Factors Influencing Hmong College Students’ Persistence and Retention in Laos: A Case Study

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Factors Influencing Hmong College Students’ Persistence and Retention in Laos: A Case Study

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Concordia University–Portland
College of Education

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the College of Education
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education in
Higher Education

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Abstract

Student persistence and retention in higher education is a phenomenon that has been studied for years, yielding many theories and frameworks. The purpose of this study was to explore the factors influencing the persistence and retention of Hmong college students in Laos. This study adopted a qualitative method with a single-case study design to explore the experiences of 10 Hmong students who were attending a university in the Lao’s People Democratic Republic (LPDR). Data for the study were collected via individual interviews and reflection journals. The findings of the study showed that there were seven emergent themes that influenced Hmong college students in Laos to persist. The themes were: (a) it was difficult being a Hmong college student, (b) family was a factor that motivated, (c) goal was a motivator to persistence, (d) Hmong students were confident in their abilities, (e) there was a sense of belonging, (f) the curriculum was the top in Laos but a nonfactor, and (g) the professor was their supporter. Based on the results of the study, it was recommended that institutions of higher learning in Laos adopt student support services such as counseling, student mentoring, and goal workshops to support the persistence of Hmong students.

Keywords: higher education, persistence, retention, institutional departure model, a model of student motivation and persistence, Lao PDR, Hmong, college student
Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to all the Hmong who dreamed about the attainment of an education but never had the opportunity to pursue it. Don’t ever give up. Dream it, work for it, and achieve it.
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First and foremost, I would like to thank my parents. Without both of you, I would not be where I am today and I would not have dared to dream of this achievement. You two were my main reason and motivation to persist in the face of adversity. To my wife, Linda. Thank you for your support and for giving me the strength when I needed it the most. This achievement would not have been possible without you. To my children, Anastasia, Catherine, Alexander, and Elizabeth, thank you for sacrificing your time with daddy. Now and into the future, we will have plenty of time to make up for the last three and a half years.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Over the last half-century, student attrition has been a critical issue for institutions of higher learning due to a variety of reasons (Aljohani, 2016; Tinto, 1993). When students enrolled in an institution but did not graduate, it resulted in many consequences (Van Bragt et al., 2011). The first consequence affected the nation (Molla, 2017). For a country to grow and progress, it must invest in the development of its most valuable asset, its citizens. While this was an essential endeavor for all countries, it was especially crucial for a nation that is still developing (Marginson, 2019).

First, education played a critical role in the transformation of society, particularly in the accessibility and improvement of technology (Khan et al., 2013). In today’s world, technology has always been changing and advancing. The advancement in technology improved the production of goods and services. It made it easier for a nation to mass-produce everyday goods or products (Amirault, 2015). Through education, a country can equip its citizens with the necessary knowledge and technical skills needed to be productive in their daily tasks (Woessmann, 2016). Therefore, it promoted the progress of its society.

Furthermore, education leads to the continued development and maintenance of a democratic society (Dorner & Gorman, 2011). Through education, citizens of a nation will conceptualize the values of what a democracy is. The citizen will be active participants in the creation of that democracy. Moreover, highly educated citizens will have the intellectual and literacy skills to acquire knowledge from a variety of sources to make informed decisions (McKinnon & Thepphasoulithone, 2014; Pham, 2016; Troschitz, 2018). They can better differentiate fact from fiction (Dorner & Gorman, 2011). When obtaining information, knowledgeable citizens can better process, analyze, and critique the acquired knowledge instead.
of taking it at face value (Demirbolat, 2019). Most importantly, education will raise the consciousness and awareness of individuals to be better citizens of their nation (Creak, 2018).

In addition to transforming society and promoting democracy, education provided multiple economic benefits to individuals (Ma et al., 2016). As asserted by Kyophilavong et al. (2018), there was a long-term relationship between economic growth and all levels of education. When an individual obtained higher education, he or she has the potential to earn more income throughout his or her lifetime (Carlson & McChesney, 2015; Kaikkonen & Quarles, 2018; Woessmann, 2015). An individual with a bachelor’s degree makes 67% more in a lifetime than an individual with just a high school diploma (Ma et al., 2016). Also, in terms of unemployment, individuals with a bachelor’s degree are 6% less likely to be unemployed than individuals who only have a high school diploma (Ali & Jalal, 2018; Guardiola, 2015). The potential impact on an individual, particularly its effect on the lifetime earnings and economic growth of a country, makes the issue of education and student attrition even more compelling (Carlson & McChesney, 2015). Accordingly, it is imperative that when an individual enrolls in an institution of higher education, it must lead to graduation (Carlson & McChesney, 2015; Tinto, 1993).

**Introduction to the Problem**

When an individual decided to pursue a degree in higher education, it does not necessarily suggest automatic graduation. Various factors and barriers may arise that prevented this individual from successfully graduating (Ashraf et al., 2018). According to Tinto (2017), four theoretical perspectives explain why an individual may decide to stop pursuing his degree in higher education. Those four perspectives are namely goals, self-efficacy, a sense of belonging, and perception of the curriculum. Through these four perspectives, an institution of higher learning can better understand the reasons behind student persistence (Tinto, 2017). Tinto’s four
theories may shed light on student persistence in the country of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic.

In the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (hereafter referred to as Laos), the government placed a high priority on higher education as an essential commodity (Moxom & Hayden, 2015; Ogawa, 2008; Siharath, 2010). The education of its citizens was particularly significant since Laos is considered a developing country. Educational accessibility and attainment can have a lasting impact on the lifetime earnings of its citizens and raise their standard of living (Onphanhdala & Suruga, 2006). According to the United Nations, the country of Laos is one of the least developed and most impoverished countries in the world (as cited by Estudillo et al., 2013; Siharath, 2010). It is, therefore, critical that the citizens of Laos have access to and assistance in graduating from institutions of higher learning. With the tools and knowledge they receive, citizens can contribute to the continued development of the country (Fox, 2003). However, progress has been slow because the education sector in Laos severely lacks funding (Moxom & Hayden, 2015; Phetsiriseng, 2009; Siharath, 2010). Also, access to education has been difficult for some of the Lao citizens, mainly ethnic minorities (Moxom & Hayden, 2015; Ogawa, 2009).

**Background, Context, History, and Conceptual Framework for the Problem**

**Background of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic**

The Lao People’s Democratic Republic (LPDR) was constitutionalized as a single-party socialist republic nation in 1975 (Creak, 2018; Fox, 2003; Moxom & Hayden, 2015; Pholsena, 2004; Siharath, 2010). Its constitution, however, was not ratified until 1991 (Phetsiriseng, 2009). It is a landlocked country located in Southeast Asia, with an estimated population of 6.4 million (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2019). Although the country’s constitution was just recently ratified,
the history of the country dates further back. Laos’s history, according to scholars, can be traced as far back as the mid-14th century when the country was the Kingdom of Lan Xang “Kingdom of a Million Elephants” (Saythongmany, 2016).

During its initial inception, the Kingdom of Lan Xang was one of the most influential and most prosperous kingdoms in the region (Evans, 2002; Savada, 1995). The Kingdom of Lan Xang was well-known for its abundant resources and feared for its elephant riders (Dezan Shira & Associates, 2012). Conversely, after many centuries of internal wars by the various dynasties and conflicts with its neighboring counties, the Kingdom of Lan Xang gradually declined (Evans, 2002). Ultimately, in 1797, the Kingdom of Lan Xang was split into three: (a) The Kingdom of Luang Prabang, (b) The Kingdom of Vientiane, and (c) The Kingdom of Champasak (Evans, 2002; Savada, 1995). Later in the 19th century, the country was colonized by the French as part of their Indochina territory (Dezan Shira & Associates, 2012).

The country of Laos was under French colonialization for the majority of the 19th to mid-20th centuries before gaining full independence in 1954 as part of the Geneva Peace Conference (Evans, 2002; Savada, 1995). Shortly after gaining its independence, Laos was engulfed in another internal and regional conflict (Evans, 2002; Savada, 1995). However, this time, the battle involved a difference in political ideology. The region of Southeast Asia was experiencing a Communist movement, and Laos was caught in the middle of the conflict (Evans, 2002). Eventually, the Communist revolutionaries of the country gained political control and established the country as a communist state in 1975 (Dezan Shira & Associates, 2012). Although the country of Laos has progressed economically since its establishment, the country is still considered one of the poorest and least developed countries in the world (Estudillo, 2013; Langill, 2016; Rigg, 2007; Siharath, 2010;). Moreover, the country depends mostly on
international aid to meet its annual budget expenditures (Berge et al., 2017; Creak & Barney, 2018).

Laos is a country that is ethnically and linguistically diverse (Langill, 2016; Phetsiriseng, 2009; Ogawa, 2009). The country’s population falls into three official categories based on the ethnic origin, language, and location of the people. The first category consists of the Lao Loum “Lowland Lao” (Inui, 2015). This Lao population, as the name suggested, generally resides in the lower regions of the country. They typically live in the cities and geographical areas that surround the banks of the Mekong River, and they all speak the Tai languages of the Tai-Kadai family (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2019). In total, the Lao Loum consisted of two-thirds of the population of the country (Inui, 2015).

The second category of the population of Laos consists of the Lao Theung “Lao of the Mountain Slopes” (Inui, 2015). This Lao group resides in the foothills of the country, and they are scattered across the country. Unlike the Lao Loum, the Lao Theung speak the Austroasiatic (Mon-Khmer) languages and are considered the original inhabitants of the land (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2019). According to the most recent data of 2018, the Lao Theung make up about one-fourth of the population of Laos (Inui, 2015).

The last category of citizens consists of the Lao Soung “Lao of the Mountain Tops” (Inui, 2015). As the name suggested, this population of Laos resides on the mountain tops of the country and consists of the more recent citizens of the country. This group speaks the Tibeto-Burman languages, and they are the latest citizens of the country. The Lao Soung consists of about one-tenth of the population of Laos (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2019). Although this population typically resides in the mountainous regions of the country, large groups have recently been migrating down to the urban areas of the country (Inui, 2015).
Within the Lao Soung population of Laos are the Hmong people. The Hmong are an ethnic minority group, and they consisted of 10% of the population (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2019; Inui, 2015). Since the Hmong are a minority population, their access to higher education has been limited (Chounlamany, 2014; Fox, 2003; Inui, 2015, 2019). In terms of ethnic disparities and access to higher education, the ethnic majority of Laos have more access to institutions of higher learning than the minorities (Ogawa, 2009). For example, of the students attending the National University of Laos, only 5% are ethnic minorities (Ogawa, 2008). In terms of socioeconomic background, low-income students are non-existent in Laos’s colleges (Moxom & Hayden, 2015; Ogawa, 2009; Siharath, 2010). Also, there exist noticeable disparities in academic opportunity and attainment among Laos’ population groups (Moxom & Hayden, 2015).

**Higher Education in Laos**

Throughout its history, Laos has had an unsubstantial educational system; in fact, the education system was mostly non-existent until the 18th century (Phetsiriseng, 2009; Saythongmany, 2016). Since then, it has gone through a series of reforms and has primarily been influenced by “colonialism, socialist revolution, and movement towards a market economy and privatization” (MacKinnon & Thepphasoulithone, 2014, p. 21). The first primary school in Laos was established at the end of the 19th century during the French colonization, and it was not until 1922 that the first secondary school was established in Laos (Phetsiriseng, 2009). During this time, any formal education was mostly offered to the Lao Loum male population only (Fox, 2003; Ogawa, 2008). Females and ethnic minorities were limited in their access to education, and the majority of the ethnic minorities were illiterate (Berge et al., 2017; Fox, 2003; Moxom & Hayden, 2015; Siharath, 2010).
The educational institutions and educators available in Laos were also quite limited (Moxom & Hayden, 2015; Siharath, 2010). The Buddhist monks provided early education in Laos from the local monasteries (Fox, 2003; Ogawa, 2008). This system of education by the Buddhist monks started in the 17th century, and it lasted well into the period of French colonization (Dorner & Gorman, 2011). Considering its history, Laos has made significant advancements in regards to reforming its education system (Langill, 2016).

Formal public education in the country of Laos only recently became available in the late 19th century. Due to the lack of resources and the culture of the country, education was still limited to the male population and members of the elite class (Berge et al., 2016). Also, the government did not prioritize the education system during the period of French colonization (Ogawa, 2008; Phetsiriseng, 2009; Weidman, 1999). As such, the infrastructure for higher education was vastly underdeveloped, and national universities did not offer programs for advanced degrees, such as a bachelor’s or master’s (Weidman, 1999). Such programs were only available to and operated by government officials. Thus, citizens of lower socioeconomic status had limited access to any form of higher education (Phetsiriseng, 2009; Weidman, 1999).

In the 1950s, the United States began its aid of Laos, which enabled the Royal Lao government to receive a substantial amount of funding (Evans, 2002). The Lao government used some of the funding to establish more primary and secondary schools in the most populated cities of the country. These changes enabled a more significant number of Lao citizens, regardless of their ethnicity, to receive a formal education. In 1958, the Royal Lao government established the Royal Institute of Law and Administration, the first higher education institution of the country (Adruce et al., 2017; Moxom & Hayden, 2015; Ogawa, 2008; Phetsiriseng, 2009). The institution was located in the capital city of Vientiane. A year later, the National Institute of
Pedagogy of Vientiane was also created (Adruce et al., 2017; Weidman, 1999). With the establishment of the Royal Institute of Law and Administration and the National Institute of Pedagogy of Vientiane, Laos had two institutions of higher learning in which its citizens could further enhance their skills and knowledge (Adruce et al., 2017; Ogawa, 2008).

Shortly afterward, in 1962, the Royal Lao government initiated the first education curriculum reform in the history of the country (Phetsiriseng, 2009). This reform mandated a bilingual curriculum through the incorporation of both the Lao and French languages into its education system. Students would begin receiving instruction in both Lao and French beginning in grade 3. This reform established a 13-year (6 years of primary, 4 years of secondary, and 3 years of postsecondary) general education system to its citizens (Phetsiriseng, 2009). However, this education reform only lasted for a decade. During the same period, the Lao Patriotic Front, an opposing party to the Royal Lao government, developed their general education system. This system used a 10-year (4 years of primary, 3 years of secondary, and 3 years of postsecondary) general education system (Phetsiriseng, 2009).

In 1975, after many years of civil unrest, the Royal Lao government lost political control of the country. They were unseated by the Communist party, the Lao Patriotic Front (hereafter referred to as the Pathet Lao). The country of Laos was renamed the Lao People’s Democratic Republic. As the primary governing body of the country, the Pathet Lao government reformed the Lao education system into an 11-year system (5 years of primary, 4 years of secondary, and 3 years of postsecondary). The newly formed Pathet Lao government wanted to ensure that its citizens were literate (Phetsiriseng, 2009; Siharath, 2010). As such, they made it a priority to ensure that primary education was available to its citizens because the population had a high illiteracy rate (Siharath, 2010). An underlying intent of the Pathet Lao government in reforming
The education system was also to educate its citizens to form a "new socialist person" (Creak, 2018, p. 762). In doing so, the citizens of the country would be integrated into the new socialist state and its ideology (Creak, 2018). Since priority was given to primary education, the Pathet Lao government paid less attention to higher education (Bourdet, 2001).

Although education was a priority to the Pathet Lao government, multitudes of educators and administrators of the previous Royal Lao government fled the country due to the new regime’s promotion of its Communist ideals (Dorner & Gorman, 2011; Evans, 2002). The teachers and administrators had witnessed first-hand the reform that transpired since the Pathet Lao government gained control of the country. They did not want to participate in any reforms made by the new government. After gaining power, the Pathet Lao government shut down newspaper agencies (Evans, 2002). They made it illegal for civil society to hold gatherings and imprisoned intellectuals and senior Royal Lao government officials to be reeducated (Creak, 2018; Evans, 2002). Due to the exodus of teachers and administrators, the Pathet Lao government was left with many vacancies in the country’s education system (Dorner & Gorman, 2011).

Ultimately, the Pathet Lao government was left with little choice but to limit the expansion of its education system, particularly in the arena of higher education (Siharath, 2010). The Pathet Lao government eventually established its institutions of higher learning. However, because of the lack of funding and qualified teaching professionals, the country had to look to outside sources to satisfy their higher education needs (Adruce et al., 2017). For the next decade, higher education was outsourced to the Soviet Bloc countries (Adruce et al., 2017; Dorner & Gorman, 2011; Sida, 2001; Siharath, 2010). Throughout the one and a half-decade after the ascension of the Pathet Lao government, an excess of 10,000 Lao students was sent to other
countries such as Vietnam, the Soviet Union, or other Eastern European countries (Poland, Bulgaria, East Germany) to pursue degrees in higher education (Adruce et al., 2017; Dorner & Gorman, 2011). Furthermore, during the years of 1976 to 1991, 40%–65% of the Lao students in higher education were sent abroad to obtain their degrees (Siharath, 2010).

Concurrently, during the decade following its rise to power, the Pathet Lao launched a series of reforms, hoping that these reforms would change the trajectory of the country’s economy (UNESCO, 2006). One of the reforms was the New Economic Mechanism (NEM) of 1986. At the heart of this reform was the expectation that the country will be uplifted from its current status as one of the least developed countries in the world (Adruce et al., 2017; Dorner & Gorman, 2011; Siharath, 2010, St-George, 2019). However, as the country embarked on implementing NEM, government officials realized that the country severely lacked a skillful and trained workforce (Bourdet, 2001).

Moreover, the Pathet Lao government faced the realization that the students who were sent out of the country for higher education were not meeting the government’s expectations (Sida, 2001). This realization of the lack of a skilled and trained workforce, coupled with the dissatisfaction in the performance of the Lao students who received higher education from outside countries, prompted the Pathet Lao government to reform its education system yet again (McKinnon & Thepphasoulithone, 2014). One of the factors that contributed to this lack of performance was the fact that the educated Lao students had studied in countries that were significantly different from their home country (Bourdet, 2001). The skills that the Lao students gained from these outside countries did not necessarily apply to the current conditions and needs of their country.
At the same time, when the Pathet Lao government realized their lack of a skilled and trained workforce, some of the outsourced countries began to collapse. The Soviet Union, one of Laos’ primary sources for higher education, collapsed. In its dissolution, financial aid to the Lao government was also eliminated (Dorner & Gorman, 2011). This prompted the Pathet Lao government to take the initiative of ensuring higher education for its citizens and not relying on outside sources. In 1995, the Prime Minister of the Lao government announced his decree of establishing the National University of Laos (NUOL) and the Private Higher Education decree of 1995 (UNESCO, 2006).

The Ministry of Education and Sports (MOE) in 1995 merged the Royal Institute of Law and Administration and 10 other private institutions of higher learning in Laos. Thus, the National University of Laos (NUOL) was formed (Moxom & Hayden, 2015). This university, the first for the country, offered a bachelor’s degree program to its students in 1996. In the years that followed, the country also formed several more university-level institutions. Currently, there are over 86 institutions of higher learning in Laos. These institutions (private and public) offered bachelor-level degree programs and enrolled about 79,000 students (Moxom & Hayden, 2015).

