

**Postsecondary Education Attainment of Hmong Americans: Evidence from the 2016-2020  
American Community Survey**

**By**

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**Abstract**

The year 2020 represents 44 years since the arrival of the first substantial group of Hmong refugees to the United States. Drawing on U.S. Census data, including the 2016-2020 American Community Survey, this paper addresses the questions: How has Hmong Americans' educational attainment changed since 1990? How does Hmong Americans' postsecondary education, especially BA and higher degree attainment, compare to that of the general U.S. population? How does it compare to those of Whites, Blacks, Native Americans, Hispanics, Asians, and Native Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders? How are Hmong Americans in different states faring in terms of educational attainment? It also examines the differences between Hmong American men and women and between foreign-born and U.S.-born Hmong in terms of educational attainment. It is one of the first to examine differences between Hmong Americans with and without disabilities in terms of educational attainment. Furthermore, it analyzes Hmong Americans' educational attainment across different state contexts. The evidence shows that Hmong Americans have made significant progress in terms of educational attainment since 1990. However, there are several important within-group differences. Specifically, a greater percentage of Hmong American females 25 years and older have obtained bachelor's degree or higher compared to their male counterparts. A greater percentage of foreign-born Hmong Americans have obtained bachelor's degree or higher than their U.S.-born counterparts. A greater percentage of Hmong Americans without a disability have obtained bachelor's degree or higher compared to Hmong Americans with a disability. Moreover, Hmong Americans' educational attainment varies by state contexts, and Hmong Americans in several states, including the three states with the greatest number of Hmong, still lag behind the general American public nationally and across most states.

**Keywords:** Access to Postsecondary Education; Role of Context/Place in Educational Attainment; Asian Americans; Native Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders; Model Minority Myth; Hmong Americans; Intersectionality: Sex, Nativity, and Disability

## **Postsecondary Education Attainment of Hmong Americans: Evidence from the 2016-2020 American Community Survey**

In a credentialed society such as the United States, one of the most important markers of a person's socioeconomic potential is the attainment of a postsecondary education degree. While associate degrees and certificates are postsecondary education credentials, the more common practice among researchers making comparisons between and among groups is to examine the percentage of the population age 25 years or older that has obtained a bachelor's degree or higher. In 1990, less than five percent (4.9) of Hmong Americans 25 years and older had obtained a bachelor's degree or higher (Xiong 2012:9). Ten years later, in 2000, 7.4 percent of Hmong Americans 25 years and older had obtained a bachelor's degree or higher. By 2010, 14.5 percent of Hmong Americans 25 years and older had obtained a bachelor's degree or higher. On average, then, between 1990 and 2010, we saw an increase of about half of a percentage point (0.48) in Hmong Americans' bachelor's degree or higher attainment per year. However, Hmong Americans experienced a larger rate of increase in terms of bachelor's degree or higher attainment during the 2000-2010 period (0.71 percentage point per year) than they did during the 1990-2000 period (0.25 percentage point per year), a topic to which I return later. Nevertheless, the rate at which Hmong Americans, most of whom were political refugees or children of refugees, have been able to obtain bachelor's degree or higher is quite remarkable when compared to the historical trend of the general U.S. population. For instance, in 1940, only 4.6 percent of the U.S. population 25 years or older had obtained a bachelor's degree or higher. It took another 40 years, in 1980, for 16.2 percent of the U.S. population 25 years and older to obtain a bachelor's degree or higher (U.S. Census Bureau 2006). In short, with respect to

bachelor's or higher degrees, it appears that Hmong Americans have been able to accomplish in 20 years what has taken the U.S. American population 35 to 40 years to do.<sup>1</sup>

Given these historical trends, what might we expect Hmong Americans' current educational attainment to be? How does Hmong Americans' postsecondary education, especially BA and higher degree attainment compare to that of the general U.S. population? How does it compare to those of Whites, Blacks, Native Americans, Hispanics, and Asians? In this paper, I draw on data from the 2016-2020 American Community Survey to address these questions. Along the way, I examine the differences between Hmong American men and women and between foreign-born and U.S.-born Hmong in terms of educational attainment. Additionally, I examine the differences between Hmong Americans with and without disabilities in terms of educational attainment—a topic that has received very little, if any, attention in past research on Hmong American educational attainment. I also analyze Hmong Americans' educational attainment across different state contexts—something that past research on Hmong Americans' educational attainment, with a few exceptions, has paid scant attention to. Finally, I discuss the implications of these outcomes and trends for Hmong Americans' socioeconomic adaptation and advancement.

### **Overview of Hmong Americans' Educational Attainment**

There are some things we know and many things we still do not know about Hmong Americans' educational attainment since their arrival in the United States in the 1970s. Most social science research on Hmong in the 1970s and 1980s tended to focus on the social, health

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that postsecondary education attainment for the U.S. general population has increased by greater amounts per decade after the 1960s than prior to the 1960s. This probably reflects the greater education opportunities provided to both Whites and non-White minorities and men and women after the Civil Rights era of the 1960s. Most Hmong political refugees arrived in the U.S. in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s and benefited from the institutional practices, policies and opportunities already in place by then.

and economic adjustments or so-called maladjustments of Hmong refugees (Downing and Olney 1982; Scott 1982; Fass and Bui 1984; Desbarats 1985; Fass 1986; Hendricks, Downing and Deinard 1986). Only some of this research examined Hmong students' educational needs and adaptation experiences. Of those that did, most tended to examine Hmong students' difficulty in acquiring English language skills, Hmong students' needs, or how well (or not) they were adjusting to American schools culturally and linguistically (Green and Reder 1986; Lewis, Vang and Cheng 1989). Beginning in the 1990s, we saw an exponential growth in research on Hmong's education experiences. The *Hmong Studies Journal's* website lists over 120 works which were published between 1990 and 1999 on Hmong educational adaptation.<sup>2</sup> Still, few provided quantitative evidence of Hmong Americans' educational attainment. In other words, few studies quantified in some way how many Hmong students have achieved a certain level of education by what time period. Most of the research on Hmong American education continued to rely on small samples or non-probability samples. This was not surprising considering that large probability data on the Hmong were not available and the only national dataset that became publicly available—the Census 1980 decennial data—did not contain very reliable information on the Hmong population. Surprisingly, since the release of 1990 Census data in the mid-1990s, few researchers have used them to examine Hmong Americans' educational attainment. It was not until the 2000s and later that we began to see research drawing upon nationally representative census datasets to quantify and analyze Hmong Americans' educational attainment (Rumbaut 2001; Sakamoto and Woo 2007; Pfeifer 2008; Xiong 2012).

