

“College-*Staying-While-Pell*”: A Critical Race-Class Analysis of Poor and Working Class Mong Undergraduates and Federal Pell Grants

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Abstract

While Title IV of the Higher Education Act of 1965 (HEA) made possible the *promise* of public higher education for all, this study complicates the very discourse of “college attainment for all” by exploring the *actual human costs of that promise* to public higher education attainment for a racially minoritized and long neglected population of students—poor and working class Mong undergraduates attending four year institutions on Federal Pell Grants. Whereas much of the research on the Mong Diaspora in U.S. higher education contexts has largely explored culturally-based explanatory factors as barriers to or supports for Mong higher education attainment, this investigation employed a *race-class* forward analytic to specifically center Mong Pell recipients’ perspectives of the economic challenges faced in pursuit of higher education attainment. Findings cast in stark relief the challenges poor and working class Mong Pell recipients faced and the recommendations students identified as integral to funding the materialisms of Mong higher educational desires.

Keywords: Mong Diaspora; higher education; critical race-class theory; financial aid; Pell grants

“College-*Staying-While-Pell*”: A Critical-Race-Class Analysis of Poor and Working Class Mong Undergraduates and Federal Pell Grants

Lamenting the mounting fear of student debt threatening to preclude the higher education aspirations of students from poor and lower income families, former President Obama pledged during the 2014 College Opportunity Summit to make higher education attainment a working reality for all students:

...as a nation, we don't promise equal outcomes, but we were founded on the idea everybody should have an equal opportunity to succeed. No matter who you are, what you look like, where you come from, you can make it. That's an essential promise of America. Where you start should not determine where you end up. And so I'm glad that everybody wants to go to college...*But I want to make sure that it actually works for them* [emphasis added].” (<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/12/04/remarks-president-college-opportunity-summit>)

To purchase an “equal opportunity” en route to that “essential promise of America,” college-bound students from poor and lower income families have historically applied for federal financial aid assistance under Title IV of the Higher Education Act of 1965 (P.L. 89–329). And according to the latest available data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2015), some 38.4% of undergraduate students receive federal assistance in the form of Pell grants. In this paper, we critically contextualize *the reach and reality* of that “essential promise” to poor and working class Mong undergraduates attending State University (pseudonym), a California State University (CSU) institution serving sizable numbers of Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) students, and more specifically, home to one of the largest Mong student populations in the nation (Vang, 2018).

Our reasons for this are three-fold. First, **more than 90% of Mong** undergraduate students in the CSU system—the nation’s largest university system—are recipients of Federal Pell Grants (Campaign for College Opportunity, 2015). This figure is likewise replicated in the roughly **89.3% of Mong undergraduates** who require financial aid just to attend our particular research site (Vang, 2018). To be clear, our focus here on Pell recipients (90%) is not a dismissal of the experiences of non-Pell Mong undergraduates (10%), but merely a reflection of our political commitment to first attend to striking disproportionalities *in the direction that most lends itself to a political economic interpretation of the impact of statist interventions such as the Pell on poor and low income Mong students*. And access to this commitment is best provided through the lived experiences of Pell recipients. Second, while Mong continue to view education as the primary ballast for upward mobility (Iannarelli, 2014; Koltyk, 1997; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Vang, 2016; Zha et al., 2005), we pose that Mong cultural-emotional funding of that educational desire must somewhat stand in tension with a higher education attainment rate (15.4% BA degree for adults aged 25 years and older) (U.S. Census Data, 2015) that, albeit trending upward (Lee et al., 2016), still lags behind general population (29.6%) and AAPI (49%) averages (Center for American Progress, 2015) as well as poverty rates that indicate greater precarity for Mong than the general population (U.S. Census Data, 2015) *and* AAPI as a whole (Ramakrishnan & Ahmad, 2014). Third, in light of these social indicators, no doubt impacted by the premigration factors of war, diaspora, statelessness, root shock, and more (see Xiong, 2013a), we are encouraged by the existing body of research illuminating Mong experiences in higher education (Bosher, 1995; DePouw, 2006; Hang, 2015; Huffcut, 2010; Iannarelli, 2014; Lee, 1997; Lee et al., 2016; Lor, 2010; Lo & Lor, 2013; Moua, 2014; Su et al., 2005; Supple et al., 2012; Vang, F., 2015; Vang, L., 2015; Vang, 2016; Vue, 2007; Vue, 2013; Xiong-Lor, 2015; Yang, 2012) while

at the same time struck by the dearth of scholarship—given the sheer numbers of Mong Pell recipients in the nation’s largest university system—that squarely and explicitly investigates Mong higher education attainment *as as much a classed* (political-economic) as it is a *raced* (culturally hegemonic, racially oppressive) educational project/phenomenon.

While cultural political economy as an approach has framed investigations on historically marginalized student populations and communities to author radical social critique positioned at the nexus of race, class, and social policy (Anyon, 1997, 2005; Dumas, 2011; Lipman, 2011), such an analytic has been remarkably absent from an area of research that otherwise could benefit—namely main line research on the Mong Diaspora in higher education (We offer more treatment on this later). For this reason, we intentionally investigate the *materialisms of educational desire and attainment* for poor and working class Mong undergraduates, and thusly (*re*)position the study of Mong higher educational desires and attainment as a *public* project, and of consequence, historically rooted in and complicated by race *and class* considerations.

We argue that doing so imbues Mong educational desires with a project on Mong educational *rights* and importantly (*re*)connects that “desires/rights” project to the *public* discourse and within *public* spaces necessary to ensure, as former President Obama posed, that a statist intervention ostensibly aimed at providing higher education attainment for poor and low income students (within a racially and economically contested social order) “**actually** [emphasis added] works for them” (<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/12/04/remarks-president-college-opportunity-summit>). As such, in *asking that very question*, our qualitative study of Mong undergraduates’ lived experiences with Pell grants represents a cultural and political economic turn in Mong higher education research. Given our

commitment to the public agency of poor and working class Mong undergraduate students in this policy auditing process, we posed the following central questions:

1. How do low income Mong undergraduate students describe their experience utilizing their Federal Pell grants?
2. What other streams of financial support do low income Mong undergraduate students have available while pursuing their degree?
3. What do low income Mong undergraduate students express as necessary measures to improve their current economic condition?

Complicating the Mong Research Gaze: A Note on Research Politics

Hlaa dlej yuav hle khau

Tsiv teb tsaws chaw yuav hle hau.

Cross the river, you'll take off your shoes

Flee from your country, you'll lose your status.

-Mong Proverb

What the Americans on the scene here want, both U.S. government personnel and the international rescue committee people alike, what they want is an expanded program. They say we still owe these refugees a debt, the men who fought for us and their families who suffered, and they believe that America's conscience cannot be clear until these camps are cleared of refugees and these people have a new beginning. Some of them settled in other countries of the world, but most of them in the country whose war it was—the United States.

-Mike Wallace, "Our Secret Army," *60 Minutes* (CBS Television), 1975

Before proceeding, we hold that any *critical* historicizing of social stratification or group positionality within the present U.S. social order always demands an eventual return to cultural political economy. We contend that given a lineage marked by centuries-old conflicts over land and resources as well as Mong's historic resistance to cultural, political, and economic subjugation in their homelands (Lee, 2015; Lee & Tapp, 2010), the turn toward a cultural-

political-economic frame is especially warranted for critically situating the present circumstances of the Mong Diaspora in the U.S, and particularly with respect to higher education attainment. As Xiong (2016) importantly noted, Mong settled in the U.S. not as immigrants but *stateless* political refugees, and of consequence bring “unique pre-migration experiences and contexts of reception” as a result of “their embeddedness in unique broad political contexts” (p. 2).

Indeed, it was following U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam during the mid-1970s that the country witnessed its first wave of Mong political refugees, earlier conscripted by the Central Intelligence Agency to fight and disrupt communist forces in the Laotian theater (Hamilton-Merritt, 1993). That said, it must be noted that Mong did not possess a monolithic political identity, and indeed, as a matter of geopolitics, were pulled into a larger conflict that would find many fighting alongside U.S. forces and others the communist forces (Lee, 2015; Lee & Tapp, 2010). What is certain is that following U.S. withdrawal from the region, Pathet Lao forces unleashed an aggressive military campaign against the Mong (Hamilton-Merritt, 1993; Palazzo, 2010), creating a worldwide diaspora that saw Mong seek transnational refuge in countries such as Thailand, France, Germany, Australia, and of course, the U.S. (Lee & Tapp, 2010). The latest figures place the Mong population in the U.S at roughly 299,191 (U.S. Census, 2016).

With this in mind, it should be *unremarkable*, then, that Mong “integration” into broader U.S. society has so contrasted with that of previous Asian immigrant groups (Xiong, 2013a). What *should be remarkable* and recognized, however, is that Mong have achieved some educational progress at all (Lee et al., 2016) in the face of such constraints. Indeed, a critical turn speculates that in the absence of such constraints, Mong higher education attainment might more *markedly* improve, and so we necessarily externalize Mong “struggle” to contest the actual political architecture that virtually (re)produces it. And as a corollary, we argue here as well that

when largely overlooking the disciplining effects of the U.S. capitalist social order on an already historically vulnerabilized and minoritized group, the prevailing “disparities” discourse in educational achievement, in income, in unemployment rates so often deployed to push Mong educational “needs” relative to other AAPI groups—even and especially to leverage support for compensatory programs—regrettably does so at the expense of Mong, who are further harmed by the enlistment of *uncomplicated* deficit narratives.

That is to say, when main line AAPI scholarship on Mong “needs” promotes “equity” projects (however well-intentioned) by inadvertently replacing the problematic Model Minority trope by underwriting another, what we call the “Diversity-of-Experiences-Among-AAPI” trope, *without explicitly and robustly complicating that “diversity” frame to implicate capitalism, and to articulate exactly how intra- and inter-ethnic class differences/antagonisms within a racial capitalist order (cultural political economy) differentially mediate, and thusly differentially mete out, those very “diversity of experiences” (i.e., different social outcomes across various categories of AAPI)*, such scholarship fails to be of politically instrumental value to the Mong.

Put bluntly, it is not enough to say that Mong need help because Mong need help.