It has been over 33 years since the Lao government passed the New Economic Mechanism (NEM) of 1986. The country has made tremendous improvements to its higher education infrastructure since then. From 1995 to 2017, the enrollment rate of higher education increased from 1.3% to 15.7% (Boualaphet & Goto, 2019). Laos has a goal of eligibility to graduate from the status of least developed country by 2020 (MOES, 2015). However, this goal was extended to 2022 to give the country more time. If the country hopes to meet its 2022 target, the enrollment and successful graduation of its students from their respective institutions need to be a continued priority to the Lao government (Boualaphet & Goto, 2017). Meanwhile, other
challenges, such as improvement in educational infrastructure, the autonomy of the community of scholars, and reduction in corruption, continue to exist (Moxom & Hayden, 2015). The country and its government will need to address these challenges moving forward.

**Background of the Hmong**

The Hmong are an ethnic minority group currently found in various countries across the five continents of the world. The origin of the Hmong has been difficult to authenticate because of the challenges and tragedies of its people (Hillmer, 2010). The uncertainty resulted in various theories about the origin and history of the Hmong. However, few have been supported by genetic evidence (Lee, 2008). In particular, one theory suggested that the Hmong originally lived in central Siberia. This theory suggested that the Hmong are of Caucasian origin, and they migrated to China (Lee, 2008). Regardless of the theories that existed about the Hmong, there are recurrent themes found throughout the speculations. Themes of discrimination, resistance, and, most importantly, migration (Lee, 2010; McCall, 1999; Yang, 2003). Despite their unclear historical origins, a large population of Hmong currently reside in the country of Laos, and it is this population that will be the focus of the current study.

According to various literature and genetic research, the Hmong people are linked to the groups of people who inhabited the Yangtze River as early as 5000 B.C. (Lee, 2008; Yang, 2003). As such, the vast majority of the Hmong population in the world resides in the southeastern provinces of China (Britannica, 2017; Lee, 2010; Ling & Austin, 2010; Pfaff, 1995; Yang, 2003). However, after centuries of conflict with the [Han] Chinese, the Hmong eventually migrated south into the mountainous regions of Southeast Asia (Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and Burma) in the late 18th century (Lee, 2010; Ling & Austin, 2010; Mayo, 2013; Yang, 2003). The
migration of the Hmong from China was not a one-time event. Instead, it was a continuous wave of migration (Yang, 2003).

After they arrived in Southeast Asia, the Hmong experienced many years of peace, especially those who settled in Thailand (Lee, 2010; Yang, 2003). Of the countries in Southeast Asia, Thailand was the only country that had not been colonized by the Europeans. Perhaps it was due to this that the Hmong in Thailand had progressed more than their counterparts who resided in the neighboring countries of Vietnam, Laos, and Burma (Lee, 2010). The other Hmong who settled in other Southeast Asian countries, especially Laos and Vietnam, did not have such a peaceful life. Similar to what they experienced in China, the Hmong in Laos and Vietnam was once again entangled in the conflicts of the region. After settling in Southeast Asia, the Hmong encountered three wars that changed the trajectory of their history (Tatman, 2004; Yang, 2003).

The first two wars occurred during the late 1800s and early 1900s during the French colonization of Southeast Asia. Around 1896, after the French colonized Southeast Asia, the Hmong took part in an uprising to protest the heavy taxation of the French. Twenty years later, another revolution took place in which the Hmong was involved. This second uprising was led by a Hmong man named "Pa Chay Vue," and, like the first uprising, protested the heavy taxation of the French (Lee, 2010; Yang, 2003). Both revolutions resulted in the deaths of many Hmong and caused the displacement of Hmong families in Vietnam and Laos. However, the two wars and conflict during the French colonization was trivial compared to the third war in the region. This third war would have the most substantial impact on the Hmong. Furthermore, the third war would cause the Hmong to be dispersed all across the five continents of the world (Yang, 2003).
In 1959, a civil war erupted in Laos between two political factions, the Royal Lao Government and the Pathet Lao (Evans, 2001). During the same period, Southeast Asia was experiencing a surge in communism, and the Vietnam War was slowing beginning. As the Vietnam War took flight, the Hmong became players of the conflict, and they were divided into three factions (Yang, 2003). The first faction fought with the Royal Lao Government, and they were under the leadership of General Vang Pao (a general of the Royal Lao Government). A second faction sided with the Communist Pathet Lao and the last faction were those who were neutral. During the 15 years of the civil war, tens of thousands of Hmong men died (Pfaff, 1997; Yang, 2003). When the dust settled, and the civil war ended, the Communist Pathet Lao gained control of the country. The Hmong, who sided with the Pathet Lao and those who were neutral, did not have difficulty adjusting to the new government regime.

However, the thousands of Hmong who sided with the Royal Lao Government had to flee the country of Laos out of fear of retaliation by the Pathet Lao government (Evans, 2001). The majority were resettled as refugees in France, French Guyana, Australia, Canada, and the United States (Yang, 2003). Those who were not resettled returned to Laos after many years in the refugee camps in Thailand, where they remain today.

**The Hmong and Higher Education**

Currently, the Hmong is one of the 49 official ethnic groups that comprise the population of the country of Laos (World Health Organization, 2019). When the Hmong originally migrated to Laos from China in the late 18th century, they mainly settled in the highlands where they lived in peace (Yang, 2003). They lived in isolation with other fellow clansmen and were farmers who practiced slash-and-burn farming (Ling, 2010). The majority of the Hmong people did not have any formal education. They did not have a native writing system, and it was not until the late
1950s that a formal writing system was developed for them (Lee, 2010). The Hmong do not speak Lao, making education very challenging because academic instruction was conducted in Lao. Although the majority of the Hmong in Laos do not have any formal education, they place a high value on obtaining a higher education and view it as a way for their families to advance in society (Her et al., 2019).

However, like other historically marginalized minorities of Laos, the opportunity for education for the Hmong is limited (Inui, 2015). Few have a chance to become educated, and the majority have no formal education. As a minority group, the Hmong have to overcome barriers to attain an education (Inui, 2015). Some of the obstacles stem from the cost of tuition, the distance of the institution, and the need of the family for labor (United Nations Population Fund, 2015). Regardless, as the country of Laos is progressing was developing its educational infrastructure, the Hmong growth rate in higher education was also growing.

**Context**

Student persistence in higher education is a phenomenon that has been occurring in institutions around the world (Aljohani, 2016). Furthermore, it has also been one of the most researched phenomena in higher education (Metz, 2004). The phenomenon of student persistence existed for all types of students regardless of gender, ethnicity, level of socioeconomic status, and ability. It also existed in all kinds of institutions, irrespective of whether it is a private, public, for-profit, or non-profit (Tinto, 1993). The literature provided extensive reasons for student persistence. These factors are classified under various categories, such as (a) personal, (b) academic, (c) social, and (d) institutional (Aljohani, 2016; Tinto, 1986, 1993).

Although some theories suggested that student persistence was a result of the institution’s inability to assist its students, other approaches placed the responsibility on the students.
Depending on the literature, it may suggest that a student’s experience in an institution may have a more significant influence on the decision to stay or leave before graduation. Regardless, the issue of student persistence is complex and there are many factors and reasons that contributed to its existence. The Hmong college student in Laos also experienced the phenomenon of student persistence. However, the reasons for their continued persistence may or may not be attributed to the factors suggested by the literature.

**Conceptual Framework**

For decades, institutions of higher learning have been trying to understand and explain how they can retain their students (Tinto, 2017). Due to its importance, many theories were developed to explain the phenomenon of student retention and persistence. However, these theories were developed from the perspectives of western institutions and western students. Few studies have been conducted about the persistence of Asian students in eastern institutions. To be specific, few, if any, have been done regarding the student population in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Fox, 2003).

As the conceptual framework for this study, Tinto’s (2017) motivation and persistence model identified four aspects of motivation that lead to student persistence. The four dimensions were (a) goals, (b) self-efficacy, (c) sense of belonging, and (d) perception of the curriculum (Tinto, 2017). The four aspects were applied as the foundation for understanding whether Hmong college students in Laos were driven to persist by the same motivational factors as students in western institutions.

**Statement of the Problem**

There is a problem in higher education in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic. Specifically, this problem pertains to the persistence of Hmong college students in Laos.
Currently, only 16.1% of students who graduated from secondary education in Laos enrolled in higher education (Inui, 2019). However, as described by Boualaphet (2019), dropout rates are a significant challenge for institutions of higher learning in Laos. Specifically, the dropout rates for students in tertiary education is at its highest during the third year (Boualaphet, 2019). This problem impacted the Hmong college students of Laos because of the additional challenges of being an ethnic minority in the country. Many possible factors contributed to this problem. Among them is a lack of goals (intrinsic or extrinsic), a low level of self-efficacy, a lack of a sense of belonging to an institution, and a negative perception of the institution’s curriculum.

As previously mentioned, the country of Laos is one of the least developed countries in the world (Langill, 2016). Since then, the country attempted to open its market to the world, with the expectation that this would stimulate the country’s economy. However, government officials quickly learned that its industry and labor market were severely lacking and could not meet the demands of a global market (Bourdet, 2001). The country realized that it must intervene to ensure that its citizens have the skills to be competitive in an open market economy. Therefore, the country passed various legislation that invested in and prioritized its higher education infrastructure. Still, even after the passage of these statutes, the governance in Laos is relying on educational practices that are not conducive to advancing the current educational environment (Chounlamany, 2014).

Government officials in Laos identified student success in higher education, particularly the reduction of dropout and repetition, as one of its highest-priority goals (Boualaphet & Goto, 2019; Cerdan-Infantes et al., 2016; St-George, 2019). However, a challenge in the resolution of dropout and repetition has been the lack of data (Boualaphet & Goto, 2019; Moxom & Hayden, 2015). As a developing country, there has been great difficulty in gathering educational data.
about student attrition. Research has been very limited in Laos (Fox, 2003; Moxom & Hayden, 2015; Siharath, 2010), and the country continues to be severely under-researched, especially regarding higher education. It is especially true when it pertains to the research on minority ethnic groups and disparities (Langill, 2016).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine the factors influencing the persistence and retention of Hmong college students in Laos. Specifically, the study focused on whether goals, self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and perception of the curriculum are factors that influenced Hmong college students in Laos to persist. As a method of understanding the phenomenon, a single-case study design was utilized.

According to Tinto (2017), college student persistence was an embodiment of motivation. A student must want to persist, and when he does, the student did whatever it took to ensure his persistence. This study examined whether Tinto’s model of student motivation and persistence and its four factors of (a) goals, (b) self-efficacy, (c) sense of belonging, and (d) perception of the curriculum had an impact on the persistence of Hmong college students residing in Laos. If the four factors identified by Tinto do not apply to these students, the researcher hopes to identify more relevant factors.

Research Questions

In a qualitative study, there exist two forms of questions: (a) central question and (b) associated subquestions (Creswell, 2014). This qualitative case study was guided by the following central and associated subquestions:
Central Research Question

How do Hmong students in Laos perceive the factors influencing their persistence and retention in higher education?

Associated Subresearch Questions

1. What motivated Hmong college students in Laos to persist in higher education?
2. How do Hmong college students in Laos perceive goals as a factor in their persistence and retention?
3. How do Hmong college students in Laos perceive self-efficacy as a factor in their persistence and retention?
4. How do Hmong college students in Laos perceive a sense of belonging as a factor in their persistence and retention?
5. How do Hmong college students in Laos perceive the curriculum as a factor in their persistence and retention?
6. What student support services do the universities provide to assist in improving Hmong students’ persistence and retention?

Rationale, Relevance, and Significance of the Study

Rationale

Educational literature on student persistence and retention has predominantly been focused on institutions in the west and its students (Gloria & Ho, 2003; Kommers & Pham, 2016). Although there were a few studies conducted on Hmong students, these students were also enrolled in western institutions (Lin et al., 2015). Minimal studies have been done on Hmong students in the country of Laos. Also, while some of the research on Hmong students pertain to culture, diversity, career development, and social support, few examined persistence
and retention (DePouw, 2012, Her et al., 2019; Lee, 2017; Lin et al., 2015; Swirkowski, 1997; Yang, 2014). This study addressed a void that has been lacking as it pertained to Hmong students in Laos relating to persistence and retention in higher education.

Another justification for the current study was the limited number of research institutions in the country of Laos (Moxom & Hayden, 2015; Siharath, 2010). Currently, there is a scarcity of institutions that are equipped with the skills, knowledge, experience, and certification to conduct scholarly research (Moxom & Hayden, 2015; Siharath, 2010). Of the five most prominent public universities in Laos, only the National University of Laos is fully equipped to do research (Adruce et al., 2017). Secondly, institutions of higher learning are severely underfunded by the Lao government (Moxom & Hayden, 2015; St-George, 2019). Due to the lack of financial resources, faculty members at these institutions are not adequately compensated for their teaching responsibilities. To meet their financial needs, faculty members have to resort to teaching specialized courses outside of their institutions (Siharath, 2010). In doing so, the faculty members do not have the time necessary to conduct research.

In addition to the lack of researchers, institutions were also not equipped with the necessary infrastructure to conduct scholarly research (Siharath, 2010). Some of the institutions do not have the facilities needed to support faculty members in their research endeavors. Lastly, there are difficulties in gathering data that would not necessarily arise in other more-developed countries (Boualaphet & Goto, 2019). For instance, it is rare to collect random data from any academic institution. The government censors the data, and this process makes it difficult to distinguish whether the information is valid or invalid.
Relevance

Reliable and relevant data needed to address student persistence and retention are limited (Ogawa, 2009). This researcher hopes that the data collected from this study will assist in an increased understanding of student persistence and retention in Laos. The data from the research will fill some of the voids in the lack of research data for the country of Laos. Although the institution that was conducting this research resides outside of Laos, the results of the study would still apply to the institutions of Laos. Furthermore, the research will be a catalyst to prompt further studies on the country of Laos.

Significance of the Study

This study addressed the factors contributing to the persistence and retention of Hmong college students at their respective institutions in Laos. Educational access in Laos is currently influenced by geographic location, gender, and ethnicity (Chounlamany, 2014). As an ethnic minority, the Hmong face multiple challenges and barriers in their pursuit of higher education, barriers that were not typically experienced by the general Lao student population (Inui, 2015). From the result of the data collected in this study, institutions of higher learning in Laos will have a better understanding of the Hmong college student population.

Definition of Terms

The following definitions are provided to clarify key terms and concepts which are used in the study:

Attrition: A reduction in numbers usually as a result of resignation, retirement, or death (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). In higher education, attrition refers to a student canceling, leaving, not re-enrolling, or stopping their education prior to graduation (Beer & Lawson, 2017).
Dropout: The act of abandoning or ending any attempt on an activity or chosen path (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). In higher education, dropout pertains to a student terminating his educational endeavors at an institution of higher learning (Tinto, 1993).

Institution of higher learning: Any school that provides education beyond the secondary level. These institutions include but are not limited to universities and colleges of various professional schools such as medicine, law, music, arts, and education (Encyclopedia Britannica, n.d.; Merriam-Webster, n.d.)

Persistence: The act of continuing determinedly or willfully regardless of any levels of resistance, demand, or vulnerabilities one may encounter (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). In higher education, persistence pertains to a student continuing his education regardless of encountered barriers or struggles until graduation (Tinto, 1993).

Retention: The act of being retained or kept (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). In higher education, retention pertains to a student being retained by the institution from one semester to the next until graduation (Tinto, 1993).

Assumptions, Delimitations, and Limitations

Assumptions

For this case study, there were several assumptions, delimitations, and limitations that were considered. First, this research assumed that all participants were honest when responding to the in person interview and the reflection journal questions. When the participants shared any information, it was assumed that the participants are truthful and the shared experiences were that of the participants. It was also assumed that the participants did not provide false information about their lived experiences. Moreover, the participants did not think that their response was the right answer or that it was the answer that the researcher was seeking.
Secondly, the standards for participation in the study was appropriate. It assured that the sample encompassed those participants who had experiences comparable to the phenomenon of the study. Lastly, all participants had a direct interest in participating transparently, and participants did not have any ulterior motives.

**Delimitations**

The primary delimitation revolved around the experiences of the participants who are Hmong college students in Laos and have completed at least one year in an institution of higher learning. The researcher’s decision to only include those participants meeting the research criteria accepted that all Hmong college students in Laos experiences are similar. The interview and reflective journal questions were derived from concepts of published scholarly journals that pertained to persistence and retention in higher education.

**Limitations**

A limitation was that this study might not reflect the actual experiences of other Hmong college students attending their respective institutions of higher learning in Laos. Each Hmong college student in Laos may have a different experience according to his or her educational journey. This research may or may not represent the experiences of all the Hmong college students in Laos. Further research will be essential to determine whether the findings from this study could be generalized to other Hmong college students in Laos.

**Chapter 1 Summary**

The consequences of dropping out of an institution of higher learning are substantial for all stakeholders: the students and the institution (Tinto, 1993). The dropout rate can also have an impact on a country’s economy (Kyophilavong et al., 2018). However, the consequences are not as dire as it was in a developing country (Adruce et al., 2017; Ogawa, 2009; UNESCO, 2006).
For the Hmong people and the country of Laos, dropping out of an institution of higher learning have severe and rippling consequences. The Hmong college students who did not persist and dropped out will not only lose an opportunity for personal advancement but also failed to contribute to the economic growth of the country (Kyophilavong et al., 2018). Therefore, it is imperative that the Hmong college students in Laos persist and are retained by their institutions. It is also essential to then investigate the factors that influence the Hmong college students to persist. This study examined the reasoning behind Hmong college student persistence and retention in Laos.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Student persistence and student retention - although similar, each has a different meaning to a student and his institution of higher learning (Tinto, 2017). Persistence pertains to a phenomenon in which a student effectively satisfies specific course sequence requirements leading to the attainment of a degree. Alternatively, retention implied that a student is remaining and consistently re-enrolling in an institution of higher learning through the realization of his degree (Manyanga et al., 2017). Tinto (2017) stated that students seek to persist in their educational endeavors, regardless of which institution they attend. The institutions of higher learning, however, try to retain their students from the initial enrollment process to graduation. While retention is essential to the institution, the students are not concerned with being retained. Instead, they want to persist (Tinto, 2017). However, the students cannot hope to endure without the assistance of the academic institution, and the educational institution cannot wish to retain if the students are not willing to persist. Both are dependent on each other for success.

The Study Topic

The topic for the study was on the factors influencing Hmong college students’ persistence and retention. The purpose was to identify the elements influencing Hmong college students’ persistence and retention in higher education in the Lao’s People Democratic Republic (Laos). Regardless of geographical location, one of the critical responsibilities of higher learning is student retention and graduation (Costa et al., 2018). It is the goal of every academic institution for students to complete the degree in their chosen fields of study on time.

Although an institution wants to retain its students, it is ultimately the students who decide whether they will continue their education or withdraw. Tinto (2017) asserted that persistence was an essential trait required for an individual to remain steadfast in pursuing his or
her education, even in the face of surmounting odds. As a student, it could mean staying up long hours to study or to work on an assignment, as well as balancing professional, academic, and personal responsibilities, all to complete graduation requirements.