In a previous work (Xiong (2012), I used the U.S. census data to examine the changes in Hmong Americans' educational attainment between 1990 and 2010. I found that between 2001

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<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.hmongstudiesjournal.org/hmong-educational-adaptation.html>

and 2010, the proportion of Hmong Americans aged 3 or older who reported attending college or above had doubled (from 13.2 percent to 26.7 percent), that the proportion of high school dropouts had declined, and that the proportion of Hmong Americans 25 years and older with bachelor's degrees or higher nearly doubled (from 7.4 percent to 14.5 percent). My study may have been the first to document differences between Hmong American men and women in terms of high school dropout and educational attainment. As I point out in that study,

Historically, the gap between Hmong women's and Hmong men's average educational attainment has been great. For instance, in 1990, only 19 percent of Hmong women had obtained a high school diploma or higher degree as compared to 44 percent of Hmong men who had done so. Therefore, it is especially significant that in the last few years Hmong females have gradually caught up to their male counterparts in terms of average educational attainment. Whereas in 1990 only three percent of Hmong females (compared to seven percent of men) had completed a bachelor's degree or higher, by 2010, 15.1 percent of them had done so (compared to 14 percent of men). In terms of the proportion with an associate's degree or higher, Hmong females caught up to Hmong males in 2009 and, by 2010, surpassed them by four percentage points (Xiong 2012:11).

Although we now know more about Hmong American men and women's educational attainment than we did 40 years ago, there are still many things we do not know. To date, research has paid little attention to the potential differences between foreign-born and U.S.-born Hmong in terms of educational attainment. Yet, we know that foreign-born Hmong and U.S.-born Hmong do not necessarily have the same kinds of opportunities or experiences. This information is especially important to help us gauge how well second-generation Hmong Americans may be doing.

To date, I know of no research that has compared the educational attainment of Hmong Americans with a disability to that of Hmong Americans without a disability. This is an important gap in knowledge considering that about 10 percent of Hmong American adults self-report as persons with a disability (compared to 15.7 percent of American adults with a disability) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016-2020 ACS). Given the multiple layers of discrimination

and forms of hardships that people with disabilities often face in our American society, I anticipate that Hmong Americans with disabilities will probably experience lower educational attainment compared to Hmong Americans without disabilities.

Moreover, although we know that Hmong Americans now live in just about all 50 states, we do not currently know a lot about how well Hmong Americans in different states are doing especially in terms of educational attainment. Yet, context and place can have important implications for people's educational aspirations, resources, experiences, opportunities and attainment (Roscigno, Tomaskovic-Devey and Crowley 2006). Surprisingly, most of the studies on Hmong American education have been studies that focus on single places. One exception is Yang and Pfeifer's (2004) study, in which they used U.S. Census 2000 data to tabulate Hmong's educational attainment across different U.S. states. The current study differs from Yang and Pfeifer's study in that it uses more updated data from the 2016-2020 ACS to give us a picture of Hmong Americans' educational attainment in several states with major populations of Hmong Americans. Additionally, it compares Hmong Americans' educational attainment to that of the general American population in different states in order to help us understand how Hmong Americans are doing relative to the general populations across different states.

### **Method and Data Source**

The American Community Survey (ACS) is an ongoing survey that is administered on a yearly basis by the U.S. Census Bureau to about 3.54 million U.S. households chosen on a random basis.<sup>3</sup> The ACS collects information from households and individuals within households on a wide range of topics, such as household rent, internet use, income, and

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<sup>3</sup> Prior to 2011, the ACS was administered to about 2.9 million U.S. addresses (or housing units) per year. Beginning in 2011, it has been administered to about 3.54 million addresses/housing units per year. [https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/methodology/design\\_and\\_methodology/2022/acs\\_design\\_methodology\\_ch04\\_2022.pdf](https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/methodology/design_and_methodology/2022/acs_design_methodology_ch04_2022.pdf)

individuals' age, marital status, citizenship, race, language, ancestry, disability, veteran status, education, employment, occupation, migration, etc. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the ACS is "the nation's most current, reliable and accessible data source for local statistics" (Burson and McKay 2021). The U.S. Census Bureau provides 1-year and 5-year estimates of the U.S. population through its ACS Public Use Microdata Sample files (PUMS), which are made available to the public on its website at [data.census.gov](http://data.census.gov). Additional information about the design and methodology of the ACS can be found in Daily (2022).

The ACS is the only source of nationally representative data on Hmong American households and individuals in terms of various social and economic topics. This paper uses the publicly available multi-year 2016-2020 ACS PUMS file. The unweighted sample in the 2016-2020 ACS PUMS contains about 15.4 million cases (15,441,673). When weighted, this sample represents 326.5 million persons (326,569,309). Of the 15.4 million cases, 11,827 cases are Hmong as defined by either race, ancestry, or language. Instead of using only the race variable to define Hmong cases, I used race in combination with ancestry and language. This yielded a larger sample size than would otherwise have been possible with only the race variable. These 11,827 cases, when weighted, represent 321,818 Hmong or Hmong American persons.<sup>4</sup> While this may still be an undercount of the true Hmong American population, this population estimate is within acceptable range given what we know about Hmong American population changes since the 1990 Census.

To investigate educational attainment, I used the educational attainment variable, "SCHL". Although this variable contains 24 distinct grade-levels ranging from "no schooling completed" to "kindergarten" to "12<sup>th</sup> grade - no diploma" to "doctorate degree," I recoded the

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<sup>4</sup> In this paper, I use the terms "Hmong" and "Hmong American" interchangeably to refer to all persons of this multi-generational ethnic group who identify as "Hmong" either by race, ancestry, or language.

variable to combine multiple grade categories into fewer categories. For the purpose of this paper, I was interested in highlighting postsecondary education attainment, especially the attainment of bachelor's degrees and beyond. To identify persons' sex, I used the variable, "SEX"; to identify persons' nativity, I used the variable, "NATIVITY"; to identify persons' disability status, I used the variable, "DIS". All statistical analyses were performed using the person weights in the 2016-2020 ACS and conducted in SPSS Statistics 26 (IBM Corporation, Armonk, New York).

## **Results**

### **Educational Attainment of Major U.S. Racial Categories**

Table 1 shows the educational attainment of the U.S. population 25 years and older and that of the five major racial categories during the 2016-2020 period. It shows that 20.1 percent of Americans 25 years and older had obtained a bachelor's degree, 9 percent had obtained a master's degree, 2.2 percent had obtained a professional degree, and 1.5 percent had obtained a doctorate degree. In total, 32.8 percent of Americans 25 years and older had obtained a bachelor's degree or higher. However, educational attainment varies by racial category.

Among Whites 25 years and older, 34.4 percent had obtained a bachelor's degree or higher. Among Blacks 25 years and older, 22.3 percent had obtained a bachelor's degree or higher. In sharp contrast to both Whites and Blacks, only 15.7 percent of American Indians had obtained a bachelor's degree or higher. Similarly, only 17.3 percent of Hispanics had obtained a bachelor's degree or higher. On the other hand, more than half (55.2 percent) of Asian Americans had obtained a bachelor's degree or higher. On the surface, it appears that Asian Americans have done quite well in this area in comparison to all other racial categories,



including Whites. However, as we know, the racial category of Asian lumps together various Asian American ethnic groups, hiding potential between-group and within-group differences.