Plainly, our hope is that in this political moment, 40 years post-resettlement in the U.S., mainstreamist AAPI research would offer more than a “Diversity-of-Experiences” frame that disappears race *and* capitalism while trying to explain Mong’s seemingly “permanent need (want)” for compensatory intervention. For that reason, we recruit instead a *transgressive* framework that breaches the strictures of a culturalist-*only* framing that tends to *internalize* Mong social “crises.”

In view of this, we hope that research energies and politics also aspire toward more radical projects fixed on sustained and politically robust contestation with Mong social suffering *within the context of* their (not-so)-new-found cultural political economic borders. Toward that race-class-forward project, ensuing sections briefly review social class, poverty, and educational outcomes; the Federal Pell Grant program; and Mong in higher education research.

Social Class, Poverty, and Educational Outcomes

In a *New York Times* OpEd entitled “Class Matters. Why Won’t We Admit It?,” education economist Helen Ladd and colleague Edward Fiske (2011) provocatively argued the salience of families’ poverty load on students’ educational outcomes:

[L]et’s not pretend that family background does not matter and can be overlooked. Let’s agree that we know a lot about how to address the ways in which poverty undermines student learning. Whether we choose to face up to that reality is ultimately a moral question. (p. A23)

And whether one takes up this charge as a question of morality or political will (and we take the latter given our reading of Mong “education-social mobility” as disciplined by race-class contest politics), what is clear is that poverty constrains educational outcomes at all levels (Abdul-Alim, 2016; Anyon, 2005; Bailey & Dynarski, 2011; Berliner, 2006; Chen & DesJardins, 2010; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Eads, 2014; Engberg & Allen, 2011; Fram et al., 2007; Goldrick-Rab, 2016; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2016; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2017; Iannarelli, 2014; Nam et al., 2015; Palardy, 2008; Reardon, 2011, 2013; Salhberg, 2011; Thomas, 2012).

With respect to social class and higher education outcomes, analyses of seventy years’ worth of longitudinal data point to ever widening gaps in higher education attainment between

children from high income and those from low income families (Bailey & Dynarksi, 2011; Reardon, 2013). Moreover, not only do class-advantaged students outpace their lower income counterparts in terms of higher education attainment, these students as well are afforded greater college options (Bailey & Dynarksi, 2011; Engberg & Allen, 2011; Oldfield, 2012; Pallais & Turner, 2006). And while soaring costs no doubt concern all students, those bearing the strains of concentrated precarity are disproportionately impacted, so much so that even community colleges now are struggling to hold on to a “market share” that finds itself increasingly “priced-out” (Bombardieri, 2018).

Thus, Pell Grants, however imperfect, have been crucial to democratizing higher education attainment for children from poor and low income families (Abdul-Alim, 2016; Flowers, 2011; Goldrick-Rab, 2016; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2016). Indeed, the overwhelming majority of Pell recipients (74%) hail from families with yearly household incomes of \$30,000 or less (NASFAA, 2015). Though conceived as a class-forward intervention, given racialized poverty trends over the past four decades where both Black and Latinx childhood poverty rates have failed to decline at the rate of white childhood poverty (Wilson & Schieder, 2018), it should come as no surprise that Black students and other students of color have come to rely heavily on Pell grants to finance higher education (Flowers, 2011; Kantrowitz, 2011; Nichols & Schak, 2018).

And using available group data from the 2015 Census, Figure 1 below shows higher education attainment (minimum bachelor’s degree) by racial/ethnic group where white attainment relative to other race/ethnicities *appears* to be superseded only by “Asian” attainment. Scholars conducting research on AAPI, however, have long argued against the Census Bureau’s practice of aggregating “Asians” into one homogenous category when making intergroup

comparisons as doing so creates a monolithic narrative that fails to capture wide disparities in both educational attainment and needs across Asian ethnicities (Teranishi et al., 2015). A homogenous narrative, in particular, masks contrasting educational attainment for Southeast Asians such as the Mong, who again, have roughly 15.4% of adults 25 or older with a BA degree (US Census Data, 2015).

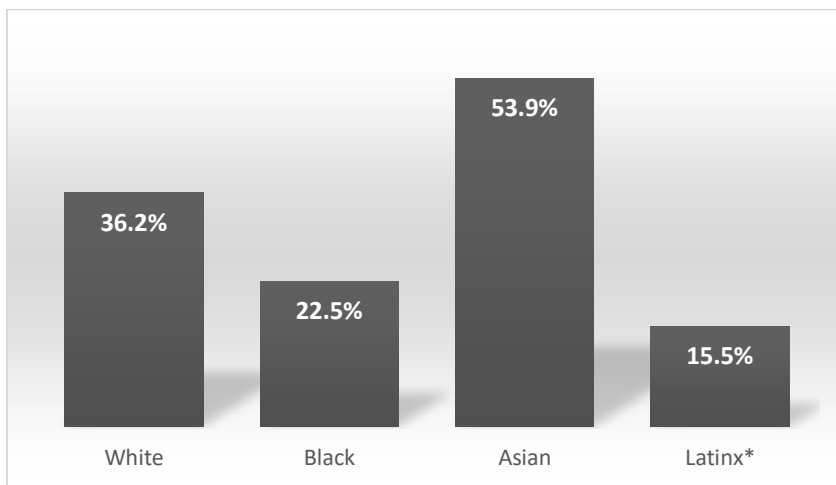


Figure 1. Percentage of adults 25 years or older with at least a bachelor’s degree by race/ethnicity. Note: Latinx used in place of Census label “hispanic.” Chart created with data retrieved from www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2016/demo/p20-578.pdf

In short, given how *racialized* family poverty and wealth have become (Nam et al., 2015; Wilson & Schieder, 2018), one can in turn understand how racialized Pell grants have become as well (Flowers, 2011; Kantrowitz, 2011; Nichols & Schak, 2018), and relatedly, how *raced* and *classed* educational outcomes have become (Ladd & Fiske, 2011; Nam et al., 2015). These contextual and intersecting shifts arguably bear on Mong higher education attainment where nearly 24% of Mong children live in households at or below the poverty line compared to 17.1% for the general population (U.S. Census, 2015) and where roughly 84% of Mong adults (25 years or older) are without four year degrees (U.S. Census, 2015).

Furthermore, in teasing apart the concentrated poverty of Mong families in California, Mong children experience higher concentrations of poverty (42%) than any other racial/ethnic group in the state (Campaign for College Opportunity, 2015). And so it should be hardly surprising that roughly 90% of Mong students within the CSU system and at our research site require Pell Grants to fund higher education attainment. Additionally, though not a focus of this study as our scope centers exclusively on one of the largest Mong-serving sites in the state, the percentage of Mong students in the University of California (UC) system requiring Pell assistance numbers approximately 90% as well. Finally, available institution-specific data from 2012 place the Mong four-year degree completion rate at 1.3% for State University (Vang, 2018) compared to a 2012 CSU system-wide completion rate of 21% (Deruy, 2017).

Given Mong’s “peculiar” social positioning, what is remarkably absent, again, is an explicitly *race-class* forward project that takes up Mong educational “struggle/need” as uniquely embedded within, and thusly uniquely connected to, U.S. cultural political economy. As such, we recognize that raced-classed policy offers are almost always determined by the politics and economic commitments of ruling racial elites. Our commitment to center the stories of Mong Pell recipients using a *race-class* analytic aims to move beyond elites-sponsored “diversity” and “equity” frames to offer critique and political strategizing at the point of building radically broader based policy solutions for Mong, and perhaps in the process as well, provide insights that may be helpful to those wishing to critically reframe policy discussions on marginalized student populations. On that matter, we next turn to federal financial aid for higher education.

Federal Pell Grant Program

A cornerstone of President Lyndon Johnson’s sweeping package of “Great Society” reforms, the Higher Education Act of 1965 (P.L. 89–329) and subsequent reauthorizations (P.L.

113–67) increased federal funding for the nation’s postsecondary institutions, and under Title IV, created federal financial assistance programs with the expressed purpose of “making available the benefits of postsecondary education to eligible students” who qualify (HEA, 1965, §400 (1070) (a)). As a result, federal loans, scholarships, and grant programs were established for college-going students demonstrating financial need, with the Federal Pell Grant as the signature program (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2016). Bearing the name of the late Democratic Senator Claiborne Pell who long advocated for federal legislation that would provide basic educational opportunity grants to college students, the Pell’s focus on broadening access to higher education, coupled with the growing and amplified national discourse pushing for college attainment, has in recent years profoundly resonated with low income students and families. Indeed, Table 1 depicts figures from the U.S. Department of Education’s (2016) Data Point analysis indicating the rate of Pell grant participation to have trended upward for both dependent and independent-status students.

Table 1
Estimates for Percentage of students who received Pell Grants, by dependency status: 1999–2000, 2003–04, 2007–08, and 2011–12

Dependency Status	1999-00	2003-04	2007-08	2011-12
Dependent Students	18.6	21.8	21.8	34.7
Independent Students	25.0	31.7	32.6	47.5

Note: Students under age 24 were considered dependent unless they were married, had dependents, were veterans or on active duty, were orphans or wards of the courts, were homeless or at risk of homelessness (in 2011–12 only), or were determined to be independent by a financial aid officer using professional judgment. All estimates include students enrolled in Title IV eligible postsecondary institutions in the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Puerto Rican institutions were excluded from the sampling frame for NPSAS:12. For comparability, students attending institutions in Puerto Rico were excluded from estimates derived from the earlier NPSAS collections. Standard error tables are available at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2016407>.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1999–2000, 2003–04, 2007–08, and 2011–12 National Postsecondary Student Aid Studies (NPSAS:2000, NPSAS:04, NPSAS:08, and NPSAS:12).

Students can apply for Pell Grants by submitting a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) online. Based on the information provided, an Expected Family Contribution (EFC) is calculated to determine eligibility, with the resulting award amounts for qualifying students determined by a number of contingencies, including students’ EFC, institutional cost of attendance (COA), attendance status (full, part-time), and anticipated portion of enrollment during a specified academic year (HEA, 1965, §401 (1070)(a)(b)).

Finally, Pell disbursements are distributed to students via their school’s financial aid office. As FAFSA are submitted yearly, award amounts vary yearly as well. To provide context for our present study, Table 2 depicts the **estimated** undergraduate cost of attending “State University” full time. Tuition fees are deducted from the qualifying grant amount as determined per student. After tuition fees have been deducted, the remaining grant amount is then disbursed to students to cover indirect costs such as food, transportation, and miscellaneous/personal expenses.

