from you within two days, I will send you an email reminder.

I look forward to hearing back from you so we can proceed with the research project. I thank you again for your interest in participating in the research project. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions.

With kind regards,

Vunsin Hiew Doubblestein
Western Michigan University
Appendix F

Email to Individuals Who Do Not Match the Criteria
Dear [individual’s first name],

Thank you for your interest in participating in the research project to learn more about the experiences of first-generation college students of Southeast Asian descent in the Midwest from families that have resettled in the United States as refugees. Based on your responses to the demographic questionnaire, your responses do not match the criteria to participate in the study. Please understand that this is not about you, but rather the rigid guidelines dictating this research project.

I want to thank you again for your interest in participating in this study and for the time and effort you spent completing the demographic questionnaire. I will keep your name and contact information and may contact you in the future if I conduct another research project of a similar topic. All other data have not been recorded and will not be retained.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions about the selection process or about the research project.

With kind regards,

Vunsin Hiew Doublestein
Western Michigan University
Appendix G

Reminder Email to Potential Participants Who Match the Criteria
Dear [participant’s first name],

I received a completed demographic questionnaire from you indicating that you were interested in participating in the research project to learn more about the experiences of first-generation college students of Southeast Asian descent in the Midwest from families that have resettled in the United States as refugees. Thank you again for your interest. Based on your responses to the demographic questionnaire, you match the criteria to participate in the study.

As a reminder, for me to schedule a time to speak with you face-to-face, I need you to do three quick things within the next day:

1. Please choose a pseudonym (fake name) that represents your personality and respond back to this email with your choice. This pseudonym will only be used for the purpose of scheduling an interview. We will choose another pseudonym for you at the beginning of the interview.

I plan to be on your campus for interviews on [dates and times]. To help with scheduling, I have set up an online calendar with numerous time slots for your convenience.

2. Please visit this link to choose a time that works best for you. Please use your pseudonym so others do not know your identity. You will receive an email reminder of your interview date and time a few days before the interview.

3. Once you have selected a date, please identify and secure a private location on your campus, such as a conference room, meeting room, or a classroom, for the interview. If this pose any problem to you at all and you are not able to secure a room on your campus, please let me know and we will try to figure something else out.

Our face-to-face interview will take approximately one to two hours. We will take short breaks as necessary. Please make sure you block off at least three hours for the interview, even though the interview may take less time than that, and please account for travel time when scheduling.

You will be asked to review and sign a consent form prior to participating. An electronic copy of the consent form is attached for your review. We will review a hard copy of the consent form together before you sign it. During the interview, I will be asking a series of semi-structured, open-ended questions.

I look forward to hearing back from you so we can proceed with the research project. I thank you again for your interest in participating in the research project and I look forward to hearing your thoughts and learning about your experience. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions.

With kind regards,

Vunsin Hiew Doublestein
Western Michigan University
Appendix H

Interview Reminder Email
Greetings [participant’s pseudonym]!

I look forward to our upcoming interview regarding your experiences as a first-generation college student of Southeast Asian descent in the Midwest whose family has resettled in the United States as refugees. This is a reminder about the interview. Our face-to-face interview that will take approximately one to two hours is scheduled for:

Date: ______________________

Time: ______________________

Location: ____________________

As a reminder, please make sure you have blocked off at least three hours for the interview, even though the interview may take less time than that, and please make sure you have accounted for travel time.

I thank you again for your interest in participating in the research project and I look forward to hearing your thoughts and learning about your experience. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions.

With kind regards,

Vunsin Hiew Doublestein
Western Michigan University
Appendix I

Consent Form
Western Michigan University
Department of Educational Leadership, Research and Technology

Principal Investigator: Donna Talbot, Ph.D.
Student Investigator: Vunsin Hiew Doublestein, Doctoral Candidate
Title of Study: The Experience of First-Generation College Students of Southeast Asian Descent From Families That Have Resettled in the United States as Refugees: Model Minority or Invisible Minority?