**Table 1. Educational Attainment of Americans ages 25 years and older, by Racial Categories, 2016-2020**

<b>Educational Attainment</b>	<b>United States</b>	<b>Whites</b>	<b>Blacks</b>	<b>American Indians</b>	<b>Hispanics</b>	<b>Asians</b>
Less than High School Diploma	11.5	9.4	13.4	18.3	30.0	12.6
High School Diploma or GED	26.9	27.0	31.5	31.1	28.0	14.5
Some College	20.2	20.4	24.1	25.5	18.0	11.3
Associate's Degree	8.6	8.9	8.7	9.4	6.7	6.6
Bachelor's Degree	20.1	21.2	13.8	10.3	11.7	30.7
Master's Degree	9.0	9.4	6.7	4.1	4.0	16.4
Professional Degree	2.2	2.3	1.0	0.7	1.1	4.2
Doctorate Degree	1.5	1.5	0.8	0.6	0.5	3.9
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: 2016-2020 American Community Survey, Weighted Samples

Table 2 shows the educational attainment of the population of 25 years and older among Native Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders and various Asian American ethnic groups. The groups in the table are arranged from left to right approximately in order of their presence in the United States. Native Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders have lived in Hawaii and other islands in the Pacific Ocean long before the formation of the United States in 1776. In July 1898, the U.S. annexed Hawaii as a territory and in August 1959, it incorporated Hawaii as its 50<sup>th</sup> state. The year 2020 represents 60 years since Hawaiian became a U.S. state and 122 years since its annexation. Surprisingly, when compared to the U.S. population, 32.8 percent of whom had obtained a bachelor's degree or higher, Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders have not experienced the same kinds of educational attainment. Among Native Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders 25 years and older, only 18.3 percent had obtained a bachelor's degree or

higher. As we will come back to below, this figure is similar to that of Laotian Americans, a relatively more recent group in the U.S.

**Table 2. Educational Attainment of Native Hawaiians and Other Pacific Islanders and Asian Americans ages 25 years and older, by Select Ethnic Groups, 2016-2020**

Educational Attainment	Hawaiians and Other Pacific Islanders		Chinese except			Asian			Laotians	Hmong	
	All	Islanders	Filipinos	Taiwanese	Japanese	Indians	Koreans	Vietnamese			Cambodians
Less than High School Diploma	12.7	12.6	6.5	16.2	4.4	7.4	7.1	25.4	29.3	26.7	21.3
High School Diploma or GED	35.6	14.5	15.2	14.2	18.1	7.6	16.1	21.1	26.0	29	25.8
Some College	24.1	11.3	18.6	7.8	14.3	5.6	12.6	14.5	16.5	17.4	19.5
Associate's Degree	9.2	6.6	9.8	5.5	10.8	3.5	5.9	7.9	7.8	8.1	10.8
Bachelor's Degree	12.7	30.7	39.9	27.0	34.1	32.4	35.7	21.5	15.0	14.9	17.0
Master's Degree	4.2	16.4	6.1	18.0	11.9	32.4	13.2	5.5	4.1	3.0	4.3
Professional Degree	0.7	4.2	2.8	3.8	3.4	6.6	4.8	2.6	0.9	0.7	0.6
Doctorate Degree	0.7	3.9	1.1	7.4	3.0	4.4	4.6	1.6	0.5	0.3	0.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: 2016-2020 American Community Survey, Weighted Samples

Among the more numerous and more established Asian American groups whose ancestors have been in the United States for over 100 years (Filipinos, Chinese, Japanese, Asian Indians and Koreans), the proportion with bachelor's degree or higher ranges from 49.9 percent among Filipino Americans to 75.8 percent among Asian Indians. Japanese Americans, Chinese Americans, and Korean Americans have similar BA or higher degree attainment at 52.4, 56.2, and 58.3 percent, respectively. Each of these figures is clearly higher than the U.S. postsecondary education attainment of 32.8 percent, higher than that of Whites (34.4 percent), and much higher than those of Blacks (22.3 percent), American Indians (15.7 percent), and Hispanics (17.3 percent).

However, the educational attainment of Southeast Asian Americans is quite dissimilar from those of larger and more established Asian American groups. About 31.2 percent of Vietnamese Americans 25 and older had obtained a bachelor's degree or higher. This is almost

on par with the U.S. population's BA or higher education figure (32.8 percent). In comparison, only 20.5 percent of Cambodian Americans and 18.9 percent of Laotian Americans 25 and older had obtained a bachelor's degree or higher. Hmong Americans fare a little bit better than Cambodian and Laotian Americans: 22.5 percent of Hmong Americans 25 years and older had obtained a bachelor's degree or higher. More specifically, 17 percent of Hmong Americans had obtained a bachelor's degree, 4.3 percent had obtained a master's degree, 0.6 percent had obtained a professional degree, and 0.6 percent had obtained a doctorate degree.

If, instead of focusing on only bachelor's degree and higher, we focus on all postsecondary education degrees (i.e., associate's degree and higher), a slightly different picture of Asian American educational attainment emerges—albeit, one that does not alter the educational standing of Southeast Asian Americans relative to more established Asian American groups. Overall, 61.8 percent of Asian Americans 25 years and older had obtained a postsecondary education degree. This is about 20 percentage points greater than the U.S. postsecondary degree attainment of 42 percent (see table 1). Each of the groups listed in table 2 had the following postsecondary degree attainment (in order from highest to lowest): Asian Indians (79.3 percent), Koreans (64.2 percent), Japanese (63.2 percent), Chinese (61.7 percent), Filipinos (59.7 percent), Vietnamese (39.1 percent), Hmong (33.3 percent), Cambodians (28.3 percent), Native Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders (27.5 percent), and Laotians (27.0 percent). Interestingly, 10.8 percent of Hmong Americans 25 years and older had obtained an associate's degree. This proportion is much higher than those of the other Southeast Asian American groups and that of Asian Americans as a whole. One possible explanation for this is that Hmong American college students may be more likely than other Asian American groups to have attended 2-year community colleges or technical schools than 4-year universities.

Unfortunately, we are unable to discern this using the ACS data as the survey did not collect information on whether a person has attended a 2-year or 4-year college/university.

Although useful, these aggregate figures hide some important differences within-group differences. Next, we explore differences within Hmong American society with respect to educational attainment.

### **Within-Group Differences in Hmong Americans' Educational Attainment**

#### *Demographics of Hmong Americans*

By the 2016-2020 period, at least 321,818 Hmong Americans were living in the United States. Of this, over a third (36.7 percent) are children. About 3.5 percent are 65 years and older. A clear majority (64.9 percent) of Hmong older adults are female (see table 3). Two-thirds of all Hmong Americans are U.S. born. About half of Hmong American adults are foreign-born. About 10.1 percent of Hmong American adults are persons with a disability. Next, we turn attention to Hmong Americans' educational attainment.

**Table 3. Select Demographics of Hmong Americans, 2016-2020**

	<b>Population</b>	<b>Percent Female</b>	<b>Percent Foreign-Born</b>	<b>Percent with a Disability</b>
All Ages	321,818	49.2	33.5	7.6
Less than 18 years	118,125	49.9	4.5	2.9
18 and older	209,005	49.1	49.4	10.1
25 and older	166,254	49.0	58.6	11.6
65 and older	11,208	64.9	92.2	54.0

Source: 2016-2020 American Community Survey, Weighted Samples

Table 4 shows the educational attainment of Hmong Americans 25 years and older by sex, nativity, and (dis)ability in the 2016-2020 period. The data show that by the 2016-2020 period, 22.5 percent of Hmong Americans 25 years and older had obtained a bachelor’s degree or higher. This represents an increase of eight percentage points from 2010. Are there differences in Hmong American males’ and females’ educational attainment? Let us find out.