Table 2
Estimated Undergraduate Cost of Attending State University, Full-time Student, Academic Year 2016-2017

	<u>With Parents</u>	<u>On-Campus</u>	<u>Off-Campus</u>
<u>Allowance</u>			
Direct Cost			
Tuition Fees	\$6,900	\$6,900	\$6,900
Food and Housing		\$13,816	
Indirect Costs			
Books and Supplies	\$1,792	\$1,792	\$1,792

Food and Housing	\$4,968		\$12,492
Transportation	\$1,108	\$838	\$1,242
Misc/Personal	\$1,458	\$1,458	\$1,458
Total	\$16,226	\$24,904	\$23,884

Indeed, as poor and working class students’ aversion to debt arguably dampens their college pursuance (Burdman, 2005), the importance of Pell grants, which require no repayment, in widening access to higher education (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2016) is further underscored. But while Pell grant participation has risen over the years (U.S. Department of Education, 2016), so too has the cost of higher education (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2016; Kelchen, 2017; Selingo, 2016), and given that the Pell’s “value relative to in-state tuition and fees” (Alsalam, 2013, p. 5) has declined in recent years, likewise has its purchasing power.

This inverse relationship no doubt impacts students’ college choices as average tuition costs have risen across the board, regardless of institution type. Using the most current data from the College Board, Table 3 shows the average cost of attendance for U.S. universities/schools. Even if a Pell recipient hoping to attend a four-year institution were to qualify for the maximum amount currently established by law at \$5,815 (Federal Student Aid, 2016), average tuition costs alone for a public four-year in-state institution (\$9,650)—with room and boarding yet to be factored—would generally require either supplemental aid or loans, or the scaling down of one’s college options either by choosing a less expensive, less selective “like-institution” or perhaps switching over to a different institution type all together (two-year college).

Table 3
Average Fees at U.S. Universities, 2016-2017

Expense Type	Public 2-year colleges	Public 4-year (in-state)	Public 4-year (out-of-state)	Private 4-year (nonprofit)
Tuition & Other fees	\$3,520 \$8,060	\$9,650 \$10,440	\$24,930 \$10,440	\$33,480 \$11,890
Room & Board	\$11,580	\$20,090	\$35,370	\$45,370
Total (per year)				

Note: Table created using College Board Data from <https://www.topuniversities.com/student-info/student-finance/how-much-does-it-cost-study-us>.

Not surprisingly, Steinberg et al.’s (2009) large scale review of Pell usage among public and private institutions found that “sticker shock” appeared to deter low income students from “choosing” higher-priced, private four-year institutions. Additionally, given the reach as well as limits of the Pell’s buying power, the cost of out-of-state tuition alone often proves prohibitive for students, thus geographically limiting college “options” to nearby institutions (Oldfield, 2012). Nonetheless, financial aid grants like the Pell provide higher educational opportunities for students, and the continued availability of federal grant aid is especially important for college access, retention, and degree attainment for students from poor and working class families (Burdman, 2005; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2016; Nora et al., 2006).

Mong Higher Education Research

While the research on Mong in higher education continues to grow (Bosher, 1997; Hang, 2015; Her & Buely-Meissner, 2006; Huffcutt, 2010; Huster, 2012; Khang, 2010; Lee, 1997; Lee, 2007; Lee, Chang, Yang, Lor, & Thao, 2016; Lo & Lor, 2013; Lor, 2010; Moua, 2014; Peng & Solheim, 2015; Rick, 1988; Su et al., 2005; Supple, McCoy, & Wang, 2010; Tabrizi, 2011; Thao, 2015; Vang, F., 2015; Vang, L., 2015; Vang, C. 2016; Vue, 2007; Vue, 2013; Xiong & Lam, 2013; Xiong & Lee, 2011; Xiong-Lor, 2015; Yang, 2012), with the exception of Lee’s (1997)

early study on Mong college women emphasizing the importance of attending to structural (i.e., economic constraints) as well as cultural explanations for low Mong higher education attainment rates, the major line of inquiry has consisted primarily of cultural explorations (e.g., cultural barriers, culture mismatch, cultural adaptation, cultural hybridity...), and certainly no investigations centering Mong “college-staying” and attainment as a direct function of financial aid. On the contrary, and tellingly so, such a turnkey issue has foregrounded studies on higher education attainment for Black (Kane & Spizman, 1994; St. John et al., 2005) as well as Latinx (Santiago & Cunningham, 2005; Zarate & Pachon, 2006) student populations.

Indeed, the literature on Mong in higher education has generally consisted of three interrelated lines of inquiry: family and cultural barriers to higher education; institutional and other contextual barriers to higher education; and Mong social and cultural wealth models as explanatory factors for higher education success. Having said that, we certainly acknowledge the porous walls marking these contested distinctions as no one investigation is ever singularly unidimensional, and thusly, given space constraints, fully recognize the limits of this overview offered only to familiarize readers with the general research tendencies emerging from this growing corpus of studies.

Family and Cultural Barriers to Higher Education

Representing a branch of the culturalist-only tendency marking Mong higher education research, a number of studies have investigated family and cultural barriers to higher education. For instance, there have been explorations on lack of self-motivation as a barrier to college pursuance (Lee, 2015) and the impact of motivation and parenting styles/support on college pursuance and persistence (Lor, 2010; Moua, 2014). And with special attention to family dynamics and college student stress, research has found that Mong college students’ levels of

distress were related to intergenerational conflict and the lack or absence of coping mechanisms (Su et al., 2005). Regarding cultural norms on gender as a factor to higher education attainment (Khang, 2010; Lo & Lor, 2013), recent research has indicated higher rates of degree attainment for Mong females compared to males, suggesting a shift in the culturally restrictive roles of Mong women (Lo & Lor, 2013). Additionally, research on language mismatch has also been identified as a barrier to higher education (Huster, 2013; Vang, F., 2015). For example, F. Vang’s (2015) investigation found that language barriers created inner turmoil for Mong college students, with study participants expressing resentment toward themselves for seemingly losing their cultural identity and in the process their connections to their parents who neither spoke English nor shared in their educative experiences. Not surprisingly, culturally-based studies on Mong navigating the tensions of identity and self-understanding within higher education are fairly prominent (Bosher, 1997; Hang, 2015; Peng & Solheim, 2015; Rick, 1988; Vang, F., 2015; Vang, L., 2015; Vue, 2013).

Institutional Culture as Barriers to Higher Education

Research on institutional cultures and concomitant practices also represents a related branch of the cultural tendency in Mong higher education research. While Her and Buely-Meissner (2006) pressed for higher education institutions to recognize the cultural needs of Mong college students and to provide Mong academic programs and course offerings to reflect students’ cultural histories and support students’ self-worth, Xiong and Lee (2011) focused on already existing academic support programs and surveyed Mong college students’ awareness and use of these programs to identify areas of need. Of interest to the present study was the finding that Mong students identified the lack of money as the overwhelming barrier to higher education, and indeed a far greater concern for them than any perceived lack of support from academic

assistance programs. Relatedly, Xiong and Lam’s (2013) grounded theory investigation of barriers Mong faced in higher educational contexts found the emergence of financial aid, along with a host of other factors including instructors, advisors, and access to support programs to be of primary import for them.

Mong Social and Cultural Wealth Models in Higher Education

Social capital encompasses the social and other peer networks and processes that provide benefits for an individual in forms other than money (Morrow, 1999; Yang, 2012). On the other hand, cultural capital in the form of familial capital (Yosso, 2005) encompasses home and community wealth (resources) that also benefit an individual. Prior research on various forms of “non-capital” capital in relationship to financing higher education has mostly highlighted the role of institutionalized social capital networks in assisting students with the Pell process. For instance, Tierney and Venegas (2006) found that college-oriented peer counseling programs in low income high schools and the “fictive kinship” that developed from these social networks were useful in helping college-aspiring high school students with information on the college-going process, FAFSA information, and submission deadlines. Similarly, De Freitas (2017) reported that state educational agencies combined with school guidance counselors were instrumental to assisting Pell-eligible students actually complete and submit FAFSA applications. In contrast, Mong-specific investigations employing the lenses of social and cultural wealth models have yet to specifically relate cultural/social capital to the financing of higher education in general and navigating the Pell process in particular.

Marking the latest cultural turn in Mong higher education research, the deployment of Mong cultural and social wealth models to explain higher education outcomes has largely focused on how the social capital that Mong students may lack, and that has a bearing on their

educational success, can be offset with cultural capital drawn from their immediate and extended families. For example, Mong college students who lacked the social networks to easily navigate higher education still found motivation to persevere as a result of the cultural capital they received from their parents in the form of encouragement (Lee, 2007; Supple et al., 2010; Tabrizi, 2011; Vang, F., 2015; Vang, 2016; Vue, 2007; Yang, 2012), and this is consistent with the cultural notion that Mong’s valuing of education combined with students’ sense of filial duty would indeed motivate them to try that much harder to succeed for their parents (Ngo & Lee, 2007; Supple et al., 2010). In other words, Mong students keenly understood that their education builds greater cultural capital for the family unit by elevating its social standing within the Mong community, and thusly again, this pressure to do for family arguably serves as a form of cultural capital that motivates students toward higher education attainment (Vang, 2016).

That said, while culturally-based investigations certainly provide valuable insight on Mong in higher education experiences, we submit that the sustained and disproportionate focus over the years on cultural explanations for Mong educational attainment, whether through the discourses of cultural mismatch or cultural wealth, *leaves understudied the very material barriers so controlling for Mong educational desire and attainment*. Continuing on this line, our research position holds that any instructive discussion of Mong social outcomes in the U.S., inclusive of the present study on Mong higher education attainment, should be complicated by, and thusly interpreted within, the context of a central organizing cultural-political-economic apparatus rooted in systems of *racial and class hierarchies*.

In that regard, Mong’s social condition in the U.S. (with particular regard to higher education attainment) must be understood in relative terms, especially when, per U.S. Census (2015) estimates, family per capita income places 20.6% of all Mong families in poverty

compared to 10.6% of families in the general population, and even moreso when that poverty index *actually rises to 24% for Mong households with children under 18 who, barring seismic shifts in wealth (re)distribution, will eventually qualify for federal financial assistance under Title IV*. For this reason alone, we have a responsibility as public researchers to breach the political strictures of Mong higher education research by squarely investigating low income Mong undergraduates’ experiences with “college-*staying-while-Pell*” using a Critical Race-Class analytic that specifically attends to entwined capitalist and racist modes of oppression (Dumas, 2013; Leonardo, 2012).