You have been invited to participate in a research project titled "The Experience of First-Generation College Students of Southeast Asian Descent From Families That Have Resettled in the United States as Refugees: Model Minority or Invisible Minority?" This project will serve as Vunsin Hiew Doublestein’s dissertation for the requirements of the doctoral degree in the Department of Educational Leadership, Research, and Technology at Western Michigan University under the supervision of Dr. Donna Talbot. This consent document will explain the purpose of this research project and will go over all of the time commitments, the procedures used in the study, and the risks and benefits of participating in this research project. Please read this consent form carefully and completely and please ask any questions if you need more clarification.

What are we trying to find out in this study?
I want to find out more about the experiences of first-generation college students of Southeast Asian descent in the Midwest from families that have resettled in the United States as refugees.

Who can participate in this study?
College students in the U.S. Midwest who are of Southeast Asian American (Vietnamese, Cambodian, Lao, and/or Hmong descent), from families that have been accepted into the U.S. under refugee status, who have attended high school in the U.S. Midwest, and whose parents have not earned a four-year college degree can participate in this study.

Where will this study take place?
You will be asked to participate in an interview. The interview will be in person and will take place in a private location agreed upon by you and me.

What is the time commitment for participating in this study?
You will be asked to participate in an interview. The interview will be one to two hours long, depending on how much you have to share with me and how frequently short breaks will be taken.

What will you be asked to do if you choose to participate in this study?
You will be asked to provide general demographic information about yourself, such as your age, your gender identity, your ethnic and racial identities, your parents’ country of origin, how your family immigrated to the U.S., whether or not you were born in the U.S., where you attended high school, where you attend college, what degree you are pursuing, your parents’ level of education, and where your family resides. You will be asked to provide answers to questions in an interview format. The interview will be audio-recorded. You will be asked to review your
responses and provide feedback on the accuracy of the information. You may be contacted with a few follow-up questions if I need to clarify any information you have provided.

**What information is being measured during the study?**
You will be asked to participate in a qualitative study to find out more about your experiences as a first-generation college student of Southeast Asian descent in the Midwest whose family has resettled in the United States as refugees. You will be asked to provide general demographic information about yourself and to provide answers to questions in an interview format.

**What are the risks of participating in this study and how will these risks be minimized?**
Potential risks related to your participation in this study are minimal, although they may include physical or emotional discomfort during your interviews. To avoid fatigue, you may take short breaks during the interview if needed. If you experience physical or emotional discomfort regarding the interview questions, you may stop answering them at any time.

**What are the benefits of participating in this study?**
You may benefit from knowing that you are participating in a study that gives voice to Southeast Asian American college students. Your participation in this study may help provide a better understanding of the experiences of Southeast Asian American college students and the various barriers and challenges faced by first-generation college students of Southeast Asian descent whose family have resettled in the U.S. as refugees. This may allow student affairs professionals to better serve the specific and distinct needs of Southeast Asian American college students. The knowledge produced by this study may give student affairs professionals and policymakers a better understanding and better equip them to address the issues surrounding the lack of programs and services for Southeast Asian American college students.

**Are there any costs associated with participating in this study?**
There are no costs associated with participating in this study.

**Is there any compensation for participating in this study?**
At the conclusion of the interview, I will present you with a $25 movie theater gift card. I will also send you two to three articles related to the topic of this study if you are interested.

**Who will have access to the information collected during this study?**
When I am done with this study, I will write a report about what I found. I will not use your name in the report. A pseudonym, rather than your real name, will be used throughout the study and in the final report. Confidentiality will be protected to the extent that is allowed by law. All written transcripts, audio recordings, and associated forms will be locked in a filing cabinet in my office and/or saved on an encrypted external hard drive. Once the study is completed, all data, including transcripts, audio recordings, worksheets, notes, and associated forms will be locked in the principal investigator’s office for three years, after which they will be destroyed.

**What if you want to stop participating in this study?**
You can choose to stop participating in the study at any time for any reason. You will not suffer any prejudice or penalty by your decision to stop your participation. You will experience NO
consequences either academically or personally if you choose to withdraw from this study. The investigator can also decide to stop your participation in the study without your consent.

Should you have any questions prior to or during the study, you can contact the primary investigator, Dr. Donna Talbot at (269) 387-3891 or donna.talbot@wmich.edu. You may also contact the Chair, Human Subjects Institutional Review Board at (269) 387-8293 or the vice president for research at (269) 387-8298 if questions arise during the course of the study.