**Table 4. Hmong Americans ages 25 years and older, Educational Attainment, by Sex, Nativity and Ability 2016-2020**

Educational Attainment	Hmong 25 years and older		Male Percent	Female Percent	Foreign-Born Percent	U.S. Born Percent	With a	Without a
	Number	Percent					Disability Percent	Disability Percent
Less than High School Diploma	35,525	21.3	17.6	25.3	32.2	6.1	56.6	16.7
High School Diploma or GED	42,968	25.8	29.6	21.9	24.2	28.2	19.0	26.7
Some College	32,574	19.5	21.4	17.8	15.6	25.3	8.2	21.1
Associate's Degree	17,877	10.8	11.3	10.2	9.7	12.3	5.1	11.5
Bachelor's Degree	28,294	17.0	15.8	18.3	13.2	22.5	8.9	18.1
Master's Degree	7,129	4.3	3.3	5.3	4.1	4.5	1.8	4.6
Professional Degree	935	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.5	0.6	0.4	0.6
Doctorate Degree	952	0.6	0.5	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.1	0.6
Total	166,254	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: 2016-2020 American Community Survey, Weighted Samples

### Sex

Among Hmong American males 25 years and older, 20.2 percent had obtained a bachelor’s degree or higher. For Hmong American females 25 years and older, that figure is 24.8 percent. This results in a difference of nearly five (4.6) percentage points. If we look at master’s, professional, and doctorate degrees individually, we find that Hmong American women also match or, in some cases, such as in terms of doctorate degree, are beginning to exceed Hmong American men. However, Hmong American males and females differ in terms of mean educational attainment.

An independent samples t-test (not shown) shows that Hmong American males 25 years and older and Hmong American females 25 years and older had a statistically different mean

educational attainment, with Hmong American males (16.31) being slightly ahead of Hmong American females (15.07) in terms of mean educational attainment.<sup>5</sup> An educational attainment mean of 16.31 corresponds to having higher than a high school diploma but less than some college. An educational attainment mean of 15.07 corresponds to having higher than 12-grade but less than a high school diploma.

### *Nativity*

Besides differences in terms of sex, I suspected that U.S.-born and foreign-born Hmong may have different educational attainment. The ACS data reveal this to be the case. Among U.S.-born Hmong Americans 25 years and older, 28.2 percent had obtained a bachelor's degree or higher. In comparison, only 18.4 percent of foreign-born Hmong Americans 25 years and older had obtained a bachelor's degree or higher. The difference here is almost ten (9.8 percentage) points.

Moreover, U.S.-born Hmong Americans differ from foreign-born Hmong Americans in terms of mean educational attainment. An independent samples *t*-test (not shown) shows that U.S.-born Hmong Americans 25 years and older (18.33) had a statistically higher mean educational attainment compared to foreign-born Hmong Americans 25 years and older (13.85). An educational attainment mean of 18.33 corresponds to having higher than some college but less than a college degree. An educational attainment mean of 13.85 corresponds to having higher than 10<sup>th</sup> grade but less than 11<sup>th</sup> grade.

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<sup>5</sup> For all independent samples *t*-tests, the data were weighted. The original variable educational attainment (SCHL) with all of its response categories was used along with the sex, nativity, or disability variable. Statistical significance level was defined as *p*-value being less than 0.05.

### *(Dis)Ability*

I was also interested in seeing how well Hmong American persons with and without a disability have fared in terms of educational attainment. As shown in table 4, 11.2 percent of Hmong Americans 25 years and older with a disability had obtained a bachelor's degree or higher. In comparison, 23.9 percent of Hmong Americans without a disability had obtained a bachelor's degree or higher. This results in a difference of about 12.7 percentage points, which is a much larger difference than the difference we saw between Hmong men and women and between foreign-born and U.S.-born Hmong.

Hmong Americans with and without a disability also differ in terms of mean educational attainment. An independent samples t-test (not shown) shows that Hmong Americans 25 years and older without a disability (16.51) had a statistically higher educational attainment mean than Hmong Americans 25 years and older with a disability (9.85). An educational attainment mean of 16.51 corresponds to having higher than a high school diploma but less than some college. An educational attainment mean of 9.85 corresponds to having higher than 6<sup>th</sup> grade but less than 7<sup>th</sup> grade.

### *Differences Across States*

Table 5 shows the educational attainment of the general population and of Hmong Americans in the U.S. as well as within 25 states where there are substantial populations (500 or more persons) of Hmong Americans. The data here enable us to compare Hmong Americans' educational attainment to their own state's educational attainment as well as to that of Hmong Americans in other states. The first two rows in the table show the educational attainment of Hmong Americans 25 years and older compared to the U.S. population 25 years and older and

are bolded to indicate that they are reference rows. The rest of the rows compare each state's general population's educational attainment to that of just Hmong Americans in that state. In each of the columns, the minimum figure(s) is (are) in blue and the maximum figure is in red. The last column (cumulative BA+) shows the sum of the percentages of bachelor's, master's, professional and doctorate degree in each row.

Let us first examine how Hmong Americans have done relative to their state's general population. In California, about 22.8 percent of Hmong Americans 25 years and older had obtained a bachelor's degree or higher. In comparison, 34.6 percent of Californians 25 years and older had obtained a bachelor's degree or higher. This represents a gap (difference between the state's population and Hmong) of 13.8 percentage points. In Minnesota, 23.1 percent of Hmong Americans 25 years and older had obtained a bachelor's degree or higher. In comparison, 36.7 percent of Minnesotans 25 years and older had obtained a bachelor's degree or higher. This represents a gap of 13.6 percentage points. In Wisconsin, 17.7 percent of Hmong Americans 25 years and older had obtained a bachelor's degree or higher. In comparison, 30.6 percent of Wisconsinites had obtained a bachelor's degree or higher. The gap between Wisconsin's population and Hmong in Wisconsin is 12.9 percentage points. The evidence here seems to suggest that the education disparity gap between Hmong and the general population in Wisconsin is less than those of California and Minnesota.