Framework and Method

Drawing from the formative scholarship of critical race theorists in legal studies (Bell, 1992, 2004; Delgado et al., 2012; Harris, 1995) as well as later foundational work applying a critical race analytic to education (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lynn, 1999; Stovall, 2006; Solorzano, 1998), both Dumas (2013) and Leonardo (2012) arguably represent, for us, the promise of radical left theorizing in education at the intersection that (seemingly) must never be—race and class (or closer to the bone—*white supremacy and capitalism*). Cleaving to the most radical tendencies in the CRT tradition in education, Dumas and Leonardo *reclaim* this tension and deliberately interpolate (as oppose to subordinate or sever) both CRT and Marxism as entwined analytics to explain how the systems of white supremacy and capitalism co-regulate and co-produce race-class oppression in education.

From *our* reading of these offers, we glean three central propositions that resonate with our current project. First, that the animating strand for a *critical* theory of race must be “critical not only about race, but about class as well” (Dumas, 2013, p. 122). Second, such a strand of CRT commits politically to “performing a race and class synthesis whose goal is to privilege

neither framework, and, instead, offers an intersectional, integrated...*raceclass* [italics in original] perspective” (Leonardo, 2012, p. 438) in order to, as Dumas (2013) contends, retire the contest discourse of race versus class for a radically transformative *critical* race theory “that speaks in radical ways about class in policy discussions of what ‘ain’t right’ in the lives of people of color...” (p.114). Third, that a *critical* race-class analytic provide entrée to sophisticated intra-racial class analyses that capture the competing class interests “of middle-class people of color [or middle-class aspiring people of color] vis-a-vis poor and working-class people of color” (Dumas, 2013, p. 125). We especially argue the salience of this point within the context of our study as it is often middle class AAPI scholars who frame, study, and broker policy narratives for the Mong that, though well intentioned, are arguably circumscribed by a *race-class* lens incongruent to that of their research subjects.

Also, while we utilize the term *Critical* Race-Class (CRC) theory in this study, the decision to do so was wholly for clarity’s sake, and by no means stakes restrictive claims about nomenclature or the rights to “naming.” Far from provocation, our choice ultimately reflects our deference to the interventionist scholarship of Dumas (2013), who pushes for the emergence of a CRT committed to *critical* race-class theorizing, and Leonardo (2012), who explicitly suggests that CRT and Marxism “forge a Critical Raceclass Theory of Education” (Leonardo, 2012, p. 427).

With these considerations in mind, and in light of what has been identified as Mong students’ continuing educational struggle as an ethnic/racial minority (Campaign for College Opportunity, 2015; Lee, 2005; Ramakrishnan & Ahmad, 2014; Vang, 2016; Xiong, 2013b) and their social economic positioning within the broader U.S. social strata (U.S. Census Data, 2016; Vang, 2012; Xiong, 2013a) as well as the research connecting higher education opportunities and

outcomes to social class (Engberg & Allen, 2011; Goldrick-Rab, 2016; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2016), we consequently chose as an interpretive analytic Critical Race-Class (CRC) theory (Dumas, 2013; Leonardo, 2012).

We do so because a Critical Race-Class lens attends to race *and* class dynamics and proposes to do more than merely taxonomize the intricacies of oppression. Rather, CRC *requires* researchers to “detail these complexities and account for how categories and inequalities intersect, through what processes, and with what impacts” (Gilborn as cited in Dumas, 2013, p. 124). On that account, we argue that CRC’s responsiveness to our theorizing of Mong higher education experiences as both *raced and classed* deems this intersectional framework most appropriate.

Furthermore, as a *Critical Race-Class* analytic centers the voices and perspectives of those marginalized by systemic oppression at the intersection of race and class, we employed a qualitative research design using descriptive phenomenology as the strategy of inquiry. More specifically, we followed Giorgi’s (2009) five step descriptive phenomenological method as the central aim of descriptive phenomenology “seeks to understand anything at all that can be experienced through the consciousness one has of whatever is ‘given’ whether it be an object, a person, or complex state of affairs from the perspective of the conscious person undergoing the experience” (Giorgi, 2009, p. 4). Table 4 summarizes Giorgi’s (2009) protocol.

Table 4

Descriptive Phenomenology Using Giorgi's Five Step Method

Step 1 Assume the phenomenological attitude.

Step 2 Read entire description to get an idea of what it’s about.

Step 3 Break the descriptions into meaning units that make it more manageable.

Step 4 Transform the meaning units into psychologically sensitive expressions.

Step 5 Synthesize the psychological structures of the experience from the constituents

Note: From (Broome, 2013; Giogori, 2009)

As such, given our specific interests in Mong Pell students’ lived experiences negotiating the economic challenges of degree attainment and informed by an epistemological framework privileging participant voice and subjectivity, descriptive phenomenology was an appropriate methodological choice. A semi-structured interview guide was developed based on the aforementioned research questions:

1. How do low-income Mong undergraduate students describe their experience utilizing their Federal Pell grants?
2. What other streams of financial support do low-income Mong undergraduate students have available while pursuing their degree?
3. What do low-income Mong undergraduate students express as necessary measures to improve their current economic condition?

Sample, Data Sources, and Analysis

Purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002) was used to net data rich cases using screening criteria that aligned with the purpose of our study. Screening criteria required that participants self-identified as Mong, were enrolled as undergraduate students at the research site (a four year AAPI serving institution in northern California) and receive federal Pell grants. Using professional contacts on campus, a recruitment call with given screening criteria was sent out in Fall 2016 to student organizations on campus. Seven participants (n=7) in total volunteered and provided interview data for this study, and this sample size was appropriate and reflected the

methodological tradition employed given descriptive phenomenology’s emphasis on “depth” strategy for thick, particularistic description over quantitative sampling strategies seeking large *ns* for the purposes of generalizing (Hycner, 1986).

Of the seven participants, three self-identified as male and four as female. Consistent with the abbreviated coding used for participant aliases in Giorgi’s (2009) descriptive phenomenology (Broome, 2013), male-identifying students were given the aliases M1, M2, and M3 while female students were given the aliases F1, F2, F3, and F4. Participants lived off campus, with all but two (M3 and F4) residing with their parents while attending State University. This “choice” for off-campus living, usually with parents, actually reflects the housing situation for the larger Mong student body at State University, with nearly all (98.5%) living in mutple person households off campus (Vang, 2018). At the time of this study, three (M1, M3, and F4) out of the seven were currently employed while attending school. Most all students were born in the U.S. (71% second generation; 14% third generation; 14% first generation) and all had parents who attended U.S. schools with only a small minority possessing post-secondary credentials (14% possessing “BA degree;” 14% possessing “AA degree”). Table 5 depicts the varying levels of schooling along with summary demographic data for participants.

Table 5
Demographics Data

Participant	Gender	GPA	Status	Parent Education	Living Situation
M1	male	2.89	2 nd generation	Some College	With Parents
M2	male	3.00	3 rd generation	High School	With Parents
M3	male	3.65	2 nd generation	High School	With Relatives

F1	female	3.80	2 nd generation	BA Degree	With Parents
F2	female	3.80	2 nd generation	AA Degree	With Parents
F3	female	3.00	1 st generation	Junior High	With Parents
F4	female	3.60	2 nd generation	Some College	With Parents

Individual one-hour interviews were conducted with participants across two semesters (fall 2016-winter 2017). The interview protocol featured items that probed students’ lived experiences with negotiating the costs of schooling and included prompts such as “Describe your financial situation in college” and “Describe what it was like relying on financial aid.” Interviews took place at mutually agreed upon sites, and to address trustworthiness, member checking (Creswell & Miller, 2000) in the form of follow up transcripts as well as emails to probe and clarify what participants shared in their descriptions were also used. Audiotaped interviews from these seven cases, again chosen because each contributed a lived perspective to the focus of interest in this investigation, were transcribed for data analyses.

To render participants’ interpretations into thick, knowable description, interview data were analyzed following Giorgi’s (2009) five-step modified descriptive phenomenological method:

- 1) Transcribed interview data were approached with appropriate “bracketing” and an open phenomenological posture.
- 2) Bracketing was followed by naïve readings and rereadings of interview data.
- 3) Following rereadings, raw data were demarcated into meaning units.

- 4) Meaning units were then transformed into psychologically sensitive statements (third person statements)
- 5) Finally, emerging constituents underlying each experience were then used to construct the general structure (phenomenological description) of the experience.

Results

Adhering to descriptive phenomenological protocol (Broome, 2013; Giori, 2009), the results section first provides a summary description of the *general structure of the experience*, which is then followed by a description of all the constituents derived from participants’ experiences and which essentially “constitute” that structure. As three research questions guided this investigation, three general structures emerged. Here we report the narratives for all three structures, list their respective constituents, and given the limitations of paper length, provide only a representative sampling of participants’ empirical statements. Given that the structure-constituent relationship hierarchically organizes the presentation of results, we first briefly discuss structure before proceeding to the results.

A Brief Note on Structure

As the goal in descriptive phenomenology is to “depict how certain phenomena that get named are lived, which includes experiential and conscious moments seen from a psychological perspective” (Giorgi, 2009, p. 166), the importance of constituents must be noted. Constituents serve as the “building blocks of a psychological process which describes the essential core structure of the phenomenon” (Leigh-Osroosh, 2021, p. 1820) through the eyes of experiencers. Of note, constituents in descriptive phenomenology are not simply themes as “relationships between constituents have a specific order, and the phenomenon is conditioned upon all

constituents being experienced” (Leigh-Oshroosh, 2021, p. 1820). Moreover, constituents provide deeper “insight into the unified dynamics taking place across varied experiences, and it serves as the basis of essential communication” (Giorgi, 2009, p. 200). As constituents are the interdependent parts that form the general structure of any experience, “removal of a constituent then is theoretically considered to result in a collapse of the structure” (Broome, 2011, p. 98). Thus, in this study, the structure for Mong students’ description of their experiences utilizing Federal Pell Grants (Research Question 1), the structure for Mong students’ description of alternative streams of support (Research Question 2), and finally the structure for Mong students’ expressions of necessary measures to improve their economic conditions (Research Question 3) all contained respective constituents that are unique to and interdependently emerged to form each respective structure of experience. Consequently, the following presents descriptions for three focus areas: lived experiences attending college on Pell grants, lived experiences with alternative streams of financial and/other resources, and finally as informed by their lived experiences, description of policies/practices needed to support low income Mong students.