This consent document has been approved for use for one year by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) as indicated by the stamped date and signature of the board chair in the upper right corner. Do not participate in this study if the stamped date is older than one year.

I have read this informed consent document. The risks and benefits have been explained to me. I agree to take part in this study.

Please Print Your Name

___________________________________   ________________________
Participant’s signature      Date
Appendix J

Interview Protocol
Interview Protocol for Southeast Asian American College Students

Pseudonym: _________________________________    Date: ____________

Location: _________________________________    Time: ____________

Introduction:

- (Introduce myself and disclose my background and motivation for conducting the study.)
- I am conducting a study concerning the experiences of first-generation college students of Southeast Asian descent in the Midwest from families that have resettled in the United States as refugees. This initial interview should last approximately one to two hours. Would you be interested to participate in this study?
- (Make sure this is being recorded.) I would like to audio record our conversation in order to allow me to listen more carefully to what you say. Do I have your permission to use the audio recorder? Please express your consent verbally so it may be recorded.
- Please review this consent form. I have previously emailed an electronic copy of this form to you. Please sign this form before we begin.
- This first part of the interview will focus on getting to know you, particularly your personal and ethnic identities as well as your and your families’ refugee resettlement experiences. The second part of the interview will focus on connecting the first part to your college experience.
- Before we being, please select a pseudonym that will be used throughout the study to refer to you so that your real name does not have to be used. A pseudonym is a fake name that is chosen to protect your identity, give you anonymity, and to ensure your confidentiality is not breached. I would suggest that you stay away from pseudonyms that may make you easily identifiable to those who know you well.
- If you do not have any questions or comments at this point, I would like to proceed with the interview.

Interview Questions:

1) Please begin by telling me a little about yourself and reconfirm how you self-identify your race and ethnicity.

2) What does it mean to you to be Southeast Asian American?
   - Cultural characteristics
   - Development of self-identity
   - Do you speak a language other than English at home?
   - Would you consider yourself traditional?
   - Would you consider yourself religious?
3) Could you tell me what you know or remember about your and your family’s experiences in [country of origin] before coming to the U.S.? What was life like in [country of origin]?
   - How you left…
   - Refugee camp
   - How long were you there?
   - What were your parents’ occupations?
   - What were your parents’ educational levels?

4) What were the most difficult things you and/or your family encountered when you first arrived in the U.S.?
   - Language barrier
   - Culture shock
   - Resource access
   - Health care
   - Employment
   - Finances
   - Housing
   - Friends
   - Transportation
   - School
   - Food
   - Support

5) Describe your involvement in your ethnic community.
   - Family and friends
   - Community organizations
   - Youth groups

6) Tell me about how you made your decision to attend your current institution of higher education.
   - Did being Southeast Asian American impact that decision?
   - Do you have any friends or relatives who have attended or who are attending this institution?
   - Did you apply to other institutions?
   - What did you look forward to in college?

7) How would you describe your experiences here on campus and in this community?
   - Classes, activities, and involvement
   - Living on or off campus
   - How do you define community?
   - In what ways do you feel connected on campus?
   - Why did or didn’t you get involved?
   - Have you ever felt like you were being treated differently because of your _____?
   - Give me an example of when…

8) Could you tell me about your experience being among the first in your immediate family to attend college?
   - What expectations do you have for yourself?
   - What promotes or hinders your educational success?
   - What has made your college experience successful so far?
   - Has there ever been a time when you felt uncomfortable or unwelcomed on campus?
   - Who do you seek out for information, support, and/or advice?
9) How do you find support or community while at college?
   - Friends
   - Student organizations
   - Student services
   - Supportive programs
   - Local ethnic associations
   - Religious place of worship
   - Co-workers
   - Are you aware of the campus services?
   - If you are aware of campus services but do not go, why not?
   - How is your relationship with your professors or advisors?
   - How do you feel about the administrators?

10) If you could give feedback to the staff and faculty at your institution of higher education about how to make your current campus more inviting and supportive toward Southeast Asian American students, what would you tell them?

11) What motivated you to participate in this study?

12) What else have I not asked you about your college experience that you would like to share?

Thank you for sharing your experience with me. Your story will be of great value in helping me explore the experiences of Southeast Asian American undergraduate students in higher education. Is there anything I did not ask you that you would like to share about this topic?