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**Table 5. Educational Attainment of General Population and Hmong American Persons 25 years and older, by Select States with 500 or More Hmong**

	Persons 25 years and older	Less than High School	High School Diploma or GED	Some College	Associate's Degree	Bachelor's Degree	Master's Degree	Professional Degree	Doctorate Degree	Cumulative BA +
<b>United States</b>	<b>222,860,804</b>	<b>11.5</b>	<b>26.9</b>	<b>20.2</b>	<b>8.6</b>	<b>20.1</b>	<b>9.0</b>	<b>2.2</b>	<b>1.5</b>	<b>32.8</b>
<b>U.S. Hmong</b>	<b>166,254</b>	<b>21.3</b>	<b>25.8</b>	<b>19.5</b>	<b>10.8</b>	<b>17.0</b>	<b>4.3</b>	<b>0.6</b>	<b>0.6</b>	<b>22.5</b>
California	26,667,825	16.1	20.6	20.8	7.9	21.6	8.8	2.5	1.7	34.6
CA Hmong	52,577	22.3	24.5	21.1	9.3	17.5	4.2	0.6	0.5	22.8
Minnesota	3,803,364	6.6	24.4	20.8	11.6	24.1	8.9	2.2	1.5	36.7
MN Hmong	46,141	23.3	23.6	18.6	11.5	17.6	4.8	0.4	0.3	23.1
Wisconsin	3,982,884	7.3	30.4	20.6	10.9	20.4	7.3	1.7	1.2	30.6
WI Hmong	28,171	20.4	34.0	18.1	9.8	13.0	3.6	0.4	0.7	17.7
North Carolina	7,097,371	11.5	25.6	21.1	9.9	20.3	8.4	1.8	1.3	31.8
NC Hmong	9,089	15.6	24.7	19.0	16.3	18.3	3.5	1.1	1.5	24.4
Michigan	6,857,146	12.8	25.6	15.4	8.8	20.9	11.9	3.0	1.6	37.4
MI Hmong	5,128	0.0	5.6	47.5	7.1	16.2	16.7	7.1	0.0	40.0
Alaska	483,772	6.8	28.2	26.5	8.7	18.9	7.6	2.0	1.3	29.8
AK Hmong	1,657	46.7	16.1	17.5	8.9	10.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	10.8
Oklahoma	2,612,978	11.6	31.4	23.2	7.8	17.0	6.4	1.5	1.0	25.9
OK Hmong	2,606	19.8	35.6	14.9	11.1	13.9	3.2	0.4	1.2	18.7
Georgia	6,996,349	12.3	27.7	20.0	8.0	19.7	8.8	2.2	1.4	32.1
GA Hmong	2,732	16.6	32.2	24.4	9.7	15.4	1.7	0.0	0.0	17.1
Colorado	3,901,097	7.9	21.3	20.7	8.4	26.0	11.5	2.4	1.7	41.6
CO Hmong	2,834	19.4	22.8	15.8	17.3	19.5	5.2	0.0	0.0	24.7
Oregon	2,944,472	9.1	22.8	24.9	9.0	21.2	9.0	2.3	1.7	34.2
OR Hmong	1,863	6.5	22.0	24.1	13.3	25.7	1.5	4.5	2.5	34.2
Washington	5,201,305	8.4	22.0	23.0	10.1	22.7	10.0	2.2	1.6	36.5
WA Hmong	1,688	19.6	21.3	23.0	13.9	12.4	6.3	2.8	0.7	22.2
Texas	18,450,260	15.9	24.9	21.4	7.3	19.8	7.9	1.7	1.2	30.6
TX Hmong	1,630	13.8	15.3	19.0	22.3	19.9	9.8	0.0	0.0	29.7
Kansas	1,910,287	8.7	26.2	22.7	8.7	21.3	9.2	1.9	1.3	33.7
KS Hmong	1,120	12.2	27.3	23.5	16.4	20.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	20.5
Missouri	4,177,471	9.4	30.7	22.0	8.1	18.3	8.4	1.8	1.2	29.7
MO Hmong	1,097	11.8	15.6	21.7	25.7	25.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	25.3
South Carolina	3,512,261	11.8	29.2	20.5	9.8	18.0	7.9	1.6	1.2	28.7
SC Hmong	777	13.1	24.2	30.4	25.6	5.5	1.2	0.0	0.0	6.7
Florida	15,252,969	11.4	28.6	19.7	10.0	19.2	7.8	2.2	1.2	30.4
FL Hmong	1,022	18.6	13.8	32.9	7.6	26.2	0.9	0.0	0.0	27.1
Arkansas	2,027,526	13.0	34.4	21.9	7.4	14.9	6.2	1.3	0.9	23.3
AR Hmong	776	24.5	15.6	22.4	2.1	15.7	12.8	0.0	7.0	35.5
Tennessee	4,649,339	11.9	32.0	20.7	7.5	17.7	7.2	1.7	1.3	27.9
TN Hmong	506	25.5	24.9	12.8	8.3	15.8	5.7	6.9	0.0	28.4
Massachusetts	4,817,149	8.9	23.7	15.2	7.7	24.5	14.1	3.0	2.9	44.5
MA Hmong	489	10.2	25.6	22.1	1.4	40.7	0.0	0.0	0.0	40.7
Rhode Island	741,228	11.1	28.0	18.0	8.1	20.8	9.9	2.3	1.8	34.8
RI Hmong	568	29.9	20.6	4.6	3.5	32.6	8.8	0.0	0.0	41.4
Pennsylvania	8,990,903	9.0	34.4	15.8	8.5	19.4	9.2	2.1	1.6	32.3
PA Hmong	302	23.2	10.9	22.8	0.0	25.5	17.5	0.0	0.0	43.0
Indiana	4,467,875	10.8	33.4	20.0	8.9	17.2	7.3	1.5	1.1	27.1
IN Hmong	427	65.6	26.0	4.2	4.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Illinois	8,688,259	10.3	25.8	20.3	8.1	21.6	10.1	2.4	1.4	35.5
IL Hmong	521	11.9	15.2	2.7	3.5	45.5	17.7	0.0	3.6	66.8
Nevada	2,093,572	13.1	28.2	24.9	8.4	16.7	6.1	1.7	1.0	25.5
NV Hmong	428	15.0	30.4	36.0	0.0	6.8	7.0	0.0	4.9	18.7
Iowa	2,104,565	7.6	30.7	20.4	12.0	19.7	6.7	1.7	1.2	29.3
IA Hmong	269	24.2	14.9	0.0	5.6	26.4	15.2	13.8	0.0	55.4

Source: 2016-2020 American Community Survey, Weighted Samples

However, we lack a clearer picture of how well Hmong Americans in different states are doing relative to each other and to the general populations in other states. It would be useful to see where Hmong Americans “rank” in the larger scheme of things. To get at this, I re-sorted the data in table 5, creating table 6. Table 6 orders the rows (from highest to lowest) according to the sum of bachelor’s degree and higher. This gives us a better picture of where Hmong Americans in each state stand relative to each other and to the broader American public in other states.

In terms of bachelors and higher degree attainment (see the column, “Cumulative BA+”) Hmong Americans as a whole appear to have fared worse than the general population of every single state listed in table 6, including Arkansas, which is the lowest performing state listed here. Surprisingly, Hmong Americans in Minnesota, California, and Wisconsin all perform worse than the Arkansas general population in terms of bachelors and higher degree attainment. Indeed, Hmong in several other states also do worse than the general population of Arkansas: Washington, Kansas, Nevada, Oklahoma, Georgia, Alaska, South Carolina, and Indiana.

However, there are Hmong Americans in certain states—Illinois, Iowa, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Michigan, Arkansas, and Oregon—who have done better than the U.S. general population in terms of bachelors and higher degree attainment. Although Hmong Americans in Texas, Tennessee, Florida, Missouri, Colorado, and North Carolina all do worse than the U.S. general public, they do better than the general population of Arkansas in terms of BA+ attainment.

**Postsecondary Education Attainment of Hmong Americans: Evidence from the 2016-2020 American Community Survey**  
 by Yang Sao Xiong, Hmong Studies Journal, Volume 25(2023): 1-31.