General Structure of the Experience of Utilizing Pell Grants

For the Mong undergraduates in our study, the experience of utilizing federal Pell grants begins a week prior to the start of each semester when they receive their grant money in one lump sum. Students then face the challenge of apportioning that amount to sustain them financially for the semester and to cover all expenses that may accrue along the way. Toward that end, students expressed being consumed with the notion of saving or not saving enough, leading many to "penny pinch" and curb spending as much as possible. Indeed, for these full time students, negotiating economic challenges while pursuing a college degree was all encompassing, spanning from their very first federal Pell grant disbursement to the moment they

graduated, or no longer qualified for Pell. This is because with the exception of summer break, semesters at State University are year-long engagements with a short winter intermission.

Consequently, students relying on Pell grants described being preoccupied with figuring out how to cover expenses that impacted their financial stability—whether school was in session or not.

For students, expenses accrued covered food, housing, transportation, utilities, and assisting family members in need.

Constituents found in this first structure were *Urgency to Conserve Money, Prioritized Spending, Unaccounted Spending Outside of Direct and Indirect Costs*, and *Challenges Going through the Semester with Limited Funds*. Given the volume of empirical data as well as space constraints, we cannot list every single psychologically transformed statement for all participants. As such, Table 6 provides the list of constituents specific to this first structure on Pell Grant usage accompanied by a representative sampling of students’ psychologically transformed statements.

Table 6
Constituents Found in the General Structure of the Experience of Utilizing Pell Grants

Constituents	Sampling of Psychologically Transformed Statements
Urgency to Conserve Money	On some occasions, F1 split the costs of books with classmates and photocopied pages to use to save money. M3 saved money on text books by not buying books and searching instead for pdf copies online. M1 saved any unspent grant aid in a savings account.
Prioritized Spending	M1 first spent his federal grant aid on textbooks and access codes for classes. The first thing M3 used his federal grant aid for was either food or books. After first purchasing textbooks, F1 spent grant aid on gas for school and for food when she was hungry.
Unaccounted Spending	M2 utilized a large portion of his Pell grant to fix his sister’s car that needed to be rebuilt.

Outside of Direct and Indirect Costs	F2 paid for her younger siblings’ phone bills, sent over \$300 of her aid grant to cover her sibling’s study abroad, and gave \$500 to another sibling to travel in a foreign country. F4 lent her mother roughly \$2000 over the course of three years and has never been repaid.
Challenges Going Through the Semester with Limited Funds	During the start of F4’s first semester, her Pell Grant and savings from her job were not sufficient to purchase all required books. F4 had to wait until her next paycheck after the semester had already started before she was able to purchase the rest of her text books. M2’s family is living paycheck to paycheck and there were occasions where M2 wanted to quit school and just work. F1 expressed that financial and parental pressures made college going stressful and that eliminating financial stress would lessen his burden.

Urgency to conserve money. Mong undergraduates in this study expressed an overwhelming concern with saving as much as possible, keenly understanding that it meant deferring the purchase of recreational items or experiences that were highly desired. Sharing the preoccupation of others, M3 emphasized the urgency “to pinch pennies” wherever possible, and for M3 (as well as others), this meant allocating “grant money on the essentials—books, food, and gas,” again reiterating that “I save as much as I can...” The urgency to save modified not only the purchasing behavior of students (what to buy) but the timing (when to buy) of purchases as well. To specifically save money by avoiding inflated costs associated with late purchases due to scarcity, F1 explained, “When I get my financial aid, I usually buy textbooks right away, so it’ll be cheaper.”

Moreover, students developed “workarounds” to creatively “pinch pennies” by renting in lieu of purchasing books, borrowing books from the library, purchasing older, outdated editions of textbooks, or co-purchasing a single copy of a textbook with peers with each taking turns photocopying pages because, as F1 explained, doing so entailed “pay[ing] for half or a fraction of the cost of a workbook/textbook.” While “penny-pinching” and “crowdsourcing” the burden

of school-related costs allowed some students to stretch the life of their awards, F4’s federal Pell grant failed to fully cover the cost of her program (“I receive only a bit of financial aid after my tuition is covered, so whatever I have left over I either save it for school items or for bills”), and unable to rely on her family for financial support, was forced to take out a loan to cover looming expenses.

Prioritized spending. Students in our study described spending behaviors that prioritized education-related expenses (i.e., textbooks, school supplies, gas for transportation), and M3’s lived experiences are especially representative of students’ disciplined spending choices. M3 recounted that his very first Federal Pell grant was spent on “probably food or books for my classes,” adding, “I like to think that I’m a pretty frugal guy” and that “being on and having a budget builds a lot of discipline...It means that there’s always going to be a sacrifice.” And the need to first prioritize spending on direct costs took on added significance for students who were unemployed, and who comprised the majority in our study. Indeed, disciplined by sacrifice, F1 echoed the sentiments of many in sharing that “because I do not work and have a limited amount of money, I have to be very conscious about what I spend my money on.”

Unaccounted spending outside of direct and indirect costs. Projected institutional costs notwithstanding, our students’ *actual expenses*, direct and indirect, often far exceeded the categorized estimated costs of attendance. For example, M1 and F4 were forced to purchase used cars that exceeded the maximum allowable for transportation (\$1,242), but given their respective personal and family financial situation, the “option” of living a “walkable” distance from campus in a neighborhood enclave where housing costs were prohibitive was effectively a non-option. Rather than luxury purchases, those auto purchases were indeed a necessity as the cars were their only means of transportation to get to school. As M1 explained, “Biggest purchase in college

was the car with [the] help of financial aid and first job.” Other students expressed financial strain as well with unaccounted for costs, and echoing others’ predicaments, M2’s experiences with indirect expenses were directly related to assisting family with unforeseen financial emergencies. M2 recalled giving “my mom money whenever she needed. No matter how much she asked I just gave it to her.”

Challenges going through the semester with limited funds. Challenges students faced ranged from a limited social life to being financially stressed to the point of doing poorly in school. Here we focus on financial strain as students expressed that covering costs was an overarching concern that not impacted their ability to perform, but to stay in school as well. This strain was particularly acute for those who had to work to meet school, housing, and other family-related expenses. For instance, M2 expressed exhaustion and personally struggled with working and being a fulltime student because, in his own words, such an impacted schedule provided “limited time to do homework, study, or have little to no chance of cramming information for school.” The emotional toil pushed M2 to the point of almost quitting school in order to just work. Other students expressed similar strain, with M3 concurring that working and being a fulltime student can be challenging, adding “if you can go to school and work at the same time, it says a lot about a person. They are able to balance the rigors of both a full load of college classes and a lot of hours at work.”

That said, students in our study also shared that the stressors of school and work life, together with providing for family, proved too challenging. Illustrative is F3’s decision to quit her job in her second year and to rely solely on Pell aid. While foregoing employment ostensibly freed up time for study, she spent her nonschooling hours caring for her sick father, who, because of illness, could neither work nor serve as a source of financial support. Facing arguably

more dire challenges due to economic hardships, another student, F4, described her overall undergraduate experience as extremely stressful, having only “\$200 left over [Pell “refund” post-Tuition deduction] for books and other things I needed for school” as well as also shouldering loan debt while expected to assist her parents with household expenses despite not living at home. As a result, her grades dropped and so too her morale given that she “worked really hard to get into college, is independent” and yet her “accomplishments seemed to go unnoticed and unappreciated” (F4).

General Structure of the Experiences with Alternate Streams of Support

Students described relying on federal Pell grants as their main source of funding for higher education attainment, and as one participant emphasized, without which, “most [would] likely not be able to afford college.” At the same time, participants also shared that Pell grants failed to sufficiently cover all of their expenses, forcing many to seek assistance from parents and other family members to subsidize cost of living expenses. In addition to support from family, other streams of financial assistance available to participants were the GI Bill, the Extended Opportunity Program and other campus support services. Still for other students, the decision to work provided needed income to offset economic hardships, with one participant working as much as “20 hours a week” on top of an already full schedule of classes. While students expressed awareness of other means of financial support such as scholarships, many could not apply due to built-in demands placed on students’ already restricted schedules.

Constituents found in this second structure were *Perceiving Pell Grants as Main Source of Funding for College; Supplementing Pell Grants with Other Forms of Support; Awareness of Scholarships and Other Campus Programs; and Reasons Why Certain Funding Sources Were*

Not Pursued. Table 7 lists these constituents along with a representative sampling of students’ psychologically transformed statements.

Table 7
Constituents Found in the General Structure of Experiences with Alternate Streams of Support

Constituents	Sampling of Psychologically Transformed Statements
Perceiving Pell Grants as Main Source of Funding for College	F1 relied only on her financial aid during college. F4 could not have attended college without financial aid and thinks college is only possible for those who can afford it. M3 has relied on the Pell grant since his first year in school.
Supplementing Pell Grants with Other Forms of Support	M1 lives with his parents near campus so he was able to save a lot of money in terms of living expenses. F1’s monthly expenses total to roughly \$450 so residing at home with a family on government assistance helps to offset her food and housing costs. F4 had to supplement her Federal Pell grant with money she saved from working to purchase books and school supplies.
Awareness of Scholarships and Other Campus Support Programs	F1 was aware of other supports but did not work or receive scholarships. M3 has the GI bill as an additional source of support but is saving it for law school. F2 enrolled in EOPS, a support program that provides financial assistance and other services for students from low income families.
Reasons Why Other Funding Sources Were Not Pursued	F3 does not use credit cards. F4 feels she does not have time for support programs. M2 does not rely on financial support from his relatives because his graduation is not their responsibility.

Pell grants as main source of funding for college. All students viewed Pell grants as their primary funding source for school. Pell aid covered their cost of tuition and was overwhelmingly cited as the reason why Mong students were even able to attend a four year institution. M1 shared “if I wasn’t eligible for financial aid I would be greatly worried,” and that without financial aid, he would have attended community college. And for many others, the lack

of federal aid would have precluded higher education aspirations altogether, as F1, F2, and F4 pointedly expressed that absent Pell grants, they would have entered the workforce right after high school. Indeed, for the majority of the students, Pell aid was seen not only as access to higher education but viewed and treated as a source of “income,” with students like M3 heavily relying on Pell grants since his first year in college to cover both school and nonschooling costs.