Within the next few weeks, I will email you a document containing the text from our interview for your review. You will be asked to review your responses and provide feedback on the accuracy of the information. Specific instructions will be included in the email.
Appendix K

Email to Participants for Transcript Review (Member Check)
Dear [participant’s pseudonym],

Thank you for allowing me to interview you regarding your experiences as a first-generation college students of Southeast Asian descent in the Midwest from families that have resettled in the United States as refugees. As we discussed when we spoke, I audio-recorded our interview and have transcribed the interview into a Word document. The document containing the text from the interview and my interpretation of our conversation is attached to this email.

Over the next two weeks, please take time to carefully review the transcript. Once you have read the transcript, please respond to the following questions by email:

1. Does this transcription accurately reflect our conversation?
   a. If no, what are the inaccuracies in the transcription?

2. Does my interpretation of our conversation accurately reflect your experience as a first-generation college student of Southeast Asian descent in the Midwest whose family has resettled in the United States as refugees?
   a. If no, what are the inaccuracies in my interpretation?

3. Is there anything that you would like to add or clarify about your experience?

4. What stood out to you as you read the transcription of your experience?

Please note that you are not being asked to look for or correct mistakes in spelling, grammar, and syntax in the transcripts. While transcripts are a verbatim and semantic record of interviews, they do not include all non-verbal utterance such as pauses and fillers. Furthermore, transcripts are supposed to document natural conversational language, which rarely consists of complete and grammatically correct sentences.

You may feel self-conscious or embarrassed when you read the transcript, but please be assured that your contributions are worthy, valid, and respected, and your voice is of higher value than grammatical accuracy. In my final report, should I directly quote your narrative, I will insert grammatical corrections and clarifications as needed. I will also remove all identifying information from any direct quotes that I may use.

You are not required to review and comment on your transcript, but your thoughts will continue to help me understand your experience.

I thank you again for your continued participation in the research project and I appreciate the time you took to share your experiences with me. I look forward to hearing back from soon. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions.

With kind regards,

Vunsin Hiew Douublestein
Western Michigan University
Appendix L

Reminder Email to Participants for Transcript Review (Member Check)
Dear [participant’s pseudonym],

I am emailing to check in with you and to remind you to look over the transcript of our interview and my interpretation of our conversation. I am really interested in your reaction to the transcript and my interpretation of our conversation. The document containing the text from the interview and my interpretation of our conversation is attached to this email.

Over the next two weeks, please take time to carefully review the transcript. Once you have read the transcript, please respond to the following questions by email:

1. Does this transcription accurately reflect our conversation?
   a. If no, what are the inaccuracies in the transcription?

2. Does my interpretation of our conversation accurately reflect your experience as a first-generation college student of Southeast Asian descent in the Midwest whose family has resettled in the United States as refugees?
   a. If no, what are the inaccuracies in my interpretation?

3. Is there anything that you would like to add or clarify about your experience?

4. What stood out to you as you read the transcription of your experience?

As a reminder, you are not being asked to look for or correct mistakes in spelling, grammar, and syntax in the transcripts. While transcripts are a verbatim and semantic record of interviews, they do not include all non-verbal utterance such as pauses and fillers. Furthermore, transcripts are supposed to document natural conversational language, which rarely consists of complete and grammatically correct sentences.

You may feel self-conscious or embarrassed when you read the transcript, but please be assured that your contributions are worthy, valid, and respected, and your voice is of higher value than grammatical accuracy. In my final report, should I directly quote your narrative, I will insert grammatical corrections and clarifications as needed. I will also remove all identifying information from any direct quotes that I may use.

You are not required to review and comment on your transcript, but your thoughts will continue to help me understand your experience. If I do not hear back from you within two weeks of sending this email, I will assume that you are not interested in providing any comments on the transcript and my interpretation of our conversation.

I thank you again for your continued participation in the research project and I appreciate the time you took to share your experiences with me. I look forward to hearing back from you soon.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions.

With kind regards,

Vunsin Hiew Doubblestein
Western Michigan University
Appendix M

Email to Peer Debriefee
Dear [peer debriefer’s first name],

As we have previously discussed, I am conducting a research project titled: *The Experience of First-Generation College Students of Southeast Asian Descent From Families That Have Resettled in the United States as Refugees: Model Minority or Invisible Minority?* Thank you for agreeing to participate in the peer debriefing process of my research project to help me enhance credibility and establish validity, to ensure that I am collecting valid information. I have begun my data collection process and am now emailing you with more specific information and to schedule our first meeting.