Notably, not all students who entered an institution of higher learning will persist until graduation. Also, even if students continue, they may not necessarily remain with the same institution throughout their educational journey. During their educational endeavors, obstacles, which included academics and non-academic barriers, may arise to prevent them from persisting (Daley, 2010; Morrow & Ackerman, 2012; Szabo & Bacs-Ban, 2015). An institution of higher learning must wonder what may have transpired to have resulted in these students either dropping out or transferring out of the institution (Leveson et al., 2013; Rump et al., 2017). There must have been certain factors, such as personal challenges or difficulties with the coursework that the students encountered. These challenges may have driven students to consider no other option than to discontinue their academic studies or to seek education elsewhere. Likewise, for those students who decided to persist through graduation or remain with their initial institution, there also must have been certain factors that contributed to their decision.

The Context

Often, student persistence was the result of a variety of factors, and educational practitioners around the world have developed various models and theories to explain the phenomenon (Aljohani, 2016). Tinto (2017) developed a model of student motivation and persistence from the perspective of the student as an explanation of the phenomenon. Typically, researchers have proposed theories to explain the phenomenon of student persistence, but from the perspective of the institution (Tinto, 2017). These theories focused on the institution and what it can do to improve student retention. Few schools concentrated on the students and why
they decided to persist. However, Tinto (2017) suggested that if researchers speak with students, they will find that students have a different perspective on why they choose to continue their education.

Tinto (2017) asserted that students do not place any value on being retained by the institution. Student interest was and will always be in persisting until the attainment of the desired degree regardless of the particular institution attended. The students can start at Institution A and willfully transfer to Institution B if it means they will be able to persist and receive their degrees. This model suggested that it was the students and their level of motivation that were integral factors in determining whether students continued to the attainment of their degrees.

Although Tinto’s model of student motivation and persistence places the responsibility solely on the students themselves, the institution also played a role. According to Tinto (2017), an institution of higher learning’s purpose was to understand why students persisted. In doing so, it can enact changes and practices that will help the students continue their education. Therefore, an institution can adopt essential practices that will ensure students want to and can persist in completing the program of study with the university. For example, an institution can provide intervention services that will monitor a student’s academic performance. Whenever the institution notices a less than satisfactory performance or excessive absenteeism from the student, the institution can take action through direct contact by an academic counselor to engage the student. Other changes that can be initiated by the institution can include increasing student support services such as longer hours for student counseling and tutorial services.
The Significance

The choice to discontinue one’s education is a hefty one and carried many potential ramifications both to the students and to the institution itself (Tinto, 1993). First of all, when a student ceased to persist, he suffered two types of financial challenges. The first challenge pertained to student debt. Students who dropped out of college will incur financial liability from their semesters in school, but without reaping any of the benefits. Robb et al. (2012) confirmed that the cost of attending college has been increasing yearly. Not all students come from a wealthy family. As a result, they have to take student loans to pay for their education.

College graduates generally earn more income throughout a lifetime than non-college graduates. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2018), an individual who has a bachelor’s degree earn 64% more weekly than an individual who only has a high school diploma. Also, the higher one’s level of educational attainment, the less likely he or she will be unemployed (Andronie & Andronie, 2014; Chan, 2016; Erdem & Tugcu, 2012; Nunez & Livanos, 2009; Qazi et al., 2017). Specifically, the unemployment rate for an individual who has only a high school diploma is 4.1%. In contrast, the unemployment rate for an individual who has a bachelor’s degree is 2.2%. For an individual who has a doctoral degree, that rate drops even lower to 1.6% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018).

Secondly, when an institution did not retain a student, the institution will experience a financial loss as well (O’Keeffe, 2013). Johnson (2016) claimed that institutions of higher education are not just a provider of knowledge; they are also large and complicated businesses. Often, an institution of higher learning is a business that generates billions of dollars. For public 2-year colleges and universities, tuition and fees account for 17% of their revenue; for public 4-year colleges and universities, that percentage increased to 22%. When students do not persist,
the institution stands to lose out on the cost of education from these students. This loss of tuition may mean the difference in whether the institution can provide services or offer a course needed for graduation (O’Keeffe, 2013; Tinto, 1993).

Another form of financial loss for the institution is through appropriations. Institutions of higher learning may also be receiving state and federal funding. According to Johnson (2016), 44% of revenues of public 2-year colleges are from appropriations in the form of state and federal funds. For public 4-year colleges and universities, 20% of its revenues are from grants from the state and federal government (Johnson, 2016). However, because the institution has been receiving state and federal funding, the institution must retain a certain percentage of its students. When an institution does not meet the student retention requirements set by the state and federal government, it will result in the loss of appropriation funds. Consequently, the decline in funds will impact student services and the availability of courses for students.

Due to its potential financial impact, the decision to cease one’s studies at an institution of higher education is even more confounding. The student must have experienced particular life or academic events that were so difficult that he was willing to forgo a future of potentially higher earnings. Oreopoulous and Petronijevic (2013) asserted that the value of education and its benefits will always outweigh its cost. In the case of students who do not graduate, however, the circumstances leading them to drop out must have exceeded the value of continuing their education.

Two critical questions arise in deciding to cease one’s education. Did the student decide by choice or by necessity? Did the student willingly discontinue studies, or did circumstances push them to entertain no other option than to stop? While life events may prevent some college students from continuing their education, in certain instances, it was the institution that was
inadvertently responsible for preventing a student from continuing (Tinto, 1993). Maybe the student failed multiple semesters and was academically dismissed. In such cases, even if the student showed an interest in proceeding with his studies, he may lack the appropriate skills needed to meet the academic expectations of the institution.

Through the understanding of why Hmong students persist, administrators of the various institutions of higher learning in Laos will have the appropriate knowledge needed when making program and student services decisions. The administrators will be able to see through the eyes of the Hmong students and hear their voices. They will have a better understanding of why Hmong students persist. Currently, the scholarly research literature on the education field severely lacks in Laos for a variety of reasons (Moxom & Hayden, 2015). Although institutions of higher learning in Laos may want data to assist in ensuring the persistence and retention of its students, they do not always possess the necessary data (Moxom & Hayden, 2015; Ogawa, 2008; Bourdet, 2001; Siharath, 2010).

This study will serve as a resource for institutions of higher learning in Laos to better understand its Hmong student population. From the findings of this study, institutions of higher education in Laos will be able to make a more informed choice regarding the allocation of funds for student services. The allocation of funds may not necessarily be only to the Hmong students but to all students at the university. Furthermore, the institution will have the data needed to ensure that current Hmong college students and others continue to endure. Moreover, Lao institutions of higher learning will be able to ensure that future Hmong students will persist as well.
The Problem Statement

This study intended to research the factors that influence Hmong college students’ persistence and retention in Laos. Higher education in the Lao’s People Democratic Republic (Laos) faced a fundamental problem, the persistence and retention of its college students. Currently, only 16.1% of students who graduate from secondary education in Laos enroll in higher education (Inui, 2019). Of the percentage of students enrolled in higher education, not all persisted through graduation. Boualaphet (2019) described that dropout rates are a significant challenge for the government of Laos. Specifically, the dropout rates for students in higher education are at their peak during the third year (Boualaphet, 2019). Typically, more college students drop out during their third year than those who graduate with their degrees.

The problem of persistence and retention impacted all college students in Laos, including the Hmong students. As a minority, the Hmong students have to overcome double the amount of barriers in the attainment of their education (Inui, 2015). In the year 2000, the Lao government passed the Educational Law. This law stated that “All Lao citizens (nondiscrimination of ethnic group, race, religion, sex, and social conditions) have the right to education” (as cited by Adruce et al., 2017, p. 3). However, access to higher education is still not equitable to all citizens of Laos. The equity gap in higher education in Laos is still significantly wide as female and ethnic minorities face the most barriers in enrollment (Moxom & Hayden, 2015). Higher education has not been easily accessible to the minority students of Laos; when it was available, the lack of financial resources became the next challenge (Boualophet & Goto, 2019; Inui, 2019; Langill, 2016). Higher education participation in Laos has been tilted more towards individuals from families whose income is higher and who are on the more top end of the socioeconomic status (Moxom & Hayden, 2015).
Tinto (2017) explained that college student motivation is influenced by their persistence. Also, four aspects such as (a) goals, (b) academic self-efficacy, (c) sense of belonging to an institution, and (d) perception of an institution’s curriculum influence motivation. Some of the possible factors that contribute to the Hmong students’ ability to persist and be retained by their educational institution may mirror Tinto’s model. It was the intent of this study to provide more insights into the issue.

Although there has been much research reported focusing on student persistence, few studies have been conducted regarding the state of student persistence and retention in Laos. Specifically, very little research has been conducted regarding the Hmong college student population in Laos. This study will contribute to the body of knowledge needed to address the problem of student persistence by identifying the factors that contributed to the persistence of Hmong students in Laos. Through the findings from this research, institutions of higher learning in Laos will have the necessary data to enact program and administrative change. Furthermore, not only was the research on the Hmong college students’ population in Laos limited, scholarly research in education has been non-existent for the country as a whole. The results from this study will fill the gap in scholarly research on Hmong college students in Laos. It will also fill a gap for the entire higher education field in Laos.

The Organization

This chapter examined the literature about student persistence and retention in higher education. Many practitioners have studied dropout and persistence in higher education, each exploring different factors and experiences to explain these phenomena. In particular, the task of addressing the issue of student attrition has been one of the more pressing concerns of the government and institutions of higher learning (Leveson et al., 2013). Education can be
interpreted as one of the pillars of society. Without it, the severe consequences would alter all aspects of our communities. Accordingly, scholars and researchers have invested much time and resources into the issue of student persistence. While there have been many theories and models of student persistence, Tinto’s model of institutional departure has been consistent (Aljohani, 2016).

The literature review addressed the contexts of student persistence in the Conceptual Framework section. A discussion of Tinto’s model of student motivation and persistence is in the section. The Review of Research and Methodological Literature provides an examination of theoretical models of student persistence in higher education. The intent in this section was to offer insight as to why some students persisted in higher education while others do not.

The Methodological Issues section included an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the issues on the methodology of research conducted on student persistence in higher education. The Synthesis of Research Findings section provided an overview of some of the findings of previous studies on student persistence. An analysis of earlier study results is presented for a better understanding of the research. Additionally, conclusions regarding the four aspects of motivations: (a) goals, (b) self-efficacy, (c) a sense of belonging, and (d) perception of the curriculum are reviewed. Lastly, a Critique of the Research Findings will identify any flaws, gaps, or issues with the previous research.

All research was performed via the Ed.D. Library Resources: Find Articles tab in the Concordia University, Portland website. The following keywords were used to search for the literature: dropout in higher education, higher education and persistence, goals and persistence, self-efficacy and persistence, student sense of belonging and persistence, perception of institution’s curriculum, and Tinto’s institutional departure model. Furthermore, the following
database was also utilized to find resources: ERIC, Education Database, Education Source, Dissertation, and Theses: Humanities and Social Sciences Collection, and Google Scholar. Overall, there were a total of 92 peer-reviewed articles, 16 dissertations/theses, and 21 online sources referenced, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

A Summary of Studies by Theoretical Areas

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Topic of Review</th>
<th>Peer-Reviewed Articles</th>
<th>Dissertation &amp; Thesis</th>
<th>Online Sources</th>
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<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Persistence &amp; Retention in Higher Ed.</td>
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<td>5. Self-Efficacy &amp; Persistence</td>
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<td>6. Sense of Belonging &amp; Persistence</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Perception of Curriculum</td>
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<td>8. Higher Ed. in Laos</td>
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<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Hmong and Higher Ed.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
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Conceptual Framework

There exist multiple theoretical frameworks that were developed to shed light on the phenomenon of student persistence. These models were tested and analyzed through numerous studies at various academic institutions and on an international level (Aljohani, 2016; Ethington, 1990; Holden, 2018). In the analysis and implementation of these frameworks, many criticisms were reported, specifically for Tinto’s institutional departure model. Critics argued that Tinto’s model should not and could not be uniformly applied to all institutions of higher education due to the diversity of the campuses (Aljohani, 2016). Not all students neatly fit into and undergo the phases of separation, transition, and incorporation upon entering college.
Moreover, Tinto’s model put the sole responsibility of persistence on the student, which implied that the academic institution had limited accountability in increasing and/or decreasing student persistence on its campus. Notably, in 2017, Tinto presented another model (Tinto, 2017). Although this new model reiterated the importance of the student’s responsibility in his or her college persistence, it also made the institution accountable by indicating that the campus and its roles did indeed influence students to persist.

Although Tinto’s institutional departure model was the subject of criticism, it was also one of the most widely used frameworks in the study of student persistence and retention (Kommers & Pham, 2016). Importantly, other frameworks, such as the student–faculty informal contact model and the student retention integrated model, utilized Tinto’s model of institutional departure as a framework (Aljohani, 2016). Correspondingly, it is Tinto’s 2017 model of student motivation and persistence that was used as the framework for this research.

The model of student motivation and persistence was derived from the updated work of Tinto (2017), who is well known for the development of the institutional departure model. As Tinto (2017) states:

persistence is but one form of motivation that is shaped not so much by student behaviors and interactions with others on campus, though clearly it is, as it is student perceptions of those interactions and the meanings they derive from them as to their capacity to succeed in college, their sense of belonging in the institution, and their perception of the value of the curriculum they are asked to study for their degree (p. 263).

Tinto’s (2017) model of student motivation and persistence does not place the responsibility solely on the institution or the students. Instead, it provides a model in which, through the understanding of the student’s perspective, an institution of higher learning can
influence its students’ motivation to persist. Tinto (2017) described that the model was a different perspective on understanding student persistence and retention. Furthermore, this new perspective was more critical. It provided an institution with a better understanding of those students who have historically been underserved. In this study, the student population, the Hmong, was one that has been historically underserved and has had to overcome various barriers to their education (Inui, 2015). Therefore, it was appropriate that Tinto’s updated model be utilized as the framework.

According to the model of student motivation and persistence, students must want to persist when attending an institution of higher learning, and their persistence was exhibited through their level of motivation. Guiffrida et al. (2013) stated that there is an essential relationship between the motivational orientation of a college student and his academic success. Also, in all aspects of life, there are challenges that an individual will encounter. When a student began his educational journey at an institution of higher learning, he too will face many challenges that were nonexistent in high school. It was these challenges that ultimately shape the student and bring out his or her character. The student must stay motivated despite, or because of, the adversities he or she may face to exhibit persistence (Guiffrida et al., 2013; Leveson, 2013; Tinto, 2017).

While facing the challenge head-on was essential, it was not the most critical aspect of persistence (Tinto, 1993). Instead, what was vital was how a student chooses to act when faced with a challenge. That was the key to determining the student’s level of persistence. When a student faced a challenge in higher education, he must want to persist and strive to exert all his efforts to find a resolution to the problem (Tinto, 1993, 2017). Failure to do so will result in the student dropping out. Furthermore, a student’s ability to persist in his education will either
increase or decrease depending on his experiences at the institution. Also, the experiences that that individual gained will have an impact on his motivation and determine his persistence (Tinto, 2017).

Tinto (2017) asserted that there are four aspects of an individual’s college experience that will have an impact on his motivation. The first aspect of motivation pertained to the student’s goals. Particular goals will vary among students. The second was the student’s academic self-efficacy. Importantly, the student’s belief in himself was instrumental in determining his academic success. The third aspect of motivation was a sense of belonging in an institution. Students with a strong sense of belonging are more engaged in learning, which impacted their academic performance. Finally, the student’s perceived worth or relevance of the institution’s curriculum was the last aspect. Students must feel that the coursework was meaningful to them if they are to be motivated to complete the work. Together, the four factors were vital in determining whether a student will decide to persist in his education or drop out before graduation.

**Review of Research and Methodological Literature**

Student persistence and retention has been a phenomenon in the field of higher education (Aljohani, 2016). In most instances, when students leave the institution before the expected two or four years required to complete their studies, they do so without having completed their degrees (Tinto, 1993). According to the National Center for Education Statistics in the United States, the retention rate for an undergraduate first-time, full-time college student was 81% (Undergraduate Retention and Graduation Rates, 2019). For other countries, primarily undeveloped countries such as Laos, the retention rates are much lower and are difficult to
determine (Boualaphet & Goto, 2019). Nevertheless, it was still relevant and essential to ascertain the understanding of college student persistence and retention.

It is a phenomenon that has been researched since the establishment of some of the earliest institutions of higher learning (Aljohani, 2016). According to Berger (2016), some of the first studies of student persistence and retention started in the 1600s (as cited by Aljohani, 2016). However, it was in the 1970s that some of the most prominent theories of student attrition started gaining attention and recognition. One of the earliest reported theoretical models of student attrition was studied by Spady. The model was referred to as a model of the undergraduate dropout process. As stated by Berger et al. (2012), Spady’s model was considered “the first theoretical and systematic model in the literature of student retention” (As cited by Aljohani, 2016, p.4). It offered the first comprehensive explanation for the student retention phenomenon. The other models that would follow, as reported in the literature, were extensions of Spady’s undergraduate dropout process model.

**Undergraduate Dropout Process Model**

According to Spady’s undergraduate dropout process model, the dropout process began with the interaction between the student’s academic and social systems of the institution. Within the two systems are two factors that will influence a student’s decision to withdraw from college (Aljohani, 2016). Thus, a student’s decision to persist in college will be affected by the interplay of both the academic and social systems, mainly through their ability to perform academically as well as via their critical relationships at the institution (Spady, 1971).

Furthermore, between the two components of academic performance and relationships, academic achievement appears to be a more accurate determinant of student persistence (Spady, 1971). Students may develop several friendships and have a wide range of social support while
in college. However, if they are not able to handle the rigorous academic expectations of the institution, they will most likely drop out (Spady, 1971).

**Institutional Departure Model**

Another dominant theory of persistence was Tinto’s institutional departure model. This model further expanded Spady’s theoretical views of the undergraduate student departure process. The first version of Tinto’s theory, however, incorporated Van Gennep’s theory on the rites of passage in the explanation of student persistence (Aljohani, 2016). Student persistence was viewed as the desired outcome to a series of stages. The purpose in viewing student persistence as a rite of passage was to “envision the process as functionally similar to that of becoming incorporated into the life of human communities generally and that this process is marked by stages of passage that the student must pass to persist” (Tinto, 1993, p. 94).

Tinto’s first model suggested that a student’s first year of experience in college was instrumental in determining whether he would develop persistence. The experiences during that first year are divided into three stages: separation, transition, and incorporation (Aljohani, 2016; Tinto, 1993). In advancing from one stage to the next, a student would demonstrate persistence.

The model also suggested that a successful student must be able to effectively separate himself from the previous communities in which he was involved. These communities are his family and the high school community (Tinto, 1988). Furthermore, Tinto (1993) stated, “many college students are, after all, moving from one community or set of communities, most typically those of the family and [the] local high school, to another, that of the college” (p. 94). The process of separation may be both mental and/or physical. Upon successfully detaching himself from these former associations, the student can then transition himself into the college community. Tinto (1993) argued that “having moved away from the norms and behavioral
patterns of past associations, the person now faces the problem of finding and adopting new ones appropriate to the college setting” (p. 98). To successfully integrate himself into the new college community, the student can join various student organizations and fraternities.