Supplementing Pell grants with other forms of support. Requiring more financial support than Pell grants could offer, students turned to other forms of support, monetary and nonmonetary. For example, the overwhelming majority of students chose to live at home with their parents. And while doing so might entail assisting with household bills or groceries, these expenses were offset by the net savings from having their cost of living subsidized by their parents. As M2 shared “college is difficult, [but] being able to live at home and get financial aid is helpful.” Moreover, for most of the participants, parents and family members provided a form of support that often goes unnoticed and is an indirect “perk.” For instance, F1 lived at home and her family received government assistance to purchase groceries, and while F1 was not a direct recipient of cash aid, and even helped pay for some household bills, she was nonetheless an indirect beneficiary as she did not have to cover housing and food costs. Additionally, a number of students shared that they could rely on family members for cash assistance, and those who could not, resorted to working to provide a stream of income for uncovered expenses. Such was the case for students like F4, who relative to the others in this study, no longer lived at home with her parents and could not rely on them to shoulder costs not covered by her Pell award. Consequently, in addition to working and using what she saved to purchase books and supplies, F4 also had to take out a loan.

Awareness of scholarships and other campus support programs. Students mentioned awareness of scholarships, assistance through the GI Bill, and other campus support programs that offered financial support. For example, both F2 as a “State University” student and M3 when he was a community college student received scholarships from Extended Opportunity Program Services (EOPS), a support program providing financial assistance and other services for low income students. M3 also shared that he had the “GI Bill from the time that I was in the Army” but is now saving that option for law school. With respect to minority-targeted scholarships, F2 was also aware of Asian Pacific Islander scholarships but did not apply for them. On that note, we next turn to reasons some students provided for not pursuing alternative streams to supplement their grants.

Reasons why certain funding sources were not pursued. Students shared reasons as to why they either “chose” to not pursue certain sources of support outside of Pell or why they felt those sources were either unnecessary or not suitable. For M1, his living situation, support from parents, and Pell grant were sufficient to cover expenses such that he did not feel the urgency, as compared to others, to pursue supplementary support. For M2, the decision to not go to his parents for financial assistance stemmed from his feeling that they were already “busy paying bills and buying groceries” and he did not expect relatives to assume the responsibility of assisting him financially through school. And though M3 mentioned having a credit card, he shared that it was exclusively used to build a credit history and never used as a source to cover living expenses. Still others, like F3, chose to forgo credit cards altogether.

While using credit cards for some students were not an option, for others, neither was seeking employment. F1 shared that her decision to not work to supplement Pell aid was actually a decision made by her parents. And for F2, the past decision to overlook scholarships reflected

“a personal preference,” a “preference” that has now changed as she intends to apply for scholarships in the coming year. Finally, F4, who expressed the most anxiety about her financial situation (i.e., living on her own, no support from parents or siblings who had their own financial obligations), shared that she failed to apply for additional campus support programs because she felt she would not qualify, believing that her family was technically “middle income,” despite qualifying for and receiving Pell assistance precisely because she was low income. Moreover, many support programs have built-in meetings and other mandatory activities, and F4 felt she simply did not have the time to meet their participation requirements.

General Structure of Perspectives on Policy Measures to Improve Their Condition

Drawing from lived experience, students described a variety of challenges to “college-staying-while-Pell,” such as money running out “before summer ended” and being from a family that has “so much debt.” Indeed, students expressed urgency for their individual needs to be recognized and understood, emphasizing that “we have our own situation at home.” Solutions proffered including providing more financial support directly to students in addition to allocating more institutional funding to “hire more teachers and add more classes” so that the university can “provide a comfortable learning experience.” Students also unanimously described the need to minimize the cost of living expenses, and that doing so would improve their economic conditions and education success by reducing the burden of work and thus freeing them “to be more focused on school and to study.”

Constituents found in this third structure were *Programs/Policies Must Recognize Students’ Unique Financial Circumstances* and *Programs/Policies Must Reduce the Cost of Living to Reduce School Stress*. Table 8 lists these constituents and provides a representative sampling of students’ psychologically transformed statements.

Table 8

Constituents Found in the General Structure of Student’s Perspectives on Policy Measures

Constituents	Sampling of Psychologically Transformed Statements
Programs/Policies Must Recognize Students’ Unique Financial Circumstances	F3 quit her job to care for her father and no longer had an additional source of income. F3’s father’s condition has affected her G.P.A. M1 thinks the process of determining a student’s need and family contribution needs to be more accurate. M3 believes the eligibility requirements for support programs needs to be re-evaluated because there are a lot of different scenarios that disqualifies students who are in need of financial assistance. F4 feels like administrators and policymakers are aware of student issues but do little to help.
Programs/Policies Must Reduce the Cost of Living to Reduce Stress	M3 considers the cost of living conditions the biggest obstacles for students and that a solution to combat the cost of living is subsidizing dorms and apartments for college students. Overall F4 finds college really stressful and shares that an ideal solution would be to get enough financial assistance to support her so she could go to school without working. F3 identified gas for transportation as a major expense. M2 expects financial stress in college. F1 would not be able to pay bills or buy textbooks without financial aid.

Programs/policies must recognize students’ unique financial circumstances.

Students’ description of their experiences largely underscored the need for structural and programmatic changes that are more responsive to their unique financial circumstances. For instance, M1 communicated that the process used to determine need relative to expected family contributions should be refined to provide students the best postsecondary educational opportunities given the particulars of their home situation. Similarly, M3 contends that the needs analysis should be more situational and flexible to capture more students who may not appear to qualify for more aid or any at all. M3 expounds on th Mong students who get left out:

One thing that often gets over looked are the students who have parents that are in the lower middle class. A lot of these parent make [just] enough to have a house and cars, but

they really don't have enough to send two or three kids to college. These students often miss out on a lot of the financial aid that low[er] income families enjoy because the parents make just enough to have their kids *not qualify* [emphasis added] for financial aid. There are some students that are disowned by their parents but they still have to fall under their parents' income tax bracket when they file for financial aid. It seems unfair to a lot of these students.

And while students also identified the importance of indirect support in the form of more faculty hiring and campus and curricular expansions for enriched university experiences, one remaining constant voiced by all was that without the federal aid each received, students would not have been able to pursue higher education. This material reality was most acute for F4, whose college experience was markedly more difficult because she had to balance surviving without family support while pursuing an education at the same.

Programs/policies must reduce the cost of living to reduce financial stress. Cost of living expenditures and students' abilities to offset them were related to financial stress. For example, students who had subsidized housing from living with their parents did not express near as much financial stress as those who did not. As M2, who relied on both Pell aid and parent support shared, relative to others, “my financial situation is okay right now.” For most, however, financial strain was a real concern. And M3's experiences mirrored this reality when he noted that the cost of living, particularly housing, was especially taxing (“I think the biggest burden on students is the cost of living”) and that a viable solution would be to subsidize dorms and apartments as doing so would eliminate financial stress and allow students to focus on their education.

This sentiment was indicative as well for students like F1 who relied exclusively on Pell grants to cover both school and nonschool related expenses while witnessing her aid decrease by \$200 due to a recent tuition increase. As F1 shared, “I see these posters around school like ‘Oh, tuition is going to increase more by next year’—so yeah, I think that would really affect me, my financial aid, and I really need to use that money for school and for my personal use.” And for another student, F4, financial stress is compounded by the demands of her particular program of study, the absence of family support, working while a full-time student, and assuming student loan debt to pay for expenses that employment and Pell aid fail to cover. Indeed, F4 stated that if she didn’t “have to worry about working, my life would have been completely less stressful” and that worrying about how to pay for bills has caused her grades to suffer, impacting her chances of getting into a competitive program of advanced studies. According to F4, increased aid would enable her, as well as others, to forgo work and fully devote their energies to schooling. We next discuss these findings in light of existing literature and a critical race-class framework.

Discussion

I really didn’t have any other sources of financial support other than financial aid and the jobs I possessed during the time.

-Mong undergraduate student, second-generation

In this study, we explored the phenomenon of “college-*staying-while-Pell*” for poor and working class Mong undergraduates who attended one California State University (CSU) institution. We undertook this investigation given the overwhelming majority of CSU Mong undergraduates who are first generation “college-goers” within a 23-member campus system that not only comprises the largest university system in the nation, but that also enrolls the largest number of Mong undergraduates, roughly 90% of whom rely on Federal Pell grants to attend

college (Campaign for College Opportunity, 2015). Harkening back to former President Obama’s question as to the responsiveness of statist interventions to working class students’ higher education aspirations, our Mong undergraduates’ experiences cast critical light on the often uncomplicated discourse of the Pell grant as sole “equalizer” for disparities in higher education attainment and on the current iteration of Mong higher education research that rarely connects students’ social suffering to, let alone offers critique on, U.S. political economy.

In short, our exploration of a *class*-forward statist intervention on college attainment for Mong, a *povertized racial/ethnic group* often (and uncritically so) invoked to debunk the “Asian Model Minority” trope, makes accessible a critical race-class analysis that intentionally situates Mong higher education desires and rights within the broader context of cultural political economy. Though our study focuses on Mong Pell recipients, we nevertheless hope that our political commitment to engage rather than disappear cultural political economy proves helpful to dissident researchers who, like us, view such commitments, particularly with respect to marginalized communities of color, not as mere provocation but *as political work necessary to generating the kind of public discussions required for strategic movement on broader social policy fronts*. In that white supremacy and capitalism calcify the cultural, political and economic order, a CRC framework rendering race-class analysis possible informs the key discussion points from our study.

Mong Students’ Pell Spending and Saving Behaviors

Critical specificity demands the recognition of not only *who* students are, but *where* they are, and *how and why* it is they came to be socially positioned. Consequently, Mong Pell recipients’ spending and saving behaviors cannot be interpreted outside of a race-class framework (Dumas, 2013; Leonardo, 2012). Thus, while U.S. Secretary of Education DeVos

pushes for financial literacy and personal responsibility as a new education priority for discretionary grant programs (Department of Education, 2017), critical race and stratification economists Hamilton and Darity (2017) deem such initiatives as racist paternalism, a political deflection that obscures structured racial dis/advantage via the discourse of “suboptimal choices” made by poor students of color. In line with Hamilton and Darity’s critique of neoliberal prescriptives as racist and misguided, the poor and working class Mong students in our study were not “wanting” with respect to financial literacy and self-restraint, *but rather money* (or lack of it). Indeed, students overwhelmingly saved and prioritized their aid spending in anticipation of unaccounted for direct and indirect costs, a preoccupation no doubt reinforced by the fact that students came from families with limited means.