As an impartial peer and an active qualitative researcher, you can provide different perspectives and valuable, unbiased feedback to me as a researcher. Specifically, you will be expected to review the process of the research study and to examine the general methodology to provide an objective assessment of the project. Your main responsibilities as a peer debriefer will include the following:

- Offering clear and concise feedback.
- Focusing on the strengths and weaknesses of the research.
- Drawing attention to any gaps in references and making me aware of any additional literature that may enhance my approach.
- Maintaining awareness of the current research emerging within the subject area.
- Incorporating concepts from your own area of expertise.
- Using open-ended and thought-provoking questions to challenge me to consider new perspectives.
- Providing me with a written review within 10 days of receiving materials.

You will also be expected to meet with me on a regular basis so that these meetings can serve as deadlines that will keep us both moving and on track to meeting our goals. Each meeting is expected to take between one to two hours. We will discuss the frequency of these meetings at our first meeting and decide on specific dates and times by email later on. Please email me a few days and times when you would be available to meet with me over the next two weeks.

If you are no longer able to serve as a peer debriefer for my research project, please let me know immediately. If you have any questions for me, please do not hesitate to let me know as well. I look forward to hearing back from you soon.

Thank you,

Vunsin Hiew Doubblestein
Western Michigan University
Appendix N

Email to External Auditor
Dear [external auditor’s first name],

I am conducting a research project titled: *The Experience of First-Generation College Students of Southeast Asian Descent From Families That Have Resettled in the United States as Refugees: Model Minority or Invisible Minority?* I have begun my data analysis process and am contacting you to request your assistance in helping me increase consistency and assess trustworthiness for my research project as an external auditor.

As an external auditor, you can provide different perspectives and valuable, unbiased feedback to me as a researcher. You will be expected to review the data from my research study to provide an objective assessment of the project. Specifically, you will review the materials and assess whether or not the findings, interpretations, and conclusions are supported by the data. Your main responsibilities as an external auditor will include:

- Assessing the adequacy of data and preliminary findings.
- Reviewing the initial themes and supporting quotes from the interview to determine whether or not they make sense.
- Offering clear and concise feedback that can lead to the development of stronger and better articulated findings.
- Maintaining awareness of the current research emerging within the subject area.
- Preparing notes for feedback meetings within one week of receiving materials.

You will also be expected to meet with me on a regular basis to provide me with verbal feedback. Each meeting is expected to take between one to two hours and our conversations may be audio-recorded. We will discuss the frequency of these meetings at our first meeting and decide on specific dates and times by email later on. Please email me a few days and times when you would be available to meet with me over the next two weeks.

I will create an audit trail to keep careful documentation of all components of my study for my own review and also for your review. I will discuss how to handle the feedback I have received from you with my dissertation chair.

If you are unable to serve as an external auditor for my research project, please let me know immediately. If you have any questions for me, please do not hesitate to let me know as well. I look forward to hearing back from you soon.

Thank you,

Vunsin Hiew Doubllestein
Western Michigan University
Appendix O

Participant Information Tables
### Participant Demographic Information

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### Participant Student Information

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Appendix P

Connection to Research Questions
| Q1: Where and how do these students’ cultural background and refugee or forced migration status influence their life aspirations and expectations for the college experience? | • Participants’ cultural background, their family circumstances, and the community in which they grew up had an influence on their academic paths and college experiences.  
  o During college selection and application processes as they made decisions on institution, institution type, and major.  
  o How they found and created a sense of community on campus.  
• Participants’ cultural background and their family circumstances had an influence on their life aspirations and served as their motivation for attending college.  
• Demonstrated in Themes One, Two, Three, Four, and Five. |
|---|---|
| Q2: Where and how do these students’ cultural heritage and refugee or forced migration status influence how they view and conduct themselves as college students? | • The legacy of trauma and being a descendant of refugees were a big part of their identity.  
  o This legacy and identity influenced their everyday lives and how they viewed and conducted themselves as college students.  
  o This legacy and identity made them appreciate the sacrifices their parents have made to provide them with better opportunities and reminded them of their responsibility to success in education.  
• In spite of the hardships they faced, they remained positive and used their powerful coping skills to help ease the pressure and stress of dealing with life challenges.  
• Demonstrated in Themes One and Five. |
| Q3: What is the impact of community or lack thereof for SEAA students living in a low ethnic concentration area and how has that influenced their college experience? | • The community in which the participants grew up and the community in college had an influence on their college experience.  
  o Participants who grew up in an ethnic enclave or diverse neighborhood had a harder time adjusting to college in terms of the initial culture shock.  
• All participants noted the low number of Asian American students or SEAA students on their campuses.  
• In spite of the low ethnic concentration of their campus community, the participants were able to find community through various sources of support on campus that helped them cultivate a sense of belonging on campus.  
• Demonstrated in Themes Three and Four. |
Appendix Q