**Table 6. Educational Attainment of General Population and Hmong American Persons 25 years and older, by Select States with 500 or More Hmong, with Emphasis on Bachelors and Higher Degrees**

	Persons 25 years and older	Less than High School	High School Diploma or GED	Some College	Associate's Degree	Bachelor's Degree	Master's Degree	Professional Degree	Doctorate Degree	Cumulative BA +
IL Hmong	521	11.9	15.2	2.7	3.5	45.5	17.7	0.0	3.6	66.8
IA Hmong	269	24.2	14.9	0.0	5.6	26.4	15.2	13.8	0.0	55.4
Massachusetts	4,817,149	8.9	23.7	15.2	7.7	24.5	14.1	3.0	2.9	44.5
PA Hmong	302	23.2	10.9	22.8	0.0	25.5	17.5	0.0	0.0	43.0
Colorado	3,901,097	7.9	21.3	20.7	8.4	26.0	11.5	2.4	1.7	41.6
RI Hmong	568	29.9	20.6	4.6	3.5	32.6	8.8	0.0	0.0	41.4
MA Hmong	489	10.2	25.6	22.1	1.4	40.7	0.0	0.0	0.0	40.7
MI Hmong	5,128	0.0	5.6	47.5	7.1	16.2	16.7	7.1	0.0	40.0
Michigan	6,857,146	12.8	25.6	15.4	8.8	20.9	11.9	3.0	1.6	37.4
Minnesota	3,803,364	6.6	24.4	20.8	11.6	24.1	8.9	2.2	1.5	36.7
Washington	5,201,305	8.4	22.0	23.0	10.1	22.7	10.0	2.2	1.6	36.5
AR Hmong	776	24.5	15.6	22.4	2.1	15.7	12.8	0.0	7.0	35.5
Illinois	8,688,259	10.3	25.8	20.3	8.1	21.6	10.1	2.4	1.4	35.5
Rhode Island	741,228	11.1	28.0	18.0	8.1	20.8	9.9	2.3	1.8	34.8
California	26,667,825	16.1	20.6	20.8	7.9	21.6	8.8	2.5	1.7	34.6
Oregon	2,944,472	9.1	22.8	24.9	9.0	21.2	9.0	2.3	1.7	34.2
OR Hmong	1,863	6.5	22.0	24.1	13.3	25.7	1.5	4.5	2.5	34.2
Kansas	1,910,287	8.7	26.2	22.7	8.7	21.3	9.2	1.9	1.3	33.7
<b>United States</b>	<b>222,860,804</b>	<b>11.5</b>	<b>26.9</b>	<b>20.2</b>	<b>8.6</b>	<b>20.1</b>	<b>9.0</b>	<b>2.2</b>	<b>1.5</b>	<b>32.8</b>
Pennsylvania	8,990,903	9.0	34.4	15.8	8.5	19.4	9.2	2.1	1.6	32.3
Georgia	6,996,349	12.3	27.7	20.0	8.0	19.7	8.8	2.2	1.4	32.1
North Carolina	7,097,371	11.5	25.6	21.1	9.9	20.3	8.4	1.8	1.3	31.8
Texas	18,450,260	15.9	24.9	21.4	7.3	19.8	7.9	1.7	1.2	30.6
Wisconsin	3,982,884	7.3	30.4	20.6	10.9	20.4	7.3	1.7	1.2	30.6
Florida	15,252,969	11.4	28.6	19.7	10.0	19.2	7.8	2.2	1.2	30.4
Alaska	483,772	6.8	28.2	26.5	8.7	18.9	7.6	2.0	1.3	29.8
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TX Hmong	1,630	13.8	15.3	19.0	22.3	19.9	9.8	0.0	0.0	29.7
Iowa	2,104,565	7.6	30.7	20.4	12.0	19.7	6.7	1.7	1.2	29.3
South Carolina	3,512,261	11.8	29.2	20.5	9.8	18.0	7.9	1.6	1.2	28.7
TN Hmong	506	25.5	24.9	12.8	8.3	15.8	5.7	6.9	0.0	28.4
Tennessee	4,649,339	11.9	32.0	20.7	7.5	17.7	7.2	1.7	1.3	27.9
Indiana	4,467,875	10.8	33.4	20.0	8.9	17.2	7.3	1.5	1.1	27.1
FL Hmong	1,022	18.6	13.8	32.9	7.6	26.2	0.9	0.0	0.0	27.1
Oklahoma	2,612,978	11.6	31.4	23.2	7.8	17.0	6.4	1.5	1.0	25.9
Nevada	2,093,572	13.1	28.2	24.9	8.4	16.7	6.1	1.7	1.0	25.5
MO Hmong	1,097	11.8	15.6	21.7	25.7	25.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	25.3
CO Hmong	2,834	19.4	22.8	15.8	17.3	19.5	5.2	0.0	0.0	24.7
NC Hmong	9,089	15.6	24.7	19.0	16.3	18.3	3.5	1.1	1.5	24.4
Arkansas	2,027,526	13.0	34.4	21.9	7.4	14.9	6.2	1.3	0.9	23.3
MN Hmong	46,141	23.3	23.6	18.6	11.5	17.6	4.8	0.4	0.3	23.1
CA Hmong	52,577	22.3	24.5	21.1	9.3	17.5	4.2	0.6	0.5	22.8
<b>U.S. Hmong</b>	<b>166,254</b>	<b>21.3</b>	<b>25.8</b>	<b>19.5</b>	<b>10.8</b>	<b>17.0</b>	<b>4.3</b>	<b>0.6</b>	<b>0.6</b>	<b>22.5</b>
WA Hmong	1,688	19.6	21.3	23.0	13.9	12.4	6.3	2.8	0.7	22.2
KS Hmong	1,120	12.2	27.3	23.5	16.4	20.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	20.5
NV Hmong	428	15.0	30.4	36.0	0.0	6.8	7.0	0.0	4.9	18.7
OK Hmong	2,606	19.8	35.6	14.9	11.1	13.9	3.2	0.4	1.2	18.7
WI Hmong	28,171	20.4	34.0	18.1	9.8	13.0	3.6	0.4	0.7	17.7
GA Hmong	2,732	16.6	32.2	24.4	9.7	15.4	1.7	0.0	0.0	17.1
AK Hmong	1,657	46.7	16.1	17.5	8.9	10.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	10.8
SC Hmong	777	13.1	24.2	30.4	25.6	5.5	1.2	0.0	0.0	6.7
IN Hmong	427	65.6	26.0	4.2	4.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0

Source: 2016-2020 American Community Survey, Weighted Samples

What is also surprising is the huge gap between Hmong of Illinois (66.8 percent) and Iowa (55.4 percent) on the one hand, and Hmong of Alaska (10.8 percent), South Carolina (6.7 percent), and Indiana (zero percent) on the other. Given that Indiana borders Illinois, which borders Iowa, it is quite surprising that few, if any, Hmong Americans in Indiana have obtained degrees beyond the associate's degree.