Other methods of integration consist of participating in campus activities, attending scholarly lectures, and/or visiting the campus student union. Students can visit with faculty members to develop rapport, or they can also join study groups to interact with peers. Overall, there are multiple ways and opportunities in which a student can integrate himself into his new college community (Tinto, 1993). In this process of incorporation, the student can acquire unique mannerisms and behaviors that will further assimilate him into his academic environment.

In 1993, Tinto refined his model of institutional departure. Unlike the first model, which focused on the stages of separation, transition, and incorporation, this second model focused more on the social and academic integration of college. Due to its emphasis on the student’s integration into the collegiate environment, the second model was more aligned with Spady’s model of undergraduate dropout. Like Spady’s, Tinto’s second model suggested that students needed to integrate themselves into the academic and social systems of the institution (Aljohani, 2016). Social integration referred to a student’s interactions with the college community. In contrast, academic integration pertained to the student’s academic performance in college and his intellectual development (Aljohani, 2016).

Tinto’s prioritization of these two systems was not coincidental. Tinto (1993) asserted that “colleges are made up of both academic and social systems, each with its characteristic formal and informal structure and set of student, staff, and faculty communities” (p. 106). Depending on the student’s personal experiences in the educational and social systems, these experiences may or may not lead to continued persistence. Success in both arenas was required
for students to persist in the face of potential challenges and barriers. For instance, a student may be extremely adept at navigating the social system in college. However, this same student may also be struggling academically. His lack of academic progress may then lead to attrition. Depending on the institution, the student may be forced to withdraw due to his failure to make academic progress. Inversely, a student may perform well academically but may not be able to establish a robust social network within the institution. As a result, the student may also not persist because he has not sufficiently integrated himself into the college social life (Tinto, 1993). Thus, the interactions within the academic and social arenas of college contribute to shaping a student’s persistence.

While these two systems are both crucial, Tinto (1993) affirmed Spady’s view that the academic system was a more critical aspect of student persistence. A student may be able to establish a secure social network in college. However, if he was not able to meet the academic expectations, he will not persist. Even if the student was motivated and wanted to continue, he will be dismissed by the institution if he does not meet the minimum grade point average requirements (Tinto, 1993). Tinto’s model provided insight into the factors impacting persistence. Furthermore, Tinto’s model has been instrumental in the study of student persistence in higher education. Tinto’s model was utilized by John Bean as a foundation to create another model, the student attrition model.

**Student Attrition Model**

Bean’s model included the study of turnover in work organizations as derived from the works of James Price. It suggested that just as students leave school for one reason or another,
employees leave their positions and work sites as well (Aljohani, 2016). There are commonalities between these seemingly contrasting systems. As shown through Bean’s model, the reasons for student dropout in academia and the turnover rates in commerce have more similarities than initially anticipated. The research conducted by Price and Bean both respectively suggested that variables exist within both systems that influence an individual’s decision to stay or leave (Aljohani, 2016).

In Prince’s turnover in work organizations model, he argued that six variables influence an employee’s persistence in the workplace: (a) pay, (b) close friendship, (c) inclusion in the decision-making process, (d) repetition of work, (e) knowledge of the work role, and (f) fair treatment (Bean, 1981). In particular, these six variables have an impact on an employee’s satisfaction with his employer. Any increase or decrease in the six variables will influence whether an employee chooses to remain or leave his or her workplace.

For example, if an employee received an increase in pay, it will increase his satisfaction with the employer, which will then influence his decision to remain with the employer. Inversely, if an employee’s wage is garnished, it will decrease his level of satisfaction with the employer, which will influence his decision to leave. Like weights on a scale, these variables can tip the balance in an employee’s decision to stay or leave his workplace.

Similar to Prince’s turnover in work organizations model, Bean’s student attrition model included multiple variables. Bean, however, was able to expand his model by making it more detailed and precise. In his model, there are four categories, and within each category are individual variables (Aljohani, 2016). The first category included background variables such as a student’s educational background and his academic performance in high school (Bean, 1981).
These background variables influenced how the student will interact with his collegiate institution.

The second category was comprised of organizational determinants such as the student’s GPA, goal commitment, and relationships with faculty and staff, to name a few. In total, there were 17 variables in this second category, all of which were used to measure the student’s level of satisfaction with the institution. The third category was the intervening variable of satisfaction, and the fourth category was the dependent variable of dropout. Through his interactions with the organization, the student will utilize the organizational determinants as measurement, which will then determine whether he was satisfied with the institution. If the student was satisfied, he will remain committed to the institution and persist. However, if the student was not satisfied, he will most likely drop out.

**Student–Faculty Informal Contact Model**

Both the theoretical models of Spady (1971) and Tinto (1986) suggested that student–faculty interaction was a significant element in the persistence of students. Building upon this concept, Ernest Pascarella developed the student–faculty informal contact model (Aljohani, 2016). The student–faculty informal contact model revolved around the hypothesis that a positive relationship between a student and faculty member will result in student retention. Pascarella (1980) suggested that “positive associations exist between the amount of student informal, non-class contact with faculty and such educational outcomes as satisfaction with college, educational aspirations, intellectual and personal development, academic achievement, and freshman to sophomore year persistence in college” (p. 564). These factors are all positively correlated; increased informal, outside-of-class interactions with teachers also increases student retention and persistence rates (Pascarella, 1980). Several factors influenced informal student–
faculty interactions, such as individual student differences, the culture of the faculty and classroom experiences, the student’s peer-culture involvement, and the size of the institution. Each factor will impact how the student–faculty contact will take place and the level of the relationship.

The first factor was the initial student difference. This factor underscored the fact that each student has his or her unique characteristics. The characteristics played a role in determining the students’ nonclassroom contact with their professors (Aljohani, 2016). For example, students may enter college with different career and academic aspirations. One student may want to pursue a career in biomedical research. In contrast, another student may want to secure employment upon completing college. Due to these differences, some students may be more likely than others to seek interactions with faculty members outside of the classroom. For instance, the student interested in biomedical research may initiate more nonclassroom contacts with a department faculty member to gain more significant insights into the research aspect of his education. Initial student differences will often determine the likelihood of students seeking informal interactions with their professors.

A second factor was the faculty culture and classroom experience. According to Wilson et al., the characteristics of a faculty member played a role if students initiate nonclassroom contacts (As cited by Pascarella, 1980). Furthermore, the faculty members who are more open to the students’ ideas and opinions in classroom discussions tend to exhibit an inviting persona (Pascarella, 1980). In doing so, students perceived them as more friendly and welcoming and, therefore, are more willing to make nonclassroom contacts. Also, faculty who show interest in a student’s personal life exhibited a persona of care, which in turn invites more student contact. How professors portray themselves and how they project support inside the classroom are factors
that determine whether they are sought out by students outside of the classroom (Pascarella, 1980).

The third factor was the student’s peer-culture involvement. Evidence from past research suggested that the peer-culture of a student played a role in the way he interacted with others (Pascarella, 1980). The adopted norms and expectations among the student’s peer group can encourage or discourage the student from seeking nonclassroom interaction with professors. If a student observed classmates or roommates making nonclassroom contact with faculty members, then he may be influenced to make nonclassroom contact as well. When their peers participate in such activities, they are then deemed by the student as not only permissible but possibly expected. A peer culture that embraced informal interactions with faculty and staff will increase the likelihood of that student interacting with his teachers.

Lastly, the size of the institution was the fourth factor in the student–faculty informal contact model. Although the institution size may not have that substantial of an influence on student–faculty contact, it does contribute to it. Within large institutions, the faculty-to-student ratios are relatively higher, which makes student–faculty connection less likely. According to Wilson et al., in an eight-institution sample study, the larger institutions reported less student–faculty interactions out of class (As cited by Pascarella, 1980). Notably, the number of students per class can be daunting for students and staff members to form associations. Therefore, faculty and students of larger institutions find it more challenging to have informal, out-of-class interactions than small or moderate institutions. Applying previous theoretical models and research, notably, the student attrition model, Bean, and Metzner developed their nontraditional undergraduate student attrition model.

The Nontraditional Undergraduate Student Attrition Model
Unlike other models, Bean and Metzner’s model focused on nontraditional students who are also attending institutions of higher education. These students, unlike traditional college students, are affected by other external factors such as family responsibility (Aljohani, 2016). Nontraditional students, such as young parents and retirees returning to school, encounter distinctive obstacles not faced by traditional students. More often than not, nontraditional students are individuals having to balance multiple roles and responsibilities, in addition to completing student course work.

According to Bean and Metzner’s model, nontraditional students who dropped out are influenced by four sets of variables. The first variable was the student’s academic performance. Similar to Spady’s and Tinto’s models, this variable suggested that students will drop out if they are not performing well academically. Meeting the rigorous demands of a class was an essential aspect of student persistence. The higher the student’s ability to complete academic coursework, the less likely he will be of dropping out of the institution.

The second variable was the student’s background, which includes the student’s age, high school performance, ethnicity, gender, and enrollment status. All of these factors played a role in increasing or decreasing the likelihood of a nontraditional student dropping out. For instance, when it came to a student’s high school performance, Bean and Metzner asserted that although the student’s grades do not directly determine whether he or she will drop out of college, they do affect student college performance (Aljohani, 2016). Ultimately, the strong work ethics established during a student’s years in secondary school will assist them in higher education.

The third variable was the intent to leave, which was influenced by psychological outcomes such as stress, contentment with the college, and educational goals. A student may be performing well in college, but if he was experiencing a high level of stress or did not like the
college, he may choose to drop out. The likelihood of dropping out also increases if the student was dissatisfied with the university or believed his academic goals could not be accomplished.

Lastly, the environment was a critical variable in the model. According to Beam and Metzner, the environmental variable constituted finance, employment hours, family commitments, transfer opportunity, and outside encouragement (Aljohani, 2016). If money was an issue, and the student also has many family responsibilities as a spouse and parent, then these factors can impact the student’s persistence. Collectively, these environmental elements created the circumstances in which the student was going to school.

**Student Retention Integrated Model**

The theoretical models of Tinto and Bean were combined as a framework by Cabrera, Nora, and Castaneda to form the Student Retention Integrated Model (Aljohani, 2016). This model takes into consideration all of the variables that Tinto and Bean presented in their models and reorganized them. Their research enabled scholars to conclude that “a better understanding of the persistence process can be derived in combining the two major theories of college persistence [Tinto’s institutional departure model and Bean’s student attrition model]” (Cabrera et al., 1993, p. 135). According to Cabrera et al. (1993), it was through the combination of Tinto and Bean’s models that a better understanding of student persistence was achieved.

**Review of Methodological Issues**

Through the analysis of educational literature, there were a variety of methods identified. Creswell (2014) described three approaches, and they are: (a) qualitative, (b) quantitative, and (c) mixed-method. Within each of the three methods, there are different designs and instruments for gathering data. Notably, flaws may exist within each approach, depending on how the methods are used. Since each research method was unique in its aspects, the three approaches are used
interchangeably (Creswell, 2014). For certain research studies, such as one in which the researcher was trying to compare two or more groups, a quantitative design may be the most appropriate method to gather the data. Whereas, for other studies, the usage of a quantitative design may be the best method to use. The researcher will have to analyze and reflect on his or her study and determine which method was most appropriate based on the topic (Creswell, 2014).

**Qualitative Research**

The qualitative research approach involved the exploration and understanding of social or human problems in an individual or group setting. The research process for this approach was comprised of the utilization of open-ended questions and procedures in the gathering of data (Creswell, 2014). In qualitative research design, the researcher will collect the data from the field. Some of the standard data collection methods for a qualitative research design are a narrative and case study. The researcher was an active participant in gathering the data by conducting the interview, leading a workgroup discussion, or observing the behavior of the participants. Upon completion of the gathering process, the researcher will manually code the data and analyze it for its themes.

According to Creswell and Miller, one of the strengths of qualitative research design was its validity (As cited by Creswell, 2014). It is more accurate from the standpoint of the researcher, the participants, and/or the reader than other methods. However, because the data gathered are usually from a small sample of the population, its findings cannot be generalized to the entire population (Creswell, 2014).

**Quantitative Research**
A quantitative approach involved the examination of the relationship of various variables, and its connection will answer the researcher’s question. For instance, a quantitative approach may study the relationship between two variables, such as gender and feelings of anxiety. Through the examination of a variable such as a gender and anxiety, the researcher can answer the question of whether men have more anxiety than women or vice versa. A quantitative research approach utilized an experimental design, such as a test, or a non-experimental design, such as a survey or questionnaire to gather its data (Creswell, 2014). In the quantitative research design, the questions asked of the participants are typically closed-ended, and the results of the data are usually numeric and are reviewed statistically.

**Mixed-Method Research**

A concern of the utilization of qualitative or quantitative research was the weakness and bias that potentially exist in both approaches (Creswell, 2014). The mixed-method design, which consisted of the usage of both qualitative and quantitative research methods, was intended to eliminate the weakness and bias as well as provide a more complete understanding of the research problem (Creswell, 2014; McKim, 2017). For example, the researcher can have participants complete a survey and then participate in a one-on-one interview or group discussion.

Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods are the three approaches to researching, and each presented different ways to how data should be collected, analyzed and interpreted. Although each research method is unique, there are some similarities. Through the various methodologies, the researcher can approach his or her study with careful planning so that the data gathered are valid and without bias.
A review of the literature for this study indicated that the usage of a quantitative design was the most common method in the understanding of student persistence, retention, and dropouts. Of the peer-reviewed research studies conducted, 76% of the studies utilized some form of quantitative design compared to 10% for a qualitative and 15% for a mixed-method design. As suggested by Creswell (2014), when designing a research project, a researcher needs to identify which method to utilize, and that decision should be determined by the problem being studied, the worldviews and experiences of the researcher, and the targeted audience.

**Synthesis of Research Findings**

The literature review reveals that exploring and understanding student persistence was critical in the field of education, particularly in institutions of higher learning. Multiple studies regarding student persistence and retention were conducted by researchers at an international level and yielded many results. In particular, several studies were conducted using the four aspects of Tinto’s student motivation and persistence model. While the studies were each unique in terms of their locations and population of participants, they yielded results that indicated an understanding of student persistence in higher education.

The findings from the studies were consistent with Tinto’s assertion that motivation contributed to student persistence. Furthermore, all four aspects of a student’s experience in higher education, such as goals, self-efficacy, a sense of belonging, and perceived value of the curriculum played a role in a college student’s persistence. Nevertheless, the findings also suggested that certain aspects were more vital than others. As the literature in the next section will show, some of the aspects of a student’s experience in higher education are more applicable to a specific student population than others.
In “A Model of Student Motivation and Persistence,” a student’s persistence “was but one manifestation of motivation” (Tinto, 2017, p. 255). The model further suggested that a student’s motivation was affected by his college experience. Also, the student’s motivation was manifested through the understanding of his goals, self-efficacy, a sense of belonging, and perceived value or relevance of the institution’s curriculum. Valle et al. (2015) concluded that a student’s level of motivation provided a good explanation of how they behave in their current academic setting.

Goals

Tinto (2017) emphasized that a student’s goal in higher education will vary depending on motivation from intrinsic and/or extrinsic factors. Intrinsic motivation pertained to an individual’s interests or personal gains, such as striving for personal growth (Hope et al., 2014). For instance, an individual may choose to pursue higher education because the act would result in personal satisfaction and self-fulfillment. In some cases, continuing higher education would result in the personal growth and development of the individual as a whole.

The development of intrinsic goals has a variety of benefits for an individual. In particular, it was beneficial to the development of a person’s identity, which in turn has a positive effect on the individual’s academic performance. Hope et al. (2014) asserted that a student’s well-being in school was positively related to an increase in intrinsic values. Furthermore, a change in a student’s intrinsic goals during the school year would also increase the student’s psychosocial development of identity and intimacy (Hope et al., 2014). Students who have a higher intrinsic motivation level tend to be more satisfied with their school work (Trevino & DeFreitas, 2014). As a result, the student will exhibit more confidence in their social abilities. D’Lima et al. (2014) concluded in a quantitative study that students who have higher
grades in their first semester are those whose intrinsic motivation level was higher than others. Also, when intrinsic motivation was promoted in an academic setting, the result was a positive educational outcome (Trevino & DeFreitas, 2014).

Extrinsic motivation, on the other hand, pertained to external factors such as money or better employment (Tinto, 2017). A student may choose to obtain a higher education so that he can get a better paying job. Others may attend college to become certified in a specific skill, so that it may result in a promotion at work. Still, some students attend college so that they can prove to others, such as a family member or the community, that they are capable of succeeding in an institution of higher education (D’Lima et al., 2014). The students who are attending college for external reasons, such as to prove others wrong, tend to have higher expectations for themselves (Kennett et al., 2011). As such, their academic performance will be higher, resulting in continued persistence.

Intrinsic or extrinsic motivation can be viewed differently by students based on their backgrounds. Chang (2019) found that different cultures place a different value on intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. His study analyzed Taiwanese and American college students’ perceptions of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. The findings indicated that the level of extrinsic motivation was stronger in Taiwanese students than American students. Also, American students had a more substantial level of intrinsic motivation than Taiwanese students (Chang, 2019). Hope et al. (2014) also concluded in their study that intrinsic and extrinsic values play a role in student persistence. Individually, students with a higher intrinsic value will perform better for the school year, which will result in higher chances of persistence.

Regardless of whether it was an intrinsic or extrinsic goal, persistence played a critical role in the motivation behind a student’s academic performance. Together, both the intrinsic and
extrinsic goals will motivate and influence students in their persistence in school (D’Lima et al., 2014). For some students, they are exhibiting a healthy balance of both intrinsic and extrinsic goals resulting in higher academic performance and continued persistence (Kennett et al., 2011). By having both types of goals, a student was always motivated to continue his education. Specifically, the student will always be satisfied internally and will also satisfy those of his outer circle.

The differences in students’ goals and the decision to persist in higher education will also vary (Valle et al., 2015). For example, a student whose goal is to graduate from an institution of higher education will persist regardless of the challenges he or she encounters (Morrow & Ackermann, 2012; Tinto, 1993, 2017). Even when confronted with an unfamiliar problem, the student will remain cognizant of the goal and continue until graduation. Another student’s goal may be to attend for just a couple of semesters and then transfer to another institution. Some students may attend on a short-term basis until the necessary skills are obtained for employment. Upon the attainment of these skills, the students would cease their education. Due to the difference in individual goals and motivation, each student’s experience in higher education will vary. The student’s experiences will ultimately impact whether he chooses to persist in his education or not (Borrow & Ackermann, 2012; Ishitani, 2016; Tinto, 1993, 2017).

Self-Efficacy

Although a student’s goal was crucial to his persistence in higher education, just as equally important was a student’s sense of self-efficacy. According to Tinto (2017), self-efficacy is "the foundation upon which student persistence was built" (p. 257). As suggested by Bandura, self-efficacy refers to an individual’s belief in his ability to be successful with a task (as cited by Tinto, 2017). Educational or learning self-efficacy pertains to a student’s belief in his ability to
achieve a specific academic assignment (D’Lima et al., 2014). Academic self-efficacy, as described by Han et al. (2017), referred to a student’s academic confidence, mindset, and self-perceived ability to perform an academic task.