Moreover, despite students’ best “penny-pinching” efforts, Pell amounts regularly failed to cover the actual costs of college for many. For instance, the highest amount of refund allowable (i.e., amount disbursed to student after cost of tuition has been deducted) for our participants was \$3000 per semester based on State University's 2016 Financial Aid Office guidelines. As spring and fall semesters run approximately five months in duration, dividing this maximum allowable refund across five months leaves a general monthly allowance of just \$600 for participants who actually qualified for the maximum grant amount. What is more, those who failed to qualify for the maximum allowable received *even less*, and this is concerning when *actual* monthly expenses for the students in our study ranged anywhere from \$450 to \$700. Thus, the “net price,” or the outstanding balance not covered by grants (Goldrick-Rab, 2016), remains a significant concern for students.

Countering Secretary DeVos’s curricular intervention, and supported by the lived experiences of the students in this study, we argue against the further disciplining of poor

students of color for being poor students of color. Further, we unequivocally forward that self-imposed austerity is not a viable long term strategy for those *most povertized by race-class oppression*. And so Pell recipients, again disproportionately students of color (Flowers, 2011; Kantrowitz, 2011; Nichols & Schak, 2018), cannot simply “financial-literacy-their-way-out-of” an existing political economic structure that makes Pell grants necessary in the first place.

Students’ Capacity to Fund Education Outside of Pell Grants

Despite public discourse in support of college completion for lower income students, Pell recipients, again, continue to privately struggle to cover the “net price” of attendance (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). Consequently, poor and lower income students are forced to look for additional streams of support (Abdul-Alim, 2016; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2016). We found this to be the case as well for the Pell recipients in our study, who worked to bring in income for unmet needs, “chose” to live with parents or other relatives to offset indirect costs, or, if completely on their own as in the case of one student, became a “striver” and worked in addition to taking out a loan.

Though working offset some of the students’ net college costs, work itself came with a price. As one student shared, working ironically left little time or emotional energy for the very purchase his labor was funding:

I think that the elimination of financial stress would allow students to actually have a chance to become passionate about what they are learning. Having to split time between work and school means that people like me might just do the bare minimum to pass classes so that they can find time to work.

(Male Student, 3.65 G.P.A, residing off campus with relatives)

Thus, while working may have been an option for prior generations, given a host of contemporary variables from the availability of quality part-time jobs to those that actually offer

livable wages in the face of rising costs, working ultimately may not be as viable a solution as previously considered (Goldrick-Rab, 2016).

Even so, what must come to bear on the discourse on college affordability is a conversation on Mong Pell recipients’ qualitatively different capacity to navigate, and thus uniquely different experiences with, college affordability given their families’ race-class positioning within broader U.S. society. We find this conversation most accessible through the critical historicizing of *how and why it came to be* that so many of our students could not rely on parents and relatives for monetary support in the first place, and why indeed many repurposed their grants as “income” to help with family bills. Neither discounting the emotional support students receive from parents, nor the housing support for those who had the option of living at home, we simply aim to, at long last, problematize the *naturalized* precarity so controlling for the lack of Mong generational wealth transfer.

Regarded at one time by sociologists as “the most disadvantaged refugee group ever to land in America” (Arax, 1996, para. 11), Mong refugees were historically relocated to racially diverse, working class enclaves in major urban centers such as Fresno, California; Santa Ana, California; Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota; and Portland, Oregon (Cohn, 1984; Downey, Olney, Mason, & Hendricks, 1984). Hyper-concentrated in “areas that have been impacted by the U.S. economic crisis” (Vang, 2013, p. 28), Mong initially struggled to find housing and gainful employment, difficulties which were further compounded by language and cultural prejudices (Cohn, 1984; Kather, 2015). In fact, to mitigate concerns about hiring discrimination, local government and community agencies engaged in public relations campaigns to convince employers of the “hirability” of Hmong refugees (Cohn, 1984). Already displaced and further vulnerabilized, Mong families turned to public cash assistance for survival (Arax, 1996; Ellis,

1997; Hwang, 2002; Vang, 2013). In response, early social integration plans often addressed public housing, welfare, the need for education and employment assistance, as well as the possibility of repatriation (Downing et al., 1984).

And while Mong unemployment rates have dropped in recent years, from 18% in 1990 (Pfeifer & Lee, 2000) to roughly 5.9% presently, and comparable for the first time with the general U.S. population rate of 5.8% (U.S. Census Data, 2016), increased labor force participation must be understood within the context of employment type. For instance, Mong occupations are still mostly concentrated in the manufacturing sector which not only makes them disproportionately vulnerable to job loss (Vang, 2013) from U.S. manufacturing companies’ globalization and automation efforts (Cohen, 2018), but also seals them from white-collar management and other professional-related jobs offering the highest pay grades (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013). Overrepresented in occupational categories with concomitant wage ceilings, Mong in general continue to suffer from income insecurity and consequently, high rates of poverty (Vang, 2013). To put this into greater perspective again, our students in this study hail from a region where instances of concentrated Mong childhood poverty are experienced at a higher rate (42%) than for any other racial/ethnic group in the state (Campaign for College Opportunity, 2015). But this is not description, because social suffering is not descriptive—*it is planning*.

As such, we argue that historically disciplined by racialized labor markets and povertized urban spaces (Vang, 2013) that often relegated them to racial marginalization in inadequate schools (DePouw, 2012, 2018; Lee 2005; Xiong, 2010) long thought the lever for social mobility (Iannarelli, 2014; Koltyk, 1997; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Vang, 2016; Zha et al., 2005), Mong *have been subjected to broad yet intersecting programs that require political solutions positioned*

within the realm of cultural political economy. Given this historical view, one arguably comes to understand why wealth building and intergenerational wealth transfer in general have been largely nonexistent for the Mong Diaspora, who, since their arrival some four decades ago, have been up against an evershifting project of racial capitalism that Anyon (2005) earlier noted has long been exacted (differentially so and to devastating effect) on poor Black and other marginalized communities of color.

In light of Mong students’ assigned precarity, we found it noteworthy that only two students mentioned having participated in campus-based Educational Opportunity Programs (EOP). Created by California’s 1969 Harmer Bill (Senate Bill 1072) and offered at all of the CSU’s 23 campuses, EOP programs “provide access and support services for historically low-income, underrepresented students from educationally disadvantage backgrounds” (The California State University, n.d., para. 3). State University’s own EOP offers student services which include orientation, academic counseling, financial aid advising, and most importantly, EOP grants for eligible students. Interestingly, one of the two former EOP students identified time constraints as a reason for why she stopped participating in EOP, which makes participation in learning communities mandatory. Nevertheless, that so few Mong students were even aware of or took advantage of EOP suggests that perhaps greater outreach (as well as program flexibility) is required on the part of the institution.

Finally, in that poor and working class students generally prefer not to have to take out loans for fear of student debt (Burdman, 2005), nearly all of the students in our study avoided loans. Still, loans coupled with work are often the only avenue for some to attend college (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). Such was the case for the Pell recipient who, absent parent support yet fueled by educational desires that overtaxed her actual means toward attaining them, took out a

loan in addition to working, in effect subsidizing a government subsidy for higher education meant to shield low income students from having to borrow in the first place. And given the race-class dimensions of the growing student loan crisis, where poor students of color, particularly Black students, are forced to borrow and then default at rates higher than whites (Fain, 2017; Miller, 2017), our student’s “decision” to borrow relative to her “capacity” to assume debt, arguably has profound and far-reaching consequences for her degree completion and future livelihood.

Implications

We maintain that group "crises" are best understood relationally, and not in absolute "within-group" terms that neutralize political solutions, but *within a socio-historical context given to a sociological imagination that accounts for contested cultural, political, and economic relations within and across social groups*. For that reason, we have framed Mong's present social "struggles" (and progress) with educational attainment by accounting for their historically situated precarity in the U.S.—a political feature of their later insertion into, as a result of U.S. global interventionist politics in Southeast Asia, *an already existing U.S racial-economic order*. Bearing this in mind, the following section closes with CRC-informed implications for political strategies and research concerning material ways to support Mong in higher education and beyond.

Policy. CRC intersectionalist politics insists that no one person, group, or phenomenon is only ever one thing at one time, and consequently cultural political economic constructs such as social class, gender, ethnicity, and language are interlocking projects that "impact how race shapes policy and everyday life" (Dumas, 2013, p. 114). We extend this to also mean that the

mediating race-class politics of researchers, and of what researchers "see fit to study," and how such phenomena are epistemologically-framed, have profound implications for the nature and direction of professionalized policy discourse and offers in response to Mong social "crises."

Disrupting this, working class Mong undergraduates served as knowledge brokers in authoring both policy critique and insights that stand in contrast to the class-disciplined, often hyperprofessionalized discourse of "barriers to Mong higher educational attainment." If there is to be a race-class lens mediating knowledge production and policy brokering, let it be a brand of race-class politics informed by the visceral expertise of poor and working class Mong undergraduates. As students' stories betray the externalities of racial capitalism and detail the material impact on Mong higher educational desires and attainment, key policy recommendations first begin with Pell grants and then graduate to broader social policies.

Retooling Pell Grants. Pell grants, however problematic in operation, have made college access, retention, and degree attainment *at least a possibility* for poor and working class students (Burdman, 2005; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2016; Nora et al., 2006). Nevertheless, in that Pell awards typically fall short of covering students' actual costs of attendance (Abdul-Alim, 2016; Goldrick-Rab, 2016; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2016), the burden to cover net costs invariably transfers back to the very students and families least prepared to do so. As one of our students argued, guidelines need to be flexible enough to capture the demands of students' unique home situations. For instance, while all were Pell recipients, a situational analysis reveals just how controlling the particularities of a Mong family's (unseen and unfactored) poverty load can be for the depth of individual students' reliance on Pell assistance. Indeed, Goldrick-Rab et al. (2016) pressed this very point in arguing that "grants may be more or less effective according to the depth of familial poverty students face" (p.1771).