## **Discussion**

Data from the ACS show that Hmong Americans have made substantial progress in terms of educational attainment over the past 30 years. The evidence reveals several important within-group differences. Specifically, a greater percentage of Hmong American females 25 years and older have obtained bachelor's degree or higher compared to their male counterparts. A greater percentage of foreign-born Hmong Americans have obtained a bachelor's degree or higher than their U.S.-born counterparts. A greater percentage of Hmong Americans without a disability have obtained bachelor's degree or higher compared to Hmong Americans with a disability. Finally, the evidence reveals that Hmong Americans' educational attainment varies by state or state contexts, and that Hmong Americans in several states, including the three states with the most number of Hmong, still lag behind the general American public nationally and across most states. Next, I discuss the trends in Hmong Americans' education before discussing within-group differences and their implications.

Whereas in 1990, only 4.9 percent of Hmong Americans had obtained a bachelor's degree or higher, by 2020, 22.5 percent of Hmong Americans 25 years and older had obtained a bachelor's degree or higher. Put differently, Hmong Americans have surpassed the U.S. general population's bachelors and higher degree attainment of 1990, which was 20.3 percent, and are only 2 percentage points away from catching up with the 2000 national bachelors and higher

degree attainment figure of 24.4 percent (Scaniello 2006).<sup>6</sup> This rate of change in Hmong Americans' bachelor's or higher attainment is in line with what we know historically about Asian and Pacific Islander Americans' educational attainment during the past half century. For instance, between 1940 and 1970, Asian and Pacific Islanders' attainment of bachelor's or higher degrees increased from 4.0 percent to 20.4 percent. Hmong Americans' educational attainment is remarkable when compared to that of Whites. In 1940, only 4.9 percent of Whites 25 years and older had obtained a bachelor's degree or higher. It was not until 1990 that 21.5 percent of Whites 25 years and older obtained a bachelor's degree or higher.<sup>7</sup> With respect to bachelors or higher degree attainment, it appears that Hmong Americans have been able to accomplish in 30 years (i.e., from 1990 to 2020) what has taken Whites 50 years to do (from 1940 to 1990).

However, the 1990s and 2000s are a different era from the 1940s and 50s. Postsecondary education attainment for the U.S. general population has increased at a greater rate (i.e., by greater amounts per decade) after the 1960s than prior to the 1960s. This probably reflects the greater educational and other kinds of opportunities provided to both majority Whites and non-White minorities following the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Most Hmong political refugees arrived in the U.S. in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s. They or at least some among them benefited from the government and institutional policies, practices and opportunities already in place by then. Of course, Hmong political refugees and, later, their children also encountered the entrenched, persistent racial, class and gender inequalities in place by the 1970s. Considering the effects that different historical periods can have on people's educational and other kinds of

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<sup>6</sup> See *A Half Century of Learning: Historical Statistics on Educational Attainment in the United States, 1940 to 2000*. Table 6a: Percent of the Total Population 25 Years and Over with a Bachelor's Degree or Higher by Sex, for the United States, Regions, and States: 1940 to 2000.

<sup>7</sup> By 2000, 26.1 percent of Whites had obtained a bachelor's degree or higher.

opportunities, an alternative approach is to compare Hmong Americans to another category or group within the same historical period (e.g., after the 1970s).

Prior to the 1960s, Blacks (and other non-White minorities) in the U.S. had very little access to postsecondary education (Baker and Velez 1996). In 1970, only 4.4 percent of Blacks 25 years and older had obtained a bachelor's degree or higher. By 2020, 22.3 percent of Blacks 25 years and older had obtained a bachelor's degree or higher. Recall that between 1990 and 2020, BA+ attainment among Hmong Americans 25 years and older increased from 4.9 to 22.5 percent. It would appear, then, that Hmong Americans have been able to achieve in a matter of 30 years what Blacks have been able to do in 50 years. That Hmong Americans have been able to attain this kind of educational progress in a matter of a generation (about 30 years) is quite remarkable considering the incredibly difficult social, cultural, political, economic and physical challenges they have had to endure as displaced refugees and new immigrants in the U.S.

What could explain Hmong Americans' remarkable educational attainment, especially at the bachelor's level and higher, in this relatively short period of time? The answer to this question is a long and complex one that cannot be fully elaborated on here. I provide only an outline of the answer. As we know, Hmong have had to endure incredibly difficult social, cultural, political, economic, mental and physical challenges as displaced political refugees and as new immigrants in the U.S. The first major group of Hmong political refugees arrived in the U.S. in 1976 and later groups of Hmong, who were much more diverse in terms of socioeconomic backgrounds arrived throughout the 1980s and 90s. By the 1970s, certain government policies and institutional practices were already in place, some of which benefited minority students directly or indirectly. For instance, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Higher Education Act of 1965 were already in place. Of course, in the 1970s, racial, class and

gender inequalities were also present and pervasive and continued to have negative repercussions for minorities, including Hmong. In the 1980s, even as government cutbacks in student financial aid were happening, the costs of higher education were rising (Baker and Velez 1996), making access to higher education anything but easy. At the same time, minority students were competing with Whites, and with each other, to get into colleges and universities whose admission policies and practices were ever more stringent and selective. The commodification of higher education became increasingly more pervasive. The gaps between rich and poor Americans continued to widen.

As ample research has documented, Hmong former refugees arrived in the U.S. with very little financial capital (Downing and Olney 1982; Scott 1982; Reder 1983; Finck and Reder 1984; Fass 1986; Mortland and Ledgerwood 1987; Rumbaut 1989; Donnelly 1997; Xiong 2013; Vang 2016; Xiong 2016; Xiong 2022). With their pre-migration skills largely devalued in their new host society and lacking the education credentials that high-paying jobs deem necessary, able-bodied Hmong former refugees took on whatever labor or work they could find to provide for their families, most of whom lived in dilapidated houses in U.S. inner-cities. Joblessness and/or underemployment created conditions of poverty or extreme poverty for Hmong. Poverty, in turn, compelled Hmong families to rely on government public assistance for their basic survival (Xiong 2013). Thankfully, in the U.S., there are plenty of public K-12 schools, colleges and universities in the states and cities where Hmong have resettled. However, the availability of colleges and universities has never by itself guaranteed that Hmong students or any other student will have access to them. Hmong students in the 1980s and 1990s, most of whom were foreign-born, had to carve out their own zigzagged paths to college. If they were lucky, they had older siblings or relatives who they could go to for questions about how to apply for college.

Sometimes they received help or guidance from public-school teachers—but rarely counselors—and/or they received tangible support from college preparatory programs such as Upward Bound, which is one of several federally funded TRIO programs. If they were not lucky, they did not have any sibling or relatives as role models and they did not receive any help from teachers or external programs. They had to figure out how to apply to college on their own.