Alt (2015) further suggested that a student’s belief in his academic ability affects his motivation to learn in school. As such, academic self-efficacy was a significant paradigm in the process of learning. In Yusuf’s (2011) study of 300 undergraduate students at a major university, students needed to perceive that they could learn in order to be successful in their academic endeavors. If they did not, they were not motivated to continue persisting. To a student who had high academic self-efficacy, problems or tasks were viewed as challenges for him to master. In a study of 1,400 first-year college students, Han et al. (2017) found that the student’s academic self-efficacy was directly connected to their academic success. This study also revealed that self-efficacy was directly related to a student’s academic performance in his first year of college.

In addition to academic self-efficacy, each student will have a different sense of self-efficacy based on past mastery experiences (Alt, 2015). A strong academic performance by a student was likely the result of increased self-confidence gained from past academic success (Komarraju & Nadler, 2013). For example, a student who graduated as valedictorian of his class will have a strong sense of self-efficacy based on the strength of his past academic successes.

Similarly, a student’s background, socioeconomic status, and previous educational experiences also impact self-efficacy (Alt, 2015; Meral et al., 2012; Tinto, 2017). For instance, a student who is a first-generation college student will have a very different sense of self-efficacy than a student whose parents are non-first-generation (Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2011; Vuong et al., 2010).

Based on data from the National Center for Education Statistics, in the Fall 2017 semester, 90% of first-time students enrolled in public 4-year degree-granting postsecondary
institutions were under the age of 25. In comparison, 79% of first-time students enrolled in a 2-year, degree-granting public postsecondary institutions were under the age of 25. Sharma’s (2012) study concluded that first-year students faced psychosocial adjustment difficulties because they were entering an educational environment unfamiliar to them. Overall, there was a strong relationship between self-efficacy and academic performance, which in turn affect student persistence (Sharma, 2012).

To assist in the development of a student’s academic self-efficacy, Tinto (2017) suggested that institutions could not assume that all incoming students had started their higher education journey fully believing that they would be successful. Besides, even if students had entered higher education with complete confidence in their abilities, their belief could change throughout their journey (Tinto, 2017). Therefore, it is vital that institutions address the challenges of self-efficacy by providing interventions such as first-year student monitoring, frequent student contact, and full academic support for students.

Another critical step that institutions could take in ensuring the continued support and development of a student’s self-efficacy was classroom instruction and engagement. According to Pascarella et al., (2011), students’ exposure to systematic and explicit classroom instruction during their first year of college had a positive impact on the student’s continued persistence and retention. To ensure this, faculty members needed to remember the critical role they played in a student’s education. The faculty members needed to remember that they needed to be actively engaged with the student. Also, the faculty member must also require that their students participate in the classroom and be actively involved in their learning. Meaningful, active engagement enhances a student’s belief in his ability to succeed in the classroom (Alt, 2015; Komarraju & Nadler, 2013; Tinto, 2017).
Finally, the faculty support of a student was critical. Morrow and Ackerman (2012) maintain that the faculty of an institution must provide support to its students. Students who persisted in college, when compared to those who dropped out, were those who received significantly more faculty support. Furthermore, it was found that faculty warmth was also a significant determinant in student persistence and retention (Morrow & Ackerman, 2012). Overall, to ensure continued persistence and retention of students, faculty members must be actively engaged with the students and must also provide support as needed.

**Sense of Belonging**

Another critical aspect of persistence was a student’s sense of belonging. Humans are social beings, and as such, it was essential that they must feel that they are a part of a community (Han et al., 2017). A student in an institution of higher learning must feel he was a part of the institution’s learning community. Johnson et al. (2007) claimed that when a student dropped out, it was due to an inability to integrate into the college environment successfully. This shortcoming was not necessarily the result of the institution’s failure to act. Instead, it was a combination of both (Johnson et al., 2007). The institution, however, can help foster a student’s sense of belonging by taking specific actions of its own. One of those actions was to ensure that diversity was represented in the institution (Tinto, 2017).

Secondly, this sense of belonging at an institution may be formed through a variety of interactions with other students, staff, and faculty. By sharing a collective experience, students strengthen their ties with not only the school but also with the people in it (Tinto, 2017). This was especially important, mainly because students are not merely just experiencing a feeling of inclusion within a particular academic group or institution. They are establishing a piece of their identity as belonging to their respective academic communities. The establishment of a sense of
belonging was a crucial aspect of a student’s retention at his university. Johnson et al. (2007) recommend that students form their relationship with the academic community within the first year of their college experience.

Means and Pyne (2017) found that student organizations within the college setting can support a student’s sense of belonging. Specifically, involvement in organizations can provide support to ensure that students are fully integrated into higher education. Although critical in the establishment of a sense of belonging for a first-year college student, the student organization was even more essential for minority and first-generation students (Means & Pyne, 2017; Stebleton et al., 2014. As Johnson et al. (2007) found, first-year students of color (non-White) have a lower sense of belonging than their white classmates. Also, college environments influenced students in different ways, depending on the students’ racial background (Johnson et al., 2007). As concluded by Johnson et al. (2007), Asian Pacific students’ sense of belonging was affected by activities such as participation in ethnic or cross-cultural student organizations.

Consequently, a student’s sense of belonging does not necessarily pertain only to his experience with other students. The climate of the institution was also a critical factor. In a study of 61 public and private 4-year institutions, campus climate was found to be a significant predictor of student success (Schreiner & Nelson, 2014). This finding suggested that a sense of belonging played a more substantial role in a student’s decision to persist than anticipated by researchers.

The results of another study by O’Keeffe (2013) indicated that an institution’s retention rate greatly improved when it provided a welcoming environment for its students. By creating a warm, inviting climate, students felt that the institution cared for and was more accepting of
them. The administrators, staff, and faculty are all members of the institution. As such, they all play a role in a student’s sense of belonging.

**Perceptions of the Curriculum**

While self-efficacy and sense of belonging are significant contributors to a student’s persistence in higher education, a student’s perceptions of the academic institution’s curriculum are equally important (Tinto, 2017). In terms of the opinion of the curriculum, there are two factors. The first pertained to the student’s view of the quality of the curriculum. Students may have meaningful interactions with their peers and professors. They may feel connected to the institution, but if they do not perceive the course content to be valuable and relevant, then they will lose interest. A loss of interest in the curriculum will result in a loss of interest in the institution (Tinto, 2017).

The second factor of the perceptions of the curriculum pertains to the relevancy of what was taught to the student (Tinto, 2017). A student must feel that what he was learning at the institution was relevant, valuable, and will lead to future employment in his desired profession. If the student determined that the institution’s curriculum was outdated, irrelevant, or inconsequential in helping him obtain his future profession, the student may stop attending and drop out.

**Critique of Previous Research**

The educational literature included a variety of studies regarding student persistence in higher education. Although numerous studies were reported about college student persistence and retention, there was still a limited amount of research regarding minority students. Based on the literature review, the majority of studies about student persistence were conducted at Western institutions. Few studies were conducted from the perspective of the student and, therefore, lack
the student voice and experience. According to data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2019), student enrollment in degree-granting postsecondary institutions was gradually increasing every year. Witkow et al. (2015) confirmed that higher education was becoming increasingly diverse. Through the economic benefit that a postsecondary degree would bring, individuals from across the spectrum are choosing to enroll in institutions of higher learning now more than ever (Witkow et al., 2015).

With the increase in the diversity of students, the research conducted should align more with the student population to ensure the validity of the findings (Jones, 2016; Ward & Zarate, 2015). The diversity of the student population also dictates the shift in policy and programs of an institution (Ward & Zarate, 2015). The data from the literature review revealed that the majority of studies pertain more to student populations in Western countries, and it does not reflect some of the experiences of students in higher education in other countries around the world. Specifically, there were very few studies conducted on the persistence of Hmong students in Southeast Asia. Additional research is needed about the issues of attrition among Hmong students (Xiong & Lam, 2012). This research was intended to fill in the gap in regards to Hmong students in Southeast Asia and the problem of erosion.

**Chapter 2 Summary**

Many reasons contributed to why an individual would choose to pursue higher education. Whether they are personal or economic reasons, these reasons provided each student with a purpose for pursuing an education at an institution of higher learning (Tinto, 2017). When an individual decided to enroll in higher education, he may start with or without a goal. A goal may be to attend and graduate with a degree or certificate. Another goal may be to increase his skills and knowledge so that he may secure employment or get promoted. Regardless of the goal, the
underlying fact was that the student must want to attend and persist (Creswell, 2018). Once the student decided to persist, he will exert all his effort and time into the completion of his education.

As the semester begins and ends, one of two events will occur. The student will continue to persist the following semester, or the student will drop out. A variety of reasons will contribute to that student’s decision to persist, and the reasons are both personal and institutional (Creswell, 2018; Thomas, 2002). Personal reasons that may influence a students’ decision not to continue his education included a lack of academic goals, low academic self-efficacy, poor academic performance, and an unfavorable perception of the institution’s curriculum.

A review of the literature indicated that the findings do support Tinto’s model that motivation leads to student persistence in higher education. However, little to no research existed regarding whether motivation will lead to the persistence of Hmong students attending institutions of higher learning in Laos. This case study will explore and fill in the gap in the literature regarding Hmong student persistence and retention in Laos.
Chapter 3: Methodology

Researchers have studied student persistence and retention, yielding multiple theories and perspectives. Of those many perspectives, Tinto’s (1988, 1993) institutional departure model has been one that researchers have utilized to further their understanding of the phenomena of student persistence and retention. As such, the conceptual framework that was used to drive this study was Tinto’s (2017) model of student motivation and persistence. This model was derived from the philosophy that institutions should consider a different perspective regarding student retention.

The model suggested that institutions should not focus on how they can retain students. Instead, institutions should focus on what they can do to ensure that students will want to persist. However, as concluded by Mamiseishili (2012), Tinto’s model was not always applicable to all types of students from different geographical areas. Kommers and Pham (2016) found that Asian students’ persistence was influenced by different factors compared to non-Asian students. One of the factors that may affect Asian students stems from a difference in culture.

Culture can be a strong influencing factor when it comes to student persistence, particularly among Asian students. Students around the world have various ways of adjusting and assimilating into their academic and social environments due to their distinctive cultures and values (as cited by Kommers & Pham, 2016). In Laos, the country is still profoundly entrenched in its native culture and traditions, especially as it pertains to cultural conservation (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2015; Moxom & Hayden, 2018; Ogawa, 2008). Furthermore, the culture of governance in Laos has been very influential in its higher education system as well as the influence of the country’s political party (Moxom & Hayden, 2018). The appointment of all
authority positions in a public university in Laos does not occur without the endorsement of its political party (Moxom & Hayden, 2015).

As a result of its influence, the culture of Laos and its ideology of governance may affect the Lao’s student population. Moreover, as a minority ethnic group of Laos, the Hmong, which was the proposed focal population of this study, has a culture and tradition that was uniquely different from the majority Lao group (Inui, 2015). As such, the type of motivation for Hmong students in Laos may be different from those discussed by Tinto’s motivation and persistence theory.

In an attempt to gain information about student persistence and retention, a qualitative study was utilized. This chapter begins with the research questions, followed by the purpose and design of the study. These sections serve as a guide to the study. The population and sampling method are the next sections, and they identify the research population. In addition, the population and sampling method section explained how the research participants were recruited and selected. In the next two sections, the instrumentation and data collection identified the tools and how they were utilized in the collection of the research data. Lastly, the chapter discussed the limitations, validation, credibility, dependability, findings, and ethical considerations of the study.

**Research Questions**

This qualitative research was driven by Tinto’s model of student motivation and persistence. Qualitative research questions were fluid, always changing, and non-directional (Creswell, 2013). As such, there was one central question for the research. Within the central question are three subquestions. For this study, the findings will answer the following questions:
Central Research Question

How do Hmong students in Laos perceive the factors influencing their persistence and retention in higher education?

Associated Subresearch Questions

1. What motivated Hmong college students in Laos to persist in higher education?
2. How do Hmong college students in Laos perceive goals as a factor in their persistence and retention?
3. How do Hmong college students in Laos perceive self-efficacy as a factor in their persistence and retention?
4. How do Hmong college students in Laos perceive a sense of belonging as a factor in their persistence and retention?
5. How do Hmong college students in Laos perceive the curriculum as a factor in their persistence and retention?
6. What student support services do the universities provide to assist in improving Hmong students’ persistence and retention?

Purpose and Design of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the factors behind the persistence and retention of Hmong college students in Laos using Tinto’s model of student motivation and persistence. Furthermore, this study analyzed whether Tinto’s model was applicable in explaining the persistence of Hmong college students.

To understand the meaning of why Hmong college students in Laos persist and are retained, this study utilized a qualitative research approach. Explicitly, a holistic single-case design was utilized in the gathering of the data for two primary reasons. The first reason pertains
to the phenomenon itself. This study on persistence and retention was a study of the experiences that the participants lived. A trademark of a case study was the fact that it provides an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon through the usage of multiple forms of qualitative data (Creswell, 2003). This study intended to understand the “why” and “how” of student persistence and retention of the Hmong college students in Laos. A case study approach provided the best opportunity to understand the reasons behind the continued persistence and retention of the participants (Yin, 2018).

Moreover, a case study method provided the opportunity to analyze the participants in their natural setting (Yin, 2018). A case study consisted of analyzing an individual or individuals within a real-life setting (Creswell, 2003; Yin, 2018). The study was conducted in the Hmong college students’ natural environment. In doing so, the data collected was current and accurate. The information was not displaced in time (Creswell, 2003).

In deciding to utilize a case study approach, Yin (2018) suggested four potential designs to be considered. They were (a) holistic single-case, (b) holistic multiple-case, (c) embedded single-case, and (d) embedded multiple-case. Although all designs are useful, in a case study, a researcher should select one that was most associated with his theoretical intention (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2018). For the current study, a holistic single-case design was utilized because it best addressed the purpose of the study. The current study examined Hmong college students who were attending a university in Laos. Other subunits within the university such as the organization structure and leadership style, were not investigated.

As described by Yin (2018), a single-case study was one in which a phenomenon was studied through the usage of a single subject or a small group of research subjects. A single-case study was similar to a single research experiment (Yin, 2018). However, there are disadvantages
to the usage of a single-case study. According to Yin (2018), there are risks in a single-case study that make it vulnerable. Specifically, utilizing a single-case design was similar to putting all of one’s eggs in a basket. A researcher risks criticism and skepticism about the validity of a single-case design because of a lack of replication.

In comparison, a multiple-case study was one in which multiple investigations are utilized to study a phenomenon. Consequently, a multiple-case study used more than one single-case in the examination of a phenomenon (Yin, 2018). A multiple-case study goes beyond the usage of multiple subjects or respondents to an experiment. What distinguishes the difference in a multiple-case study was the essential reasoning behind the duplication of an investigation (Yin, 2018). For instance, a single-case study was conducted, and it yielded a particular result. A second, third, fourth, or fifth study may be replicated to see whether it will produce a similar finding as to the single-case study. In replicating the single case, scholars would be strengthening the findings of the original case if similar results are produced.

The decision of whether to utilize a single or multiple-case design was dependent on the intent of the study, and there are advantages and disadvantages to both designs (Yin, 2018). When designing this case study, the literature review was highly considered. Although there may exist many reasons in deciding between a single- or multiple-case design, through the literature review, it was determined that a single-case is most appropriate for this research. The decision to conduct the current study as a single-case was made for two primary reasons.

First, the study on the persistence and retention of Hmong college students in Laos has rarely been conducted. As established through the literature review, student persistence and retention theories have been established for years. It has been the subject of much research by educators and researchers alike. However, the theory, as applied to the proposed student
population, has not been researched. Of the many kinds of literature that were gathered, none were conducted about the Hmong student population in Laos. This study provided the researcher with an opportunity to observe and analyze a phenomenon that has rarely been addressed with this particular student population. As suggested by Yin (2018), one of the primary rationales for a single-case design was the revelatory case, one in which the researcher has an opportunity to observe and analyze a phenomenon that has not been previously accessible.

Secondly, the population of the participants resided in another country. Due to their residency, traveling abroad to interview the participants would be time-consuming and expensive. Through the usage of a single-case design, the participants were selected from just one institution. If a multiple-case study design had been implemented, the participants would have had to come from various colleges or universities in Laos, which would have posed multiple challenges in the data collection process. Additionally, the process of collecting data from numerous locations in the country of Laos would have been more time consuming; both time and resources were limited (Yin, 2018). The usage of a single case study was the most effective, efficient, and less expensive way to complete the data collection process of this study.

**Research Population and Sampling Method**

The participants in this study were Hmong college students who are currently attending one of the five most prominent public institutions of higher learning in Laos. There are five universities in Laos, and each is located in various parts of the country. Due to their different locations, the student body make-up among the institutions varied. For instance, the National University of Laos was located in the province of Vientiane, and the population of Vientiane mainly consisted of the Lao-Loum population. Although there were Hmong and other minority students, the majority of the student body was comprised of the Lao-Loum ethnic group. On the
other hand, Savannakhet University was located in Savannakhet Province, which has a large population of the minority Lao-Soung and Lao-Theung; therefore, the majority of the student body consists of the Lao-Soung and Lao-Theung population (Phetsiriseng, 2009).

The current case study was focused on the real-life experiences of the participants through the usage of multiple data collecting processes (Creswell, 2018). The data were obtained through (a) observation and field notes, (b) documents, (c) reports, (d) audiovisual materials, and (e) individual interviews. In a case study, all participants must experience the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2013). As a result, the participants shared and expressed their unique experiences in their educational journey as it pertained to persistence and retention. Also, because the participants were of the same ethnic group, they came from similar backgrounds (socioeconomic status, educational backgrounds, and geographical location). As a result, their lived experiences were similar to each other and provided insight into their actions. Purposeful sampling was utilized to ensure that the participants were appropriate in meeting the intent of the study (Creswell, 2013).

Purposeful sampling was a qualitative sampling method that would best help the researcher comprehend a problem and research question (Creswell, 2018). In the current study, purposeful sampling allowed for the selection of a sample that would best provide insights into the understanding of the research question (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Through the usage of purposeful sampling, the researcher was able to secure participants who had experienced the research phenomenon.

To be eligible for participation in the study, all participants had to meet the following three criteria:

- The participants must be of Hmong descent and must identify themselves as Hmong.
• The participant must be a current college student at an institution of higher learning in Laos for at least one year.

• The participant must be willing to discuss and disclose information relating to his or her persistence and retention as college students at his or her respective institutions of higher learning.

**Recruitment of Participants**

Since the participants resided in Southeast Asia, recruiting was done via a flyer. Through personal connections, Mr. X (pseudonym for confidentiality), a Hmong resident in Laos assisted in the recruitment process. Mr. X graduated with his bachelor’s degree from a university in Thailand. He worked as an international monument guide in Laos. Mr. X spoke and read fluent Hmong, Lao, and English, which made him a perfect candidate in assisting with the recruitment of the participants. A flyer of the study was sent to Mr. X, and he posted the flyers on a bulletin board in an apartment complex near a university in Laos. Hmong students who were interested in participating in the study contacted the researcher to provide their information.