Accordingly, students’ charge that Pell calculations undercapture familial poverty highly resonates with Kelchen’s (2017) proposal to revisit how expected family contributions (EFC) are determined. Current guidelines set the lowest possible EFC at zero, but Kelchen argues that using negative EFCs to reflect negative family contributions *better captures need*. In point of fact, Kelchen’s cross-institutional analysis of student-level FAFSA data showed that replacing zero values with negative EFCs had the effect of uncovering masked needs and thusly increasing award amounts for a share of students. Aside from incorporating negative value EFCs (Kelchen, 2017), suggestions to scale up the Pell award maximum to match the rise in college costs have intensified (Goldrick-Rab, 2016; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2016; The Institute for College Access, 2018; The Pell Institute, 2016) given that the current maximum allowable (\$6095) still accounts for less than 30% of total college costs for public four year institutions (The Institute for College Access, 2018). As such, the recent push to “double Pell” to \$13,000 in order to “address the most serious financial barriers faced by **students from the bottom half of family income** [emphasis added]” (Mortenson, 2016, p.82) would not only respond to the concerns of the Pell recipients in our study but likely as well the more than 90% of Mong in the CSU system who depend on Pell to stay in school.

Indeed, there is likely no *existing* higher education policy/program more arguably “Mong” than Pell grants, an ostensibly *class-forward* policy which has become, by virtue of who has come to so heavily rely on it, a *race-class statist intervention*. In light of this, we hope that future policy discussions on Mong educational “uplift” reflect conversations on strengthening Pell in particular and on critical engagement with the new cultural political economy of Mong educational desire and rights more broadly.

Tuition-free, debt-free higher education for all. Prior research on Mong college students’ perceptions of obstacles to higher education revealed an unanticipated finding wherein students pinpointed financial concerns as the major barrier to higher education attainment (Xiong & Lam, 2013). And this through line of funding threats pre-empting higher education attainment emerged for our students as well given how many shared that absent Pell grants, workforce entry would have been the only “rational” post-high school option left. As students’ “rational choice” arguably reflects the disciplining power of a social structure that manages away educational desire relative to one’s race-class positioning moreso than “good” sense, we move from higher education as a hoped for desire to *higher education as a right*.

Though former California Governor Jerry Brown’s signing of Assembly Bill 19 established the *California College Promise*, the program itself provides free tuition for just the first year and to just full time community college students (Edsource, 2017). For students attending four year public institutions much like the site in our study, Senator Bernie Sanders’s more expansive proposal, the “College for All Act” of 2017, would not only cover community college costs but undergraduate public four year tuition and fees as well. As proposed, 67% of the funding for the \$70 billion a year program would come from the federal government with states covering the remaining 33% (<https://www.sanders.senate.gov/download/collegeforallsummary>). While referred to the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions where it currently sits, such a proposal would, unlike the Pell grant program which neither fully accounts for total costs of attendance nor covers all students regardless of income (Savidge, 2018), actually seek to make college a reality for all (Leiber, 2017; Zornick, 2017). And insofar as a “rights” view takes up inclusivity under an “education for all” frame, tuition-free, debt-free higher education initiatives would

impact not only Mong Pell students but the portion of Mong nonPell students who, generationally-speaking, are not so far removed from precarity.

Housing, income, and wealth interventions. Citing as their primary concern the cost of living while trying to get an education, students’ most radical suggestion pushed for a policy turn from the neoliberal prescriptives of “work harder/save more”—measures already practiced as a function of their race-class social positioning—to broader social policies that reduce the tax of living in a world not expressly structured for them. Indeed, from housing to transportation to other basic needs, negotiating the cost of living was identified as the determining factor in *explaining the amount of stress they faced*. In that the economic stressors our students encountered are so broadly shared (Goldrick-Rab, Broton, & Hernandez, 2017), any serious discussions on “student success” can no longer be engaged without a *rights* analysis that refuses to separate students from what they require to live in this world—the right to education, the right to housing, the right to food and other basic necessities.

With housing issues having plagued 1 in 9 CSU students (Crutchfield, 2016), and in light of rising costs due to the current housing shortage, the right to affordable housing for college students has found some traction in California State Senator Nancy Skinner’s proposal to have students use their financial aid documents to qualify for subsidized apartments. Moreover, the proposal would incentivize new construction of affordable housing developments specifically set aside for full time college students (Murphy, 2018). In addition to affordable housing, policies that support students’ abilities to cover basic human needs are also needed as poverty has become so concentrated among college students that a recent U.S. Census study found “the inclusion of off-campus students [to have] a statistically significant effect on local poverty rates,

in some cases increasing the rate by 10 or more percentage points” (Benson & Bishaw, 2017, para. 8).

Toward that end, basic income initiatives have been piloted to varying degree in countries such as Finland, India, and Canada (Radu, 2018) as well as a few pockets here in the U.S. Alaska, for example, has had the long running *Alaska Permanent Fund* (Radu, 2018; Zak, 2018), which many rural Native Alaskans have come to depend on for poverty reduction (Zak, 2018), and the bankrupt city of Stockton, California, hardest hit by the U.S. foreclosure crisis, is set to launch in partnership with the Economic Security Project the first phase of its basic income pilot (Crane, 2018; Foster, 2017). Of note, both “experimental” sites, Stockton, California and Alaska, have Mong enclaves with concentrated poverty (National Coalition for Asian Pacific American Development, n.d.; Vang, 2012). Toward that end, a classic universal basic income (UBI) approach that proposes guaranteed income outside of employment in the form of cash aid to address economic insecurity (Foster, 2017; Radu 2018) merits strong consideration. With this in mind, UBI should not be used to supplant the need for a federal jobs guarantee (Paul et al., 2018).

Research. As race (Bell, 1992, 2004; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) and class (Engberg & Allen, 2011; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2016) matter in education, a Critical Race-Class analytic (Dumas, 2013; Leonardo, 2012) demands that any investigation of educational “non-attainment” within a minoritized racial group should interrogate not only the effects of a governing apparatus on the racially disciplined and surplusd but even moreso the very organizing features so responsible for producing racialized political violence (race-class inequality) in the first place. Drawing from CRC (Dumas, 2013; Leonardo, 2012), we have argued here that research in education, particularly situated at the nexus of race, class, and social policy, is needed to

radicalize explanations of Mong higher education attainment. Indeed, we pose that Mong's continuing racialization in the U.S. (DePouw, 2012, 2018; Lee, 2005) and concomitant material vulnerabilities (Center for American Progress, 2015; U.S. Census Data, 2015; Ramakrishnan & Ahmad, 2014; Vang, 2012; Xiong, 2013a) co-conspire to create myriad educational disparities (Lee, 1997, 2005; Xiong, 2013b) that can only be tackled seriously through a different kind of research politics.

For us, this assignment demands attending to the powerful interplay and mediating effects of race-class dynamics in explaining the Mong Diaspora's experience in education. While Mong higher education access for our participants has largely been a result of *class*-forward federal interventionist policy (i.e. federal Pell Grants), *race-class* discourse on financial aid with respect to Mong students is nonexistent. This research vacuum stands in contrast to the established and still growing body on culturally-based investigations documenting Mong cultural adaptation and maintenance of hybridity amidst insertion into a "host" culture that, though certainly valuable, underscores even more the need for mobilizing lines of inquiry that make political inroads into the kind of educational campaigns required to contest broadly *the differentialized distribution of goods and resources so controlling for higher education attainment for minoritized and economically vulnerabilized groups such as the Mong*.

For this reason, we studied the responsiveness of an "equity"-driven statist intervention, federal Pell grants, on higher education attainment for poor and working class Mong undergraduates. We did so as not every Mong undergraduate will have parents or social cultural networks to draw upon en route to funding educational desire, and for students like the Pell recipient in our study who worked and took on student debt because she did not have parental support, a different brand of research is also needed to (again) extricate educational desire from

the neoliberal enclosures of "personal striving" toward a *public project* on Mong educational desire and *rights* contested with public discourse within public spaces to build a viable *public politics* of change going forward. And again, this need was especially glaring for us as 90% of Mong students in the country's largest public four year university system continue to depend on Pell grants to even approach, let alone pass through, the gates of higher education. Along those lines, we would encourage further research exploring the “new economics of higher education” (Goldrick-Rab, 2016) for Mong students (i.e., Mong Pell “stop-outs,” Mong student debt load, Mong student default rates...).

But most importantly, we argue that because “Mong Pell recipient” (along with attendant “struggles”) fails to stand as a complete, operating category outside of white supremacy and capitalism, the well-meaning “needs”-based discourse on Mong students in particular, and the Mong Diaspora in general, *absent analyses of U.S. cultural political economy does little more than “poverty-wash” racial capitalism*. That is, “progressive” discourse that casually reads Mong social suffering through the lens of “deficiencies” enforces a complicit politic that not only obscures racial capitalism but further abets as well social disciplining of the Mong. Even more regrettable, the fallout from such *uncareful* discourse, in turning from the “onerous” political work of critically understanding and situating Mong “crises” as a function of political economy, often has the ironic effect of activating in Mong, a fiercely proud and independent people who have fought centuries-old battles against cultural, political, and economic subjugation, *neoliberal striverism as a means of group vindication*.

This is why researchers’ class politics and privilege matter (Dumas, 2013), and of consequence, are never innocent. And this is also why a *rights*-based discourse engaging the

social relations of power, the exercise of power, and the resistance to it in education (Benesch, 1999) is so very crucial to mobilizing toward a truly radical politic of change.

For certain the Mong students in our study, capable and committed and speaking 'perfect English' while maintaining their grades despite varying levels of “inherited” precarity, viscerally recognize that there are no guarantees in this particular project. Nowhere was this more poignantly clear than in the story of one second generation student who actually had a father with a professional university degree but still qualified for Pell aid based on her family's economic hardship. Thus, while education pedigrees are perceived as the "great leveler," neither education nor its "commensurate" economic returns (jobs, salary, upward mobility) are guaranteed (Goldrick-Rab, 2016) and disbursed within a race-class vacuum (Gittleman & Wolf, 2004). And Mong higher education research that fully recognizes the need for a politically disruptive reading of an internalized higher education "crisis" is not only past due, but a necessary political and critical epistemological intervention for, by, and in solidarity with the Mong Diaspora, who, 40 years post resettlement and planted firmly at the intersection of race and class, are still forever (mis)imagined by the wider world-

"Asians of a lesser god."

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