While it is true that most Hmong parents (and grandparents, etc.) actively encouraged their children (grandchildren) to go to college, these positive reinforcements seldom, if ever, by themselves created access to college for their children. Financial aid packages, including subsidized education loans, made it possible for Hmong students from low-income backgrounds to access higher education. Indeed, financial aid made it possible for Hmong students who would otherwise have to work to support themselves and their parents/families at home, to continue their studies year after year until they graduated from college. The companionship and support of other likeminded Hmong or (Southeast) Asian American college students as well as the support and guidance of college faculty and staff, especially faculty and staff of color, have often been integral to Hmong American college students' academic success, graduation from college, and opportunity to pursue degrees beyond the BA. The successful graduation of one child in a family or household greatly increased the odds that another child will attend and graduate from college. As more Hmong students graduate from 2- and 4-year institutions and as more of them pursue degrees beyond the bachelor's degree, they become the ad-hoc counselors and mentors for their younger siblings and other Hmong young people. With individual hard work and perseverance, parental support, institutional or external support and guidance, financial aid and a great deal of luck, these young people find ways to attend colleges and universities, including highly selective private colleges. The net effect of all of this individual and collective



effort is that Hmong American communities have been able to produce a steady substantial number of college graduates each year.

Although Hmong Americans' upward education attainment trend is promising, it is important that we do not lose sight of the fact that Hmong Americans in many states, including California, Minnesota, and Wisconsin, still lag behind the broader American population in most states, including the state of Arkansas, which is among the lowest performing states in terms of educational attainment. Seen from this perspective, Hmong Americans still have a long way to go before they reach educational parity with the American population. Let us turn now to discuss some of the within-group differences we have seen.

Since 2010, Hmong American women have surpassed Hmong American men in terms of bachelors or higher degree attainment. In Xiong's (2012:11) study of Hmong Americans' educational attainment, he found that "whereas in 1990 only three percent of Hmong females (compared to seven percent of men) had completed a bachelor's degree or higher, by 2010, 15.1 percent of them had done so (compared to 14 percent of men)." Considering that we also find gender differences in educational attainment in the general U.S. population and in many other ethnic groups and racial categories, the difference between Hmong American women and men in this area is not too surprising. Unfortunately, the ACS does not contain information about individuals' length of college attendance or time of their graduation—data that we need to calculate college graduation rates. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Hmong American men may have lower college graduation rates compared to Hmong American women. One study found that among 326 Hmong graduates from a public California State University during a two-year period (2012-2014), the total number of Hmong female graduates was nearly double the number of Hmong male graduates. The data in that study, however, do not enable us to calculate

graduation rates of Hmong college students because of the lack of information on when individual students started attending college and when they graduated from college (Thao 2015).<sup>8</sup>

This study's finding that U.S.-born Hmong Americans have done significantly better than foreign-born Hmong in terms of postsecondary education attainment is also not surprising. If anything, it is an encouraging finding about the Hmong American second generation. As we discussed above, foreign-born Hmong, many of whom are children of Hmong refugees, faced many odds against them going to college in the 1970s, 80s and 90s, and were often the first ones in their family to go to college. In contrast, some second-generation Hmong Americans have had certain advantages, including the opportunity to learn English from a very young age, having exposure to the social norms of American schools from earlier on, having older college-educated siblings as role models, receiving guidance from their bilingual parents on homework, test taking skills, the college application process, etc. We should expect the second generation to obtain higher education degrees at a rate on par with that of the general U.S. public. However, whether this will be realized is uncertain. There are many kinds of social inequalities that continue to deprive Hmong Americans and other non-White racial categories of equal educational opportunities.

As far as I can tell, my study here represents the first to examine the difference between Hmong Americans with a disability and those without a disability in terms of educational attainment using nationally representative data. We saw that the difference between Hmong with a disability and those without a disability in terms of bachelor's degree or higher attainment was nearly 13 percentage points. This is more than twice the difference we saw between Hmong men

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<sup>8</sup> <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/48496803.pdf>

and women (i.e., a 4.6 percentage difference) in in terms of bachelors degree or higher attainment. Compared to the national difference of about 18 percentage points,<sup>9</sup> Hmong's difference is less severe but still quite concerning. This is an urgent issue that will require careful intervention in order to reduce the gap between Hmong Americans with and without disabilities. Future research should examine the kinds of interventions, if any, that have been used to help Hmong Americans with disabilities, especially to increase their access to and graduation from colleges.

Speaking of gaps in educational attainment, the findings here suggest that place and context may play an even larger role than sex, nativity, or (dis)ability status. As we have seen, the Hmong in certain states, such as Illinois, have achieved bachelors or higher degrees at a level as great as six times more than that of Hmong in other states, such as Indiana. Contexts do matter. Contexts, especially in the form of state policies, shape the social and economic opportunities that people have. They also shape the kinds of resources, including schools, that are available to people. Contexts also condition people's access to resources and schools, which, in turn, affect their chances of graduating, finding work, buying homes, building families, etc. The truth is that U.S. states can and do differ from each other in various important ways, including in government representation and policies, social demographics, levels of resources, types of schools, neighborhoods, etc. Future research should take account of context by paying attention to differences in different contexts' histories, social demographic composition, social and economic resources and opportunities, etc. Given that many people do not have the means to simply move or migrate at will and given that marginalized racial minorities in our society

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<sup>9</sup> My calculation using 2016-2020 ACS weighted data shows that 17.6 percent of U.S. Americans 25 years and older with a disability had obtained a bachelor's degree or higher compared to 35.9 percent of U.S. Americans 25 years and older without a disability who had done so. The difference here is 18.3 percent.

cannot simply choose where to live, it is critical that researchers pay more attention to how context conditions and shapes social, political, economic and educational opportunities.

## **Conclusion**

The evidence from the 2016-2020 American Community Survey shows that 22.5 percent of Hmong Americans 25 years and older had obtained a bachelor's degree or higher. This represents a very substantial increase from the 1990, 2000, and 2010 figures of 4.9 percent, 7.4 percent, and 14.5 percent, respectively. If we continue to see the trend that we have seen over the last 30 years, it is possible that Hmong Americans will be able to catch up to the national average at some point in the future—although it is impossible to know when this might occur. However, there are many odds against Hmong Americans students who are planning to enter into and graduate from 2-year colleges and 4-year colleges and universities. These odds include the problem of widening income inequality in the United States, which affects, among other things, parents' ability to support their school age children (Flores 2017). But there are also the persistent problems of institutional racism within K-12 and across higher education institutions, which create different tracks for different students, discouraging marginalized students from aspiring to go to college and preventing those who aspire to go to college from being admitted into the colleges/universities of their choice. My own research has highlighted the negative impact of past and current education policies and practices on English learners, especially the ways in which home language surveying, mandatory English language proficiency testing, and long-term academic tracking reduces or eliminates English learners' access to college preparatory curriculums and courses, which comprise some of the minimal requirements for entry into public 4-year colleges and universities.

Moreover, the evidence here suggests that there are differences between Hmong men and women, U.S.-born Hmong and foreign-born Hmong, and Hmong with and without a disability in terms of educational attainment. The size of the difference also varies depending on whether we are looking at sex, nativity, or disability status, with the latter variable resulting in the largest difference. In other words, Hmong with a disability are much more different (much more disadvantaged) from Hmong without a disability than Hmong men are different from Hmong women in terms of bachelor's degree and higher attainment. Whereas past research has stopped at gender differences, future research would do well to recognize that there are other axes of identity that can shape educational attainment, and to take multiple axes of identity into account. In doing so, we can gain a more nuanced picture of within-group differences. More importantly, we can work toward possible interventions to help severely disadvantaged segments of the population who have often been neglected or ignored but who equally deserve resources and opportunities.

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