After receiving 14 names of potential participants and their contact information, each potential participant was prescreened to determine their eligibility to participate in the study. A spreadsheet of the potential participants was created to track the responses and participation of each participant. Of all those who met the participation criteria, a total of 10 participants were chosen for the study.

Merriam and Tisdell (2015) claimed that there was no limit to the number of participants in qualitative research design. Having too few participants may minimize the data and may not provide enough information to answer the research question appropriately. However, having too many participants may cause data saturation or redundancy. Therefore, being aware of the data
were the best practice to ensure that the appropriate number of participants was obtained. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) recommend the process of concurrent gathering and analysis of data. In doing so, when no new insights or information were obtained, it was an indication that the appropriate amount of data had been collected. The data collection could cease to avoid data saturation and redundancy.

During the prescreening process, it was determined that not all of the participants had access to a computer to print, sign, scan, and return their signed consent forms (see Appendix G). Therefore, instead of sending the consent form to the participants, it was read and reviewed with each participant prior to his or her interview. All the participants verbally agreed to and gave their consent via Messenger or the WhatsApp. Their verbal consent was recorded and will be kept for two years prior to deletion. All the participants had completed at least one year of college and were older than 18 years of age. Parental consent to participate was not necessary for the participants.

**Instrumentation**

The data for the study was conducted using two instruments: a one-on-one interview and a personal reflection journal. In a case study, one of the most critical sources of data collection are interviews (Yin, 2018). All the participants in the study were asked to respond in detail to a series of questions (see Appendix D). These questions pertained to Tinto’s (2017) four aspects of motivation and were in accordance with his recommendations.

There were four questions for the individual one-on-one interview. The questions were open-ended, and they provided the participants with the opportunities to share in detail their lived experiences as Hmong college students. Before the one-on-one interview, a copy of the questions was emailed to those participants who would be able to download, open, and review
the questions. For those participants who did not have access to email, the questions were typed and sent to them via Messenger or the WhatsApp application. In receiving the interview questions in advance, participants were given an opportunity to familiarize themselves with the questions and contemplate their responses for the interview.

According to Yin (2018), there are five necessary attributes that a researcher must possess in order to conduct a good case study. The first attribute was asking the right questions of the participants, and it involves the ability to pose and ask questions that will result in a fruitful dialogue with the participant. The second attribute was being a good listener. As the researcher conducted the interview, he must not only listen and take in the responses from the participants. He needs to try to understand without bias and interpret the meaning of what is shared (Yin, 2018). The third attribute was staying adaptive to the ever-changing flow of the interview. During the interview, if an unexpected situation arises, the researcher must be able to adapt accordingly. For instance, during the interview process, if data from the participants’ responses results in the need to add more participants or analyze additional cases, the researcher has to be willing to entertain these options. The researcher needs to remember that adapting to an unexpected situation does not suggest a change in the purpose of the study (Yin, 2018). The fourth attribute was having a firm understanding of what is being studied. This attribute suggested that the researcher must have a full understanding of the theoretical concepts of the study. Lastly, the researcher must conduct the research ethically without any preconceived position and bias. If the data collected does not coincide with the researcher’s perceptions, the researcher must not falsify the data. The researcher must be honest and ensure the accuracy of the data (Yin, 2018).
Prior to conducting the interviews, a review of the literature was completed. The literature review assisted in the development of all the questions that were utilized in the study. When a researcher conducts a qualitative study, he does not typically rely on a questionnaire or instrument from other researchers (Creswell, 2013). All the questions for this study were not selected from a preexisting list created by another researcher. Instead, they were generated from the various literature on student persistence and Tinto’s model of student motivation and persistence.

Also, all interview questions were translated into Hmong and into Lao. Most of the participants did not speak English and the interviews were conducted in their native language—Hmong. Furthermore, all the participants read and understood Lao. Therefore, translating the interview questions into Hmong and Lao enabled the participants to better understand and respond to the questions. In his tenure with the Department of Social Services of Fresno County, the researcher was certified as a Hmong speaker and writer. This certification process was comprehensive and required his ability to correctly translate a paragraph and a verbal conversation from English to Hmong and vice versa. As such, the researcher felt qualified to interview the participants in their native language. For the Lao translation, Mr. X, who assisted with the recruitment of the participants, assisted in the translation. Mr. X was certified and his profession entailed verbal and written translation of documents from English to Lao and English to Hmong.

After their one-on-one interviews, participants were instructed to respond to a set of journal prompts that required them to reflect on their educational experiences (see Appendix E). Participants had to answer three open-ended questions. All participants submitted the reflection journal in one of two capacities: email or through Messenger or the WhatsApp application.
Data Collection

After Concordia University–Portland Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained, the data collection process started. However, before any data could be collected, the participants had to give consent. For participants who lacked access to email, the informed consent form was read and reviewed with the participant prior to his or her interview. Again, this was due to the participant’s inability to access, open, view, scan, and/or return the informed consent form. Those who were able to receive the informed consent form was emailed a digital copy. After providing either written or verbal consent to the researcher, each participant was interviewed.

Prior to the interview process, potential participants were prescreened to ensure they met the participation requirements. During the prescreening process, all participants who met the requirements were scheduled for an interview. Each interview lasted about 30–45 minutes, depending on the depth and level of detail in the participant’s responses. Since the participants lived in Laos, there was a 15-hour difference in the time zone. Also, most of the participants had part-time jobs, so interviews were scheduled around their work and school schedules. Therefore, it took a month to conduct all the interviews.

Initially, all interviews with the participants were to be in person via WebEx or in person in the country of Laos, depending on the accessibility of the participants (see Appendix F). However, after the participants were prescreened and selected, they disclosed that they did not have the necessary equipment needed to access WebEx. All the participants, however, did have a smartphone with access to the internet. Furthermore, all the participants had either a Messenger account or an account with the application, WhatsApp. It was then that the interview was modified to be conducted either through Messenger or the WhatsApp application. Both
applications have the capability of “face-time,” which allowed for the interview to speak with each participant in person, similar to the WebEx application.

During the interview, active listening techniques were employed and follow-up questions were asked when applicable. When the participants went off-topic by sharing information that was not relevant to the study, they were stopped and redirected back to the original question. All interviews were recorded using a voice-recording device and via the Debut application—the Debut application allowed for the recording of the face-time interview. After the interview was recorded, it was saved as an audio or video file. As discussed in the section above, open-ended questions were utilized to gain an understanding of the participants’ persistence and retention.

Each interview was conducted at a public place or a place of the participant’s choosing. As suggested by Creswell (2013), a key component of data collection for a case study approach to qualitative research is gaining the confidence of the participants. By enabling the participants to select their desired location for the interview, it ensured that all participants were comfortable. The comfort level of the participants contributed to their willingness to share their educational experiences. However, the location of the interview had to be one where distractions were limited because the interview was recorded. Creswell (2013) stated that the place for conducting an interview should be a safe place that was free of noise and distractions. By interviewing at a distraction-free location, the participant was more focused on the interview and did not worry about any outside interruptions. During all the interviews, there were no interruptions and very little background noise that interfered with the participants’ responses.

Secondly, because the interviews were conducted in person online, the participants’ reactions to the questions were also observed. Creswell (2013) suggested that observation was one of the critical tools in data collection for qualitative research. Therefore, the observation of
the students’ responses was the second method of data collection. When asking the questions, each participant’s facial expression and tone of voice as he or she answered the question were observed. Any discrepancies in the participant’s response and facial expressions were documented for further analysis. Also, as needed, follow-up questions were asked during the interview so that participants could elaborate on their responses. Overall, there were very little to no contradictions in the facial expressions of the participants as they answered the questions.

Lastly, a qualitative design is emergent (Creswell, 2003). It was anticipated that this case study might shift throughout the interview process. The four interview questions that were asked of the students were not modified; however, the way the researcher posed each question was, depending upon participants’ responses. Some students understood the questions differently from others and did not fully answer the questions. In such cases, the researcher had to ask impromptu follow-up questions for clarification. These follow-up questions were more specific and closed-ended since they addressed the particular events and experiences that the participant had shared.

At the conclusion of each interview, the responses were transcribed verbatim immediately. The transcriptions of the interviews were then entered into an Excel spreadsheet, analyzed, and manually coded for themes. After transcribing the interviews, the researcher replayed each interview, made detailed notes, and ensured that each transcription was accurate. As suggested by Merriam and Tisdell (2015), data collection and data analysis should be completed together. Therefore, the researcher began the data analysis after transcribing each interview, and both processes were conducted concurrently. The analysis of each interview was typed, and each participant was given an opportunity to review his or her transcription and analysis to ensure accuracy.
The documents were sent via an email or message in Messenger or the WhatsApp along with three open-ended journal questions (see Appendix E). Although instructors for the completion of the reflection journal was provided to the participants at the conclusion of each interview, an email or message reminding the participants to start a reflection journal was also sent. The three questions enabled the students to reflect on their educational experiences and document any factors that influenced their persistence and retention in higher education. Through the usage of journaling, the participants had an opportunity to record and express their thoughts and feelings on their own, free of any outside influences.

Although the usage of a reflective journal is a popular method of data collection and has value, it could pose some issues (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2018). A potential problem pertains to the clarity of instructions given to participants. Knowing this, the researcher provided clear instructions so that participants would understand how to complete their journal responses. Still, some participants may not interpret the directions in the same way, resulting in responses that would not correspond with the intent of the questions. To alleviate this issue, the researcher carefully explained the journal entries and its questions to the participants in detail after each interview. When reviewing the reflection journal, the researcher reviewed it line by line. If needed, he also cross-referenced the responses and their meanings with the participant via email, messenger, or the WhatsApp application.

**Identification of Attributes**

The attributes of this study were the four key dimensions of student motivation, as described in Tinto’s model of student motivation and persistence (Tinto, 2017). These four dimensions are the forces that shape a student’s motivation; therefore, the participants’ responses
to the researcher’s interview questions were analyzed for these specific factors. The four dimensions that were discussed throughout the study are defined as follows:

1. **Goals**: goals pertain to the participant’s own personal goals. The goals do not necessarily have to be academic-related.

2. **Self-efficacy**: referred to the participants’ academic self-efficacy.

3. **Sense of belonging**: the participants’ sense of belonging, his or her integration, and incorporation into the entire educational environment at the institution of higher education. It included membership in other student organizations, academic services, and rapport with faculty and professional staff.

4. **Perception of curriculum**: refers to the value or relevance of what the participants are learning at the institution.

**Data Analysis Procedures**

A qualitative research design is emergent because the researcher does not always know what will transpire during the data collection process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Hence, data analysis of a case study, according to Huberman and Miles was not “off-the-shelf” (as cited by Creswell, 2013). Alternatively, Creswell (2013) states that data analysis was a process that was designed by the researcher and was continuously being revised throughout the study. It was a process that was always continuous and occurred throughout the data collection process because of the many questions that may arise before, during, and after the data collection process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Furthermore, Stake, emphasized the usage of four forms of data analysis in a case study (as cited by Creswell, 2013). The first form is the categorical aggregation. It involved the collection of data and organization of them into categories. The second form is a direct
interpretation. This tool allows the researcher to review a single situation and draw meaning from it without considering any other condition. The third form of analysis is to utilize patterns to analyze the data. It involved the researcher categorizing the data into two or more categories and trying to establish relationships between them. Finally, the last type of analysis is naturalistic generalizations. In this form, the researcher utilizes the data and generalizes them to the general population.

For this study, the researcher utilized some of the forms as described by Stake (as cited by Creswell, 2013). However, prior to analyzing the data, the researcher transcribed the reflection journals and one-on-one interviews. After both sets of data had been transcribed, they were organized into a matrix on an Excel spreadsheet (Baxter & Jack, 2008). The usage of Microsoft Word or Excel is very acceptable for qualitative data analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Furthermore, developing a data matrix will assist in locating and identifying information about the data (Creswell, 2013). Baxter and Jack (2008) also insisted that the reliability of a case study is improved when using a database. Through a database, the researcher can track and organize the data source easily for later usage.

In the current study, the responses from each participant were transcribed and typed into an Excel spreadsheet verbatim; responses were also organized one line at a time. On the spreadsheet, the researcher included time brackets for each response from the participants. As Creswell (2013) maintained, the time bracket will enable the researcher to reference each response of the participant specifically. With the current study, the time brackets enabled the researcher to locate and clarify the participants’ responses quickly. Since the data collected was originally in Hmong, the researcher translated the responses into English. The translation, however, was not done until after the data analysis was completed.
Merriam and Tisdell (2015) recommend two strategies when data collection is conducted in another language. The first was transcribing the original data in the original language. The data can be analyzed in its original language. Doing so would help maintain the integrity of the data as much as possible. These two recommendations were implemented in the current study. The transcriptions of the reflection journals and interviews were done in Hmong, as well as the data analysis. It was only after the analysis had been completed when the findings and any corroborating materials were translated into English.

After transcribing the reflection journals and interviews, the data were placed in an Excel spreadsheet where the researcher reviewed the data in detail, one line at a time. The researcher coded a note, comment, observation, and/or query about each line. The coding of the data occurred directly after each interview and upon receipt of the journals. After this process, all codes were reviewed and grouped into categories that encompassed the overall theme of the codes. The categories were then sorted for patterns and reviewed for meaning.

**Limitations and Delimitations of the Research Design**

**Limitations**

There are several limitations to this study. Since the participants were non-English to limited-English speakers, the interviews were conducted in the participants’ native language—Hmong. Due to the difference in language, the original interview and reflection journal questions were translated into Hmong. In addition, since the participants read and spoke Lao, the interview and reflection journal questions were also translated into Lao. Although the current researcher was a certified speaker and writer in Hmong, some of the English terms did not necessarily exist in the Hmong language. Thus, some of the translated questions may not have conveyed the exact
meaning that was intended. Also, the researcher did not read, write, or speak Lao. Thus, the translation of the questions from English to Lao was completed by an outside source, Mr. X.

The researcher had to assume that the translation of the interview and reflection journal questions to Lao was accurate. As stated by MacKenzie (2015), the quality of an interpreted question is never the same as the original one. In some languages, there is a lack of alignment in words. Nes et al. (2010) suggested that metaphors are an essential component of communication and meaning. Different cultures utilized different metaphors which influenced the meaning of their words and expression. When a narrative is translated from one language to another, the original meaning may be lost (Nes et al., 2010). Also, because the current researcher was the interpreter, there may exist a bias that could influence the translation of the questions (MacKenzie, 2015). As a result, the participants’ responses to the questions may be different as well.

Secondly, the sample size was small and the findings from the research cannot be generalized to the broader Hmong college student population in Laos. In total, 10 Hmong students were selected to participate in the researcher’s study. Although the participants responded in detail to the interview and reflective journal questions, their experiences were not necessarily reflective of the larger population of Hmong college students in Laos. Furthermore, the university where the participants attended was located in a particular part of the country. The difference in the university organization structure, academic programs and curriculum, and local culture may have influenced the responses of the participants. As a result, this study needs to be conducted on a larger scale at each of the five prominent institutions of higher learning to determine whether the results can be duplicated.
The final limitation was the bias that the researcher brought to the study. The researcher was a naturalized American citizen of Hmong descent. He was born in a small village in the mountains of Laos. Having lived in Laos for the early years of his life, the researcher experienced some of the challenges that the participants faced. During the interview, as the participants shared their stories and experiences as a Hmong college student, the researcher identified with some of their experiences. Yin (2007) cautioned that a disadvantage of case studies is biased views of the researcher that might influence the direction and findings of the research (as cited by Zainal, 2007). As a result, the researcher’s bias may have inadvertently affected the findings of the study.

**Delimitations**

This study was limited due to the uniqueness of the characteristics of the sample. The participants who were selected for this study were only Hmong college students in Laos. Any other potential participants who were not Hmong were eliminated from participation. This selection process for the participants was intentional since the premise of the study was to understand the educational experiences of Hmong college students who resided in the country of Laos. Furthermore, the sample size of the study was small. As such, the result of the study cannot be generalized to the population of Hmong college students in Laos.

An attempt to compare this study with others was initiated. However, it was difficult as no comparable research has been done with the same student population. There were a couple of studies on the persistence of Hmong college students in the United States, but none were found on the Hmong students in Laos. Comparing the Hmong college students in the United States with those in Laos would not be valid. Both the student populations’ experiences in higher education...
would have been different. Since this study was one of the first of the selected population, the findings may not be generalized to the entire population of the Hmong college students in Laos.

**Validation**

There are various views regarding the validation of qualitative studies (Creswell, 2013). Depending on the researcher, the validation term will differ. For instance, according to LeCompte and Goetz, the terms utilized are internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity (as cited by Creswell, 2013). Other researchers, such as Lincoln and Guba, use terms such as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (as cited by Creswell, 2013). For this study, the terms used to discuss the validation of the research will be credibility and dependability.

**Credibility**

In qualitative research, credibility pertains to the trustworthiness of the study (Creswell, 2013). As such, researchers have developed various strategies to promote credibility in their studies. In this study, some of the established credibility procedures were utilized to make sure that the findings were credible. As discussed in the limitations section, potential bias may have been brought into the study. Therefore, it is even more critical that multiple strategies be utilized to negate any possible bias.

According to Creswell (2013), one strategy is “prolonged engagement and persistent observation” (p. 250). With this strategy, the researcher builds trust and rapport by learning about the participant’s culture and checking any misinformation that may have arisen from previous research (Creswell, 2013). As someone who shares the same ethnicity as the participants, the current researcher believed that he has the appropriate knowledge of the culture to establish trust and rapport. However, since the participants resided in a different country, and
it has been over 35 years since he lived in Laos, the researcher made sure to check with the participants to ensure that there was no miscommunication. Additionally, the researcher read up on the culture of the country of Laos before embarking on the data collection process.

Secondly, Creswell (2013) recommends triangulation, which is the process of using multiple and different resources to provide substantiating evidence of the study. In triangulating the results, the data from the current study, along with other similar cases, were utilized to ensure that all aspects of the phenomenon have been investigated in a valid, credible, and ethical way. Furthermore, as discussed above, the researcher may bring his own bias into the research because of his past experiences of living in the country of Laos. Therefore, the researcher will utilize member checking as a tool to assist in the alleviation of any bias (Yin, 2018).

As discussed by Creswell (2013), member checking involves the researcher allowing the participants to check the findings and interpretation of the data. Member checks are recommended throughout the study so that the researcher can validate not only the findings but also fine-tune the data collection method as well (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Through this process, the participants can confirm the researcher’s findings and interpretation, or they can provide additional details to help facilitate a better understanding of the data. According to Lincoln and Guba, member checking is one of the most important methods used for the establishment of credibility in a qualitative study (as cited by Creswell, 2013).

In this study, the participants were given an opportunity to review the transcribed interviews for accuracy. There were some participants who had access to download, read, and respond to the transcribed interview via email. For these participants, a copy of the transcribed interview was sent to them. There were some participants who did not have an email and thus did not have access to the transcribed interview. For these participants, they were contacted via
Messenger or the WhatsApp application. The transcribed interview was read back to them verbatim. These participants then had the opportunity to either confirm or suggest changes.