Comparison of Major Findings to Current Literature
### Comparison of Major Findings to Current Literature

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<th>Theme One: The journey is difficult</th>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of college awareness, access, and preparation</td>
<td>SEAAs have lower educational attainment and lack access to higher education (Her, 2014; Museus, 2013; NAPCA, 2012; Ngo &amp; Lee, 2007; Palmer &amp; Maramba, 2015; Soodjinda, 2009; Yeh, 2005; Yoo et al., 2010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continued and continuous struggles in college</td>
<td>SEAA college students, like other first-generation college students experience challenges navigating higher education (Dumais &amp; Ward; Irlbeck et al., 2014; Padgett et al., 2012; Smith, A. A., 2015; Tang et al., 2013; Tramonte &amp; Willms, 2010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiences of microaggression and racism</td>
<td>Model minority stereotype impose a burden on APA students (Brydolf, 2009; Chou &amp; Feagin, 2010; Diamond, 2008; Kwon, 2009; Ly, 2008; Ying et al., 2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adds to:</td>
<td>Reflects nuances that exist in SEAA college student experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In spite of their struggles, SEAA college students are resilient and optimistic about their future</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme Two: Family circumstances guided their academic choices</th>
<th>Affirms:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>College choice</td>
<td>Geographical proximity is an important when it comes to low-income AAPI and SEAA college students’ college choice, due to need to fulfill family obligations (Museus &amp; Buenavista, 2016)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic major</td>
<td>Adds to:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reflects nuances that exist in SEAA college student experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family circumstances influenced academic major and career choices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme Three: Childhood community has an influence on their college experience</td>
<td>Affirms:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Grew up in ethnic enclave or diverse neighborhood</td>
<td>• Ethnic or diverse student organizations and culturally-relevant events could validate students in underserved populations and mediate their progress toward college success (Maramba &amp; Palmer, 2014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Grew up in predominantly White neighborhood</td>
<td>• Maintaining contact with family and friends back home could bolster students’ transition into the college environment (Chhuon &amp; Hadley, 2008; Tang et al., 2013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Attended ethnic churches</td>
<td>• Being able to connect with those from similar cultural backgrounds, have opportunities to learn about own cultural communities, and have opportunities to give back to cultural communities contributed positively to SEAA college students’ college persistence and success (Museus et al., 2016)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Finding community within student organizations</td>
<td>Adds to:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Reflects nuances that exist in SEAA college student experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The type of community the students grew up in had an influence on their college experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• SEAA college students may or may not have come from a community where community and cultural resources and capital were available to be drawn upon</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme Four: Support, inclusion, and sense of belonging foster college success</th>
<th>Affirms:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Higher education professionals</td>
<td>• SEAA college students who received cultural validation had a positive impact on their college experience (Maramba &amp; Palmer, 2014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Supportive services</td>
<td>• Caring agents as well as supportive organizations and student services enabled SEAA college students to form social capital and be successful in college (Palmer &amp; Maramba, 2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Friends and peers</td>
<td>• Familial and aspirational capital could serve as an extension of cultural capital, and navigational capital, gained through participation in ethnic-based and cultural organizations, could serve as an extension of social and linguistic capital (Tang et al., 2013)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adds to: |
• SEAA college students brought up the importance of increasing representation of Asian American staff members and administrators, and of faculty members in non-STEM fields, particularly those with awareness, knowledge, and skills around social justice issues |
• SEAA college students advocated for recruitment and retention of more students, staff, faculty, and administrators of Southeast Asian descent |
• SEAA college students called for the disaggregation of data on AAPIs |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme Five: The legacy of trauma is embedded in their everyday lives</th>
<th>Affirms:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Parents’ refugee experience</td>
<td>• Refugees have experienced severe migration trauma and stressors (Bankston &amp; Hidalgo, 2007; Duffy et al., 2004; Hsu et al., 2004; Nguyen, V. T., 2012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Family’s resettlement challenges</td>
<td>• Refugees faced various resettlement challenges upon arrival to the U.S. (Beiser &amp; Hou, 2006; Bruno, 2011; Han, 2005; Hein &amp; Moore, 2009; Nawyn et al., 2012; Yang, 2004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Caught between two cultures</td>
<td>• Parental trauma has a negative effect and long-term consequences on children’s mental health (Han, 2005; Rodriguez, 2012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Motivation for attending college</td>
<td>• SEAA college students and first-generation college students draw upon their aspirations for a better life and the belief that a college degree would lead to a better life to motivate them despite the obstacles they had to overcome (Tang et al., 2013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The importance of telling their stories</td>
<td>• APA students may experience cultural dissonance as they are “caught between two cultures” (Ly, 2008, p. 24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• APA students have to constantly “negotiate the tension between the dominant norms of American society and familial and cultural values that affect their development tasks” (Lew et al., 2005, p. 76)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adds to:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Reflects nuances that exist in SEAA college student experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• It is important for SEAA college students that the stories of their parents’ and of their own struggles to be heard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Being a descendant of refugee is a big part of SEAA college students’ identity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix R