**Dependability**

Dependability pertains to the trustworthiness of the collected data (Creswell, 2013). In an attempt to promote dependability, the participants of the current study were allowed to review the data. As suggested by Stake, the participants play a vital role in the study (as cited by Creswell, 2013). Hence, they should be allowed to examine the rough draft of the data collected and provide any additional feedback as needed. Such feedback will serve to improve and clarify the data. This process was utilized with the current study. If there were any inaccuracies regarding the interpretation and analysis of the interview and journal responses data, the participants were able to discuss and clarify these issues with the researcher. This study, however, did not require any corrections as the participants confirmed the researcher’s data.

**Expected Findings**

A college student’s persistence is an embodiment of his motivation (Tinto, 2017). However, four key dimensions impact the student’s motivation: (a) goal, (b) self-efficacy, (c) sense of belonging, and (d) perception of the curriculum. Without the four key dimensions, a college student will not persist in his education. However, Asian students’ persistence is influenced by different factors that vary from those that typically impact non-Asians students (Kommers & Pham, 2016). The Hmong students of Laos shared similar characteristics as the Asian students in Kommers and Pham’s (2016) study; therefore, it was not surprising that both studies had similar findings.

Of the four aspects outlined in Tinto’s model, it was expected that the goal and self-efficacy would be the only factors that influence the Hmong college students in Laos to persist in
their education. As an ethnic minority group in Laos, the Hmong commonly reside in the rural areas of the country. Many tend to be farmers and live in poverty. In Laos, education played a crucial role in the decision to work in nonfarm or farming jobs (Estudillo et al., 2013). Due to their location, the Hmong typically lack access to institutions of higher education, which have made them more susceptible to agrarian occupations. This has become problematic; however, as the country of Laos continues to develop, farmlands are declining. The result was that Laos’ labor market would shift from one that is dependent on pure labor to one that requires a skilled labor force.

As asserted by Kyophilavong et al. (2018), education played a vital role in increasing human capital. Furthermore, Kyophilavong et al. (2018) also concluded that there is a long-term relationship between all levels of education and the economic growth of a country. As one of the least developed countries in the world, Laos needed to have as many educators as possible for the advancement of its country (Langill, 2016). As 70% of the county still live in rural areas in which the poverty level is high, education is evermore essential (Estudillo et al., 2013). Correspondingly, those who are uneducated are more likely to remain in poverty (Estudillo et al., 2013). Due to their experiences of living in poverty, Hmong college students are motivated to persist by their goal of distancing themselves and their families from poverty. Thus, the goal will be a factor that has the most influence on Hmong college students’ continued persistence and retention in higher education.

Secondly, as concluded by Chang (2015), self-efficacy was theoretically meaningful in Asian cultures. An individual in Asia was also motivated by their level of self-efficacy just as someone in Western culture. A student’s past academic achievement has a positive effect on his self-efficacy (Hwang et al., 2015). Although primary education in Laos was still evolving in
terms of quality, relevance, and efficiency, the number of student enrollment has steadily increased over the last two decades (Phetsiriseng, 2009). With the continued evolution of primary education, the enrollment rate of higher education was also growing. However, access was not equitable across the board.

In Laos, it was not easy for an individual to gain access to higher education. There are only a limited number of admission slots available in higher education due to an existing quota system (Siharath, 2010). During the education reform, the government of Laos implemented a quota system in which a certain number of admission slots are allocated to each province. The provincial authorities are then mandated to nominate students in their regions for admission (Weidman, 1999). To gain access, students will have to take and perform well in a three-day national exam administered by the Ministry of Education. Those students who perform at the top level will receive an exemption from paying tuition, and the government will also pay for the student’s living expenses (Moxom & Hayden, 2015). These students should not have any issues with regards to their level of self-efficacy. Therefore, the Hmong students who performed well and received a tuition exemption should have a high level of academic self-efficacy, and it should not prevent them from persisting in their education.

The other factors, such as a sense of belonging and perception of the curriculum, will have little to no influence on the Hmong college students’ persistence for a couple of reasons. First of all, a sense of belonging is a concept in which the student must feel like they belong to the institution. Since entrance into an institution of higher learning in Laos is limited, not all students who have a desire to attend can. It is especially more so for Hmong students who are an ethnic minority (Siharath, 2010). Therefore, the Hmong students who are able to attend are those who will persist regardless of whether there was a sense of belonging or not.
As for the perception of the curriculum, it is also not a factor because of the limited choices that are available for the students. Since the education system in Laos was still evolving, there was a limited number of qualified school administrators and faculty members (Adruce et al., 2017; MacKinnon & Thepphasoulithone, 2014; Siharath, 2919; Weidman, 1999). Furthermore, some of the curriculum and textbooks are outdated or irrelevant, but it was what was available (Siharath, 2010) is. Although a student many want a curriculum that is more current, they may not have a choice in the matter.

**Ethical Issues**

**Conflict of Interest Assessment**

Although there was a potential for a conflict of interest in every study, this current study did not present significant concerns. All participants resided in a foreign country and were not known to the researcher before they participated in the study. As discussed in the sampling section above, all participants chose to participate in the study and had no connection to or relation with the researcher. All participants did not receive any form of compensation from the researcher to participate in the study.

**Researcher’s Position**

As a Hmong born in Laos, the researcher has a deep connection to the country and the people. The hope was that the data and findings from the current study would be another resource that will contribute to the continued improvement of the higher education system in Laos. To his knowledge, the researcher remained neutral and did not allow any of the potential biases to taint the results of the study. Also, the researcher did not attempt to force any of his beliefs and ideologies on the participants so as not to influence any of their responses.
Ethical Issues in the Study

According to Creswell (2013), a researcher will face ethical issues during the data collection process regardless of the research method used. Some of the problems pertain to the confidentiality of the participants and the data. To ensure confidentiality, the researcher personally collected the data. Also, the researcher completed the required training on the ethics of research through the provider CITI. Moreover, before conducting the study, all participants had been informed about voluntary participation via a letter. (see Appendix G). If any of the participants had chosen to withdraw during the study, they had the right to do so at any time. There were no consequences, pressure, or judgment from the researcher for the participants to remain in the research if they choose to leave. The participants were also informed about the confidentiality of information gathered from the study. All transcripts of the participants’ responses, both written and audio versions, were kept in a locked USB drive that was encrypted with a password. The participants’ names and personal identifiers were also kept confidential through a numbering system to maintain the confidentiality of the participants’ identities.

Chapter 3 Summary

This chapter detailed the methodology for this single-case study. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the factors behind the persistence and retention of Hmong college students in Laos using Tinto’s model of student motivation and persistence. There were four research questions that the researcher answered in the study, and the questions were all driven by the four aspects of Tinto’s model. The research sample was gathered from one of the five prominent universities in Laos. All participants were Hmong students who had completed at least one year at their respective institutions.
To gather the data, the researcher used a series of open-ended questions that addressed the aspects presented of Tinto’s model of student motivation and persistence. The participants were Hmong and spoke very limited English. The interviews were conducted in the participant’s native language. After the gathering of the data, the researcher utilized multiple strategies to analyze the data for themes. Finally, multiple approaches were applied to ensure the validity of the data. The data gathered will be presented and discussed in Chapter 4.
Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Results

The purpose of this study was to examine and understand the factors that influenced the persistence and retention of Hmong college students in Laos. Through the usage of a single-case study design, the study focused on one primary and three subresearch questions. The primary research question guiding the study was, “How do Hmong students in Laos perceive the factors influencing their persistence and retention in higher education?”

Additionally, there were the following three subresearch questions:

1. What motivated Hmong college students in Laos to persist in higher education?
2. How do Hmong college students in Laos perceive goals as a factor in their persistence and retention?
3. How do Hmong college students in Laos perceive self-efficacy as a factor in their persistence and retention?
4. How do Hmong college students in Laos perceive a sense of belonging as a factor in their persistence and retention?
5. How do Hmong college students in Laos perceive the curriculum as a factor in their persistence and retention?
6. What student support services do the universities provide to assist in improving Hmong students’ persistence and retention?

Through this study, readers will better understand why Hmong college students in Laos persist and what factors influenced their persistence. Furthermore, the study fills a much-needed gap in the literature as it pertains to Hmong college students in Laos.
This chapter contains four sections: (a) the description of the sample, (b) research methodology and analysis, (c) summary of the findings, and (d) presentation of the data and results.

**Description of the Sample**

The population for this case study was Hmong college students in Laos. As a method of ensuring that the participants in this study met the criteria, purposive sampling was utilized. All participants were screened prior to their acceptance for participation in the study. They had to meet three criteria. First of all, the participants must be of Hmong descent and must identify themselves as Hmong. Secondly, the participant must be a current college student at an institution of higher learning in Laos for at least one year. Lastly, the participant must be willing to discuss and disclose information relating to his or her persistence and retention as college students at his or her respective institutions of higher learning. Any participants who did not meet all three criteria were dropped from the study. Those who met the criteria were contacted via phone and scheduled for an interview.

In the country of Laos, there are five large universities that are well known. With the assistance of Mr. X, an international monument guide in Laos, flyers regarding the study were disseminated in an apartment complex where a considerable number of Hmong college students resided. The students then corresponded with the researcher to inform him of their willingness to participate in the study. All the participants who were interested in participating were prescreened to ensure that they met the participation requirements.

A summary of the participants’ demographics was presented in Table 2. The participants of this study were students who were currently attending one of the five well-known universities of Laos. A total of 14 students met the participation requirements and enlisted to participate.
However, only 10 students provided the necessary information and/or were available for an interview. Yin (2018) recommended that a case study not involve too many participants. Likewise, Creswell (2013) suggests that five participants would be sufficient for a qualitative study to avoid data saturation. Ten participants would provide a better and broader range of experiences needed to understand the phenomenon. Thus, only 10 participants were selected for the study.

All participants were current students and of Hmong descent. Nine out of the 10 participants were first-generation college students. There was one student whose father had received his Bachelor of Science degree. Most of the participants did not reside in the city or province where they are attending college. All participants lived off-campus in an apartment complex designed for college students. Of the participants, half were females and half were males. The academic major of the participants varied and ranged from math education to criminal law. In order to protect their identities, all participants will simply be referred to as Participant 1, Participant 2, and so on. Also, despite efforts to diversify student demographics in terms of institution, all the participants happened to attend the same university; therefore, any identifying information that could jeopardize the confidentiality of the participants was strictly limited. The name of the institution where the participants attended was listed as University 1.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Major</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant 1 (P1)</td>
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<td>Architecture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 2 (P2)</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Business Admin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 3 (P3)</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Foreign Language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 4 (P4)</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Political Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 5 (P5)</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Criminal Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 6 (P6)</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 7 (P7)</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Politics &amp; Admin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Major</td>
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<tr>
<td>--------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 8 (P8)</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Business Admin</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participant 9 (P9)</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Finance &amp; Banking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 10 (P10)</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Management</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Research Methodology and Analysis**

In a qualitative study, the researcher observes and interprets what he sees in its natural setting (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Also, the researcher attempts to understand and establish meaning to a phenomenon from the perspective of the participants (Creswell, 2014). This research study utilized a single-case study approach. The goal was to understand the factors that contributed to the persistence and retention of Hmong college students. Furthermore, the study intended to analyze and determine if the four factors (goals, self-efficacy, a sense of belonging, perception of curriculum), as established by Tinto’s model of student motivation and persistence, were applicable to the Hmong college students in Laos.

To understand the phenomenon, this study examined the Hmong college students’ experiences in Laos. These experiences included the students’ recollections of their first day in school to the challenges they encountered while attending their university. In addition, the students shared what factors contributed to their continued persistence and retention at their current institution. In the gathering of the data for the study, two instruments were utilized: interview and reflection journal.

**Field-Test**

In a case study, a field-test was necessary to refine the interview questions and identify any potential problems that may arise during the interview process (Creswell, 2013). However, because of their limited number, none of the participants were designated as field-test subjects. Instead, the interview questions were refined after each interview due to the emergent nature of qualitative research as described by Creswell (2013). For example, P1 was well-versed in
English. His reading and writing level in English was also good. When the interview was conducted for P1, there were certain instances in which P1 spoke in English. However, the rest of the participants were limited in English, and the entirety of the interview was conducted in Hmong.

**Data Collection**

After obtaining IRB approval on January 22, 2020, the participants who volunteered for participation in the study were contacted via phone and prescreened. The consent form was read to the participants verbatim, and verbal consent was obtained. Some of the consent forms were also sent to participants via email. All consent was recorded for safekeeping. For the interviews, the participants were contacted online either through Messenger or the WhatsApp application. These two online tools allowed for a person video conference, which enabled the opportunity to observe the participants’ body language and facial expressions as they responded to the interview questions. Furthermore, both applications were available on the researcher’s Surface Pro which enabled the researcher to record the interview via the Debut application. Thus, the interviews were recorded for further reference during the data analysis process.

The interview of the students consisted of four open-ended questions, and they were as follows:

1. Describe your experience as a Hmong college student in Laos?
2. What do you perceive as some of the factors that have contributed to your motivation to persist or stay in the university?
3. How do you perceive the following factors in your continuing to persist in the university? Goals, self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and perception of the curriculum?
4. What are some of the student support services that are provided by the university to help motivate you to persist?

Throughout the interview, the participants’ responses, along with the expressions on their faces and the tone of their voices, were documented. All questions were open-ended, and if there were any instances in which the participant’s response did not match their facial expression or body language, a follow-up question was asked for clarity. Overall, the average interview lasted 35 minutes. Every participant was allowed to ask questions regarding the study or interview questions. Upon the conclusion of the interview, each participant was informed about the next data collection method, the reflection journal. The researcher reviewed each reflection journal questions with the students and explained the process of completing the journal.

The reflection journal questions consisted of three open-ended questions, and they are:

1. Think about your impression as you arrived to the first day of class and the last day of the first year. Explain why you are pursuing your degree in higher education and what factors influenced your decision to continue?

2. Think about your academic experience as you pursue your degree. What role do goals, academic self-efficacy, a sense of belonging, and perception of the curriculum have in your decision to continue your education?

3. Imagine that you are an administrator of your university. What type of student support services would you enact to assist the student and their motivation to persist?

For the participants who had an email account, they were encouraged to respond via email. However, there were some participants who did not have an email account. For those participants, they were given the option of completing their reflection journal via Messenger or the WhatsApp application. In addition, a couple of the participants requested, and were allowed
to write their reflection journals on paper. In order to share their journals, these participants took a picture of each page and sent them to the researcher via Messenger, WhatsApp, or text message. Regardless of which method they selected, all the participants completed their reflection journals.

Data Analysis

All the interviews were conducted in the participants’ primary language—Hmong. Prior to analyzing the data, the interviews were transcribed verbatim in Hmong as well. Initially, the plan was to translate the data (transcript and reflection journal) into English and then analyze it. However, after reviewing and reading the data several times, it was more useful to analyze the data in its original language because of the valuable meaning behind the words and language. As suggested by Nes et al. (2010), language has a significant influence on the meaning of any experience. There was a key concern that analyzing data that had been translated from its original language would alter the meaning of the data, and in some cases, the original meaning would be lost altogether. As such, after the data had been coded and the themes identified in the primary language, the findings were then translated into English. In doing so, the meaning of the data remained as close to the original meaning as possible (Nes et al., 2010). Since the data analysis was conducted in its original language, the utilization of a software or automated application such as NVivo 12 in the analysis process did not occur. Instead, the data were manually analyzed in a Microsoft Excel database using the following strategies suggested by Yin (2018).

The following steps were utilized to analyze the transcribed interviews and reflection journals:

1. Organize all data
2. Organize the data through words and phrases
3. Code the data
4. Review for themes
5. Review for reliability & validity of data (members checking)
6. Interpret the themes

This data analysis process was repeated several times until seven general and significant themes were established. The general and significant themes are shown in Appendix I and Appendix J.

**Summary of the Findings**

To understand the factors, the Hmong college students were interviewed in person via Messenger or the WhatsApp application. Initially, all the participants seemed nervous when they were contacted for the pre-screening interview. However, during the actual interviews, all the participants appeared and sounded relaxed. The participants were open and willing to share their experiences as Hmong college students in Laos. Some of them were curious about the study and wanted to know more about the research.

In this single-case study, the focus was on the Hmong college students and the factors that contributed to their persistence and retention in Laos. After the data analysis was completed, there were 65 general themes (see Appendices H and I). Of the general themes, seven significant themes were identified. They were as follows: (a) being a Hmong college student was difficult, (b) family was a factor that motivated, (c) goal was a motivator to persistence, (d) Hmong students were confident in their abilities, (d) there was a sense of belonging, (f) the curriculum was the top in Laos but a nonfactor, and (g) the professor was their supporter. Each of the seven significant themes is discussed below.
Theme 1: It was Difficult Being a Hmong College Student

The first significant theme suggested a level of difficulty for Hmong college students. Seven out of the 10 participants shared that being a Hmong college student has been difficult for them (P1, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10). The Hmong students who expressed this difficulty shared that they came from a poor family (P1, P3, P4, P5, P6, P8, P10), and going to school was challenging from a financial standpoint (P8, P10). When asked about his experience as a Hmong college student, P7 shared:

Being a Hmong college student is not easy. The biggest challenge is that my parents and my family are poor. And because of that, my family is not always able to help me financially. Therefore, I will have to help myself the majority of the time, and it makes it difficult to just focus on my education. The university that I am attending is in the city and is far from the village where my family lives. Because of the distance, I will have to rent an apartment, which further complicates everything. A part of me will have to concentrate on my education, but another part of me will have to focus on finding a way to support myself and my living arrangements.

The Hmong students felt that their lack of financial resources amplified their challenging circumstances. P10 was a student from a financially-challenged family and expressed her lack of educational supplies. Because she came from a poor family, P10 also expressed that she needed to study harder. The family had invested what little money they had into her education.

On her experience as a Hmong college student, P10 shared, “As a Hmong college student, I will have to perform better than the Lao students. I have to also study harder and I have to devote myself to my education fully. My grades have to better as well.”

P9 shared a similar experience as a Hmong college student. She said:
Ever since I was in grade school, I’ve seen how my parents have invested a lot of time and money into my education. Also, they worked very hard to ensure that they could provide some sort of financial support for me. I have to study hard and persist until I graduate with my bachelor’s degree for my parents and make them happy.

Essentially, the Hmong students felt that they had to study harder and perform better than other students to ensure that they did not waste their family’s money.

Another challenge derived from additional responsibilities associated with being a Hmong student. One of the participants shared that she had to also assist her parents in toiling on the family farm, in addition to studying for her classes. P5 explained:

However, I am from a family in which my parents do not have a lot of money. So even as I go to college, I have to also find a job to support myself. Also, even though I am a college student, I also have to help my parents with the family when I am not at school.

The Hmong students felt a keen responsibility to help and support their families, despite having academic challenges to overcome.