Revised Conceptual Framework Graphic
The journey is difficult.
Family circumstances guided their academic choices.
Childhood community has an influence on their college experience.
Support, inclusion, and sense of belonging foster college success.
The legacy of trauma is embedded in their everyday lives.

Model Minority Stereotype

Visible: What the numbers and the media are saying.
- Smart
- Math whiz
- High educational attainment
- Achieve success through hard work
- Not athletic
- Quiet
- Exotic
- Villain
- Submissive
- Martial arts expert
- Overrepresented in higher education
- Asexual (male)
- Hypersexual (female)

Invisible: What the numbers and the media do not say.

Invisible Minority
- Undocumented immigrants
- Rarely included in literature and research to study experiences of underrepresented populations
- Excluded from services, educational opportunities, and funding targeted at underrepresented populations

Intragroup Differences
- 25 different Asian groups
- Disparate income levels (some groups face poverty rates above national average)
- Dissimilar immigration status and circumstances (immigrants or refugees)

Gender role differences
- 24 different Pacific Islander groups
- Distinct languages, religions, cultures, and national origins
- Different educational levels (some groups have less than high school education)

Challenges
- Lack of capital
- Language barrier
- Limited career opportunities
- Glass ceiling

History of and Present Day APA Oppression
- Anti-Asian laws
- Internment: Rounding up the alien within
- Pitted against other racial minorities
- Used as pawn in affirmative action debate
- Perpetual foreigner syndrome: Patriotism and citizenship often challenged
- Exclusion: Keeping out the alien
- Racial triangulation: Defining the alien as other
- Not immune to racial hostility

Internalization of Stereotype
- Social isolation
- Mental health issues
- Less likely to seek help
- Reinforcing stereotype
- First-generation college students
- Resettlement and acculturation challenges
- Long-term effects of migration and encampment traumas

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Appendix S

HSIRB Approval
Date: August 5, 2015

To: Donna Talbot, Principal Investigator
Vunsin Doubblestein, Student Investigator for dissertation

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair

Re: HSIRB Project Number 15-07-28

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project titled “The Experience of First-Generation College Students of Southeast Asian Descent from Families that have Resettled in the United States as Refugees: Model Minority or Invisible Minority” has been approved under the expedited category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note: This research may only be conducted exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project (e.g., you must request a post approval change to enroll subjects beyond the number stated in your application under “Number of subjects you want to complete the study.”) Failure to obtain approval for changes will result in a protocol deviation. In addition, if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

Reapproval of the project is required if it extends beyond the termination date stated below.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination: August 4, 2016