Other Hmong students shared about the difficulty of the Lao language and culture. P9 shared about the challenges she had experienced. P9 stated, “I am Hmong and the curriculum is in Lao, so it was difficult. I do not speak Lao fluently and I have an accent, so it made it more difficult when communicating.” P8 expressed the same challenge as P9. She shared, “I am Hmong and I am going to school in a Lao society, so it presents a lot of challenges. I do not speak Lao very fluently, so it was difficult.”

P10 also expressed about the challenges of not knowing the Lao culture. When asked to explain her experiences, P10 disclosed:
Another challenge is the fact that I am not familiar with the Lao culture. I do not know about their leadership style, customs, and beliefs. Therefore, when I am at the university, I had to learn about the Lao culture as well.

Some of the Hmong students felt that the language and culture barriers further contributed to their struggles as Hmong students.

**Theme 2: Family was a Factor That Motivated**

The second significant theme revolved around the participants’ families. All participants shared that in one form or another, their families were their motivation. Specifically, all of the participants came from low-income families who experience continual financial hardships. Participant P2 summed up the sentiments of most participants when she stated: “So you use the fact that you come from a poor family as motivation to give you the strength to persist in your education.” Since their families were poor and had low socioeconomic status, the participants wanted to get an education so that they could help their families financially (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8). In obtaining an education, the participants wanted the opportunity to have careers that would provide them with stable incomes (P1, P2, P3, P4, P8, P9).

Secondly, half of the participants shared that they come from a family of farmers. Their parents were farmers, their grandparents were farmers, and their great grandparents before them were farmers. They do not have any other means of earning a living other than through their farming. As farmers, the family would farm to feed the family, and any extra produce was sold at the local farmers’ market as a source of income. A small portion of the money would then be sent to the participants to help with their educational expenses. The participants shared that they wanted a better life than that of their parents (P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P8, P10) and education would afford them the opportunity to do so.
As P8 shared about why her family was a factor in her decision to persist, she stated:
As for myself, I always gravitated towards getting an education because my parents are farmers, and I told myself that I would not follow in their footsteps. I told myself that I would go to college in the city so that I will get a good job and not farm like my parents. So when I encounter challenges that make me question whether I should drop out, I continue to persist.

Eight of the 10 participants shared their belief that education would be the opportunity for them to enhance their own lives and that of their families. As previously mentioned, the participants described that they came from low-income families who experienced financial struggle on a regular basis. P6 expressed his family’s struggled and said:

There may exist many factors that influenced me in persisting, but the most important factor was my family. I witnessed how poor my parents and my family are. I do not want my life or my family to be poor in the future. Therefore, I will work on persisting in my education so that one day, I will be able to help my family attain a better life.

P5 echoed the same sentiment when she said the following:

When I look back on my life, I saw how poor my family was. That is why I work so hard in ensuring that I am successful and that I am able to attain the highest degree possible. I am hopeful that through my hard work and persistence, I will be able to escape and not struggle financially like my parents.

The opportunity to attend college and obtain an education that would provide the participants with a way of life that was different from that of their parents was evident in the interviews. Witnessing the first-hand struggles of their parents and their families was a vital source of motivation for the participants. This motivation was a factor that significantly
contributed to the participants’ decision to continue to persist in their education. Also, the participants were motivated by the prospect of being able to later provide financial security for their families.

P10 also shared a similar experience:

As a young girl, I saw how poor my family was and how much my parents struggled to provide for the family. I told myself that I would walk a different path than my parents. I want a good life for myself. A life in which I do not have to worry about my everyday needs, and I do not have to worry about my future. This is what fueled and motivated me to study hard. Also, it helped me to continue to persist so that I graduate regardless of how difficult the situation may be. I am hopeful that when I graduate, I will be able to secure a good job, one in which I will have a monthly income.

Furthermore, another source of motivation was the lack of parental education; most of the participants’ parents never attended college. Nine of the participants shared that their mothers had no formal education, and the highest education reported for fathers was a Bachelor’s of Science degree. When explaining about her parents’ education, P8 said:

My mother had no formal education because she was a woman, and my grandparents did not support her getting an education. They said that my mother’s role was to help the family with the household chores and to learn how to be a good future wife. Education was a privilege only reserved for the males of the family. As for my father, he attended school, but the fourth grade was the highest that was offered in his village. After fourth grade, even if he wanted to continue his education, my father would have had to travel to the city, and he did not want to. Furthermore, my father was needed at home to help the family, so he stopped going to school.
P2 also shared a similar sentiment about her parents’ education and said:

My parents did not have the opportunity to get an education, and it resulted in them not being able to get good-paying jobs. They have to work in the fields, in the hot sun every day. Whereas, for me, I have an opportunity that they never had. I have an opportunity to get an education so that I do not have to work in the field in the future. Instead, I will have an opportunity to work in an office with the air conditioner on.

In regards to his parents’ education, P4 also shared:

My parents never had any formal education. Because of that, they farm to support the family. As a son who witnessed the struggles of my parents and their way of life, I said to myself that I would not follow in their footsteps. I will go to school and get a degree in higher education so that I will have an opportunity at a life that is different from my parents’. This is the reason why I am willing to go so far and work so hard to ensure that I persist in my education. I want to make sure that I graduate with my degree. Also, when I graduate and find a good job, I will be able to help my family financially.

The Hmong students attributed their parents’ lack of opportunity and poverty to their lack of education. They used it as a motivating force to motivate them to persist in their education so that the trajectory of their life will be different from their parents.

**Theme 3: Goal was a Motivator to Persistence**

The third significant theme relates to Tinto’s model of student motivation and persistence, and it pertains to goals. All the Hmong students expressed that having a goal was very important and played a vital role in their continued persistence (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10). Having a goal was what motivated the student to continue their education (P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10). As P2 spoke about her goal, she said:
I said to myself, if I dream big, I will be able to achieve it. There have been many instances in which I was frustrated and tired of school, and I wanted to drop out. However, I remembered my goals and remembered that I must achieve my goals regardless of the challenges. I must not give up in the face of the struggles that I encountered. I must persist, and eventually, I will be able to overcome anything. The challenges that arise were trivial compared to my goals. Eventually, any challenges and difficulties that arise will pass, and I will reach my goal.

About the importance of goals, P1 explained:

To be a person in this world, you must have a goal. Therefore, when you have a goal, you will work hard, and you will persist through anything. When you have a goal, it will motivate you to overcome any difficulties or challenges that you encounter.

P3 shared about his goal and said:

I truly believe that having a goal is essential, and it motivated me to work and study hard. It also helped ensure that I continue to persist and not drop out of school. Overall, having a goal is something that will provide the greatest motivation for a person. When a person has a goal, he will be more willing to do whatever it takes to ensure that he achieves his goal.

In regards to goals, P10 said:

As a human being, you must have goals. If you believe in living day to day without any goals, then you will not be able to achieve anything. For example, when you come to college, and you do not have any goals, you will not do well, and you will not have a successful outcome. However, if you have a goal, you will devote and not waste your
time on anything that is not necessary for your success. When you have a goal, you will make use of your time to ensure that you achieve your goals in the face of adversity.

Similar to P10, P6 expressed the importance of goals and said:

I believe that it is essential to have goals. As a human being, to be motivated to do anything, you must have a goal. It is something that will propel you to work and study hard so that you can persist and not drop out of your education. I believe that those students who dropped out and do not graduate are those who did not have goals. When they encounter roadblocks or when their education challenged them, they will falter. However, when you have important goals, you will know what is essential, and you will not allow anything to stop you from the attainment of your goals.

The same thoughts about goals were conveyed by P7, who said:

In regards to goals, I believe that it is essential to an individual. When a person has goals, he will know what must be done and where he is heading. When you start your education, you must have goals for yourself. In doing so, when you encounter any difficulties or stressors in school, you will have the strength and energy to endure. So I feel that my goals are essential to me, and they have motivated me to continue to persist and not drop out of my school. When I faced challenges, it was very evident to me that my goals were the key to motivating me to continue persisting.

As described by P8, she said of goals:

You must have a goal in anything that you attempt. If you do not have any goals, then you will never be able to achieve anything. As for myself, the first thing that I did when I started my education was to establish a goal. Even if my parents were to support me in everything that I do, if I do not have any goal, I will not have the heart and the drive to
achieve anything. So I must have a goal that I will be a daughter who can succeed in my education. Through this goal, I will believe and will have the motivation to persist in my educational endeavor.

Having a goal or multiple goals was imperative to the continued persistence of all the Hmong students. They all expressed that they had goals that kept them motivated in the face of numerous adversities.

**Theme 4: Hmong Students Were Confident in Their Abilities**

Another significant theme that was evident in all the participants was their academic self-efficacy. All the Hmong students shared that they always believed in themselves and their ability to accomplish a task (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10). When explaining her self-efficacy, P9 explained:

> When I started college, regardless of how difficult it got, I always believed in myself and my ability to succeed in my courses. If I did not believe in myself and my abilities to succeed when the courses were difficult, I would not have continued.

In regards to his self-efficacy, P4 said, “I believe that believing in one’s ability to be successful in college is something that will motivate and help with their persistence. As for myself, I have always believed in myself and my ability to be successful in school.” P8 also expressed similar confidence in her ability and said:

> You have to believe in yourself that if you say that you can achieve something, you will. Believing in yourself and your ability to complete a task will help motivate you when you are in college. If you believe in yourself, but you do not complete the task that you set for yourself, then you are lying to yourself. I was never the smartest student. I was average,
but I always studied and worked hard. Also, I have always believed that I will be successful in my schooling.

P6 reiterated similar thoughts about self-efficacy. He said:

I have always believed in myself and my ability. Also, I think that my belief in my ability to succeed is something that assisted in my academic success. Furthermore, it motivated me to continue to persist in the face of difficulties. In Laos, we have a saying, “If you enthusiastic and work hard, you will receive something good in return.” So my belief in myself and my ability to succeed is something that will always motivate me to be enthusiastic and work hard in my education. Furthermore, I will continue to persist in my school until I graduate.

All the Hmong students had a strong sense of academic self-efficacy. They all expressed confidence in themselves and their ability to be successful in their studies. This belief in themselves never wavered even when the Hmong students faced insurmountable challenges. Furthermore, because of their keen sense of academic self-efficacy, the students never questioned whether they would be able to perform well in school.

**Theme 5: There was a Sense of Belonging**

As the fifth theme suggested, the Hmong students felt like they belonged to the university (P2, P4, P5, P6, P8). Since they felt this sense of belonging, the Hmong students were motivated to persist (P4, P5, P6). However, some of the Hmong students shared that regardless of whether they felt a sense of belonging at the university or not, they would have still continued to persist (P3, P6, P9). One student even stated that since she had decided to attend college, she was resolved in her commitment to continuing her education regardless of any challenges she may face along the way (P7).
In regards to a sense of belonging, P6 expressed:

Whether the university made me feel like I belonged or not, have no bearing on whether I continue to persist. Because attending and graduating is my goal, I will persist regardless. As for the curriculum of the institution, I believe that as students, we must take courses that are beneficial to us in the future. If we are interested in any subject, we should pursue it. I believe that this institution is the best and should have the desired courses for all students.

P7 expressed similar thoughts and said:

In this institution, we do not have anything pertaining to a sense of belonging. When you decide to come to college, you come. Also, this institution that I am attending is one of the highest and top universities in the county of Laos. Before I attended, I heard that this university was the best. Therefore, when I attend classes, I truly believe that the curriculum that the instructors are teaching will benefit us now and in the future.

**Theme 6: The Curriculum was the top in Laos but a Nonfactor**

The sixth significant theme suggested that the Hmong students had high regard and a positive perception of the university and its curriculum. These positive attitudes were mainly due to the university’s prestigious reputation as one of the top institutions in the country. Six out of the 10 Hmong students expressed that the university that they were attending was one of the top in the county (P1, P3, P4, P6, P7, P10). When asked about their perceptions of the curriculum, some of the Hmong students shared that the curriculum was relevant and acceptable (P2, P7, P8, P9). In contrast, other students shared that the teaching and learning process at the university needed some improvement (P1, P3, P4). Regardless of their perceptions of the curriculum, some of the Hmong students expressed that since they were attending the school, they would continue
to attend and work hard to be successful (P1, P3, P4). A student shared that her perception of the curriculum did not factor into her decision to persist (P8).

As expressed by P1 about the curriculum:

At this university, the professors treat every student fairly and equally. Furthermore, the professors also support all the students and their academic endeavors. As a student, if you work hard, you will be successful. Also, in the country of Laos, there are not many well-known universities. So the university that I am attending now is [ranked] among some of the top in the country of Laos. Because of its prestige as one of the top university, I feel that regardless of my perception of the curriculum, I will continue to attend until I graduate. So when I started attending, there were some good instructors and a good curriculum. There also exist some bad instructors as well. Be that as it may, because it is a university, I will have to continue to attend. Regardless of the curriculum, whether I succeed or not depends on myself and how hard I devote myself to my studies. Since I chose to come to the university, I will persist until the end, even if I think that the curriculum is not the best or relevant to my future.

When asked about the curriculum of the institution, P3 said, “In regards to the curriculum, I personally feel that the curriculum is not good as the professors do not provide good instruction. However, I believe that regardless of how well the professor teaches, I have never considered dropping out.”

P5 expressed similar feelings and said:

In regards to the curriculum, if you are an individual who has the intention to learn and if you believe in your ability to be successful, you will attend regardless of the curriculum. As long as the professor teaches the important theories, then it is acceptable and you
should persist. Also, if a professor deemed a theory necessary to be included in the curriculum, then it must be important.

In general, the Hmong students felt that their personal views about the quality of the curriculum and the instructors were inconsequential. Therefore, they did not play a role in their persistence in school.

Theme 7: The Professor was Their Supporter

The seventh significant theme that surfaced from the Hmong students pertained to the student support services that were provided by the institution. Each student provided a slightly different perspective and shared different experiences on the student support services that the institution provided them. Some of the student support services ranged from financial support to workshops and assemblies. In regards to student support services, P1 explained:

At this university, there is support from foreign countries such as Australia, Thailand, China, Korea, and Japan. They provide services in the form of 30–40 U.S. dollars to help students with the materials needed for their education. In regards to student support services that will help with motivation for persisting, this university does not have them yet.

When explaining her experience on student support services, P2 said:

Support services are similar to those offered at institutions in the United States. When we first started attending, the professors provided us with written guidelines on how we should conduct ourselves. The university also has a team of staff from Japan and from outside sources who will provide student support services to the students. These outside support services will be provided to all the students via a workshop or assembly. When the workshop or assembly is being provided, the professors will inform all the students
via an announcement. All students will be encouraged to attend. There will be certain sessions in which the students are mandated to attend, while some sessions are voluntary.

In regards to student support services, P3 said:

As for student support services, we do not have it over here. However, based on my logic and my personal beliefs, whether or not I receive support from the institution, I will continue to persist. Also, it [student support] is not a factor that will discourage me. I will find my strength and find what motivates me to continue to persist.

P5 expressed her thoughts on student support services and said:

This institution does not have a student support office. The majority of the time, it is the responsibility of the student to study hard. Some students study hard and focus on their studies, but the institution does not provide any support for them. I believe that if a student works and studies hard and the institution also provides support services, the student will be more successful.

Half of the Hmong students shared that their professors played a role in supporting them (P1, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10). As shared by P7:

In this university, we do not have a student support office. When you want to talk to somebody, you go and speak with your professors or with the dean of your school. However, you usually speak with a professor whom you know well, someone who will want to help you truthfully and wholeheartedly. So when you go speak with the professor, the professor will guide you on what you should and should not do. If you are contemplating whether to drop out or not, the professor will discuss with you the pros and cons of not persisting. After meeting with the professor, you can then make the decision that is best for you.
P6 was one of the students who shared that student support services were not offered; however, she received support from her professor. She explained:

At this institution, the [student support] services that you described are not offered yet. So when you are attending, and you face difficulties which prevent you from being successful, you will speak with your professor. You will think about all the professors whom you have taken a course with and decide which one has the best relationship with you. You will think about the professor who will be able to help you the most and then speak with the professor about the difficulties you are facing. The professor will speak with you, provide guidance, and motivation for you to continue to persist.

Student support as explained by P10, is a service that the student must be willing to seek out. She stated:

The most important thing is you must be willing to ask for help. When you are willing to help, you will speak with your most trusted professor. When you speak with your professor, you will share that you encountered some stressful challenges. These challenges are making you contemplating whether you want to continue your education. The professor will not tell you to drop out. However, the professor will explain to you that you must persist and that finding a job in the future will be hard if you do not have a degree. So if you are willing to open up and speak with your professors, they are always open to helping you.

In addition to support from their professors, some of the Hmong students shared that they received support from their classmates (P1, P3). P3 shared that he received support from his friends:
I have support. The first people that I always talk to are my friends. I would talk with them to see what their perspectives on the situation are and if they have a way of helping me. I would talk to my friends and explain that I am encountering some challenges, and I do not want to continue my education and ask for their opinion on what I should do. Also, I would talk to my friends about whether continuing my education is the best course of action for me or what other options I have.

P1 also shared about the support he received from his friends; he stated, “You will speak with your friends and the people whom you have a relationship [about the stress and challenges that you are encountering]. But, specifically speaking, this institution does not have the help [student support services] for the students.”

**Presentation of the Data and Results**

There were seven significant themes, and they were organized based on the research questions, as shown in Appendix H and Appendix I. This section will provide a detailed description of the participant’s profiles along with the findings from the case study. Additionally, the section will present the central and subresearch questions, along with the answers to those questions.

**Participants’ Profiles**

Although all the participants were from different parts of the country, they all attended the same institution. The descriptions of the participants were assembled based on the experiences that they shared during their interviews and in their reflection journals. Moreover, the participants’ profiles included their lived experiences as they pertained to the central and subresearch questions.
Most of the participants came from various parts of the country to study at the same university. However, when the participants shared their experiences, they had several commonalities. These commonalities were even more evident in their educational experiences and the challenges that they had encountered as students.

**Participant 1 (P1).** The first participant was a male student who had been attending the university for 4 years. He was a first-generation college student and also the oldest child in his family. Both his father and mother had no formal education. He expressed a deep desire to be able to help his family and relatives in the future pertaining to the design and construction of homes.

P1 shared that his life as a Hmong college student had not been easy. Because of their poverty, his parents instilled in him the enthusiasm to go to school and work hard on his education at an early age. In order to attend college, however, P1 had to rent and share an apartment with several classmates, since he did not live in the city or province where the institution was located. One of the most significant factors that contributed to P1’s continued persistence was his parents. P1 shared that seeing how hard his parents worked to provide for the family inspired him to continue his education.

Another essential factor to P1 was the prospect that his life would not be as economically disadvantaged as his parents. P1 believed that attending and graduating from college would assist him in securing a prosperous life in the future. When P1 is able to secure employment, he would be able to provide for his family and move them away from poverty.

As for goals, P1 shared that it was essential and played a critical role in his continued education. P1 genuinely believed that every human being should have a goal, and to be a person in this world, one must have goals. Having a goal and having the desire to accomplish the goal
was what motivated P1 to work hard on his education. One of P1’s goals was to create a good life for himself in the future. To achieve this goal, P1 acknowledged that he must attend and graduate from college. Furthermore, P1 also intended to return to his village and help build homes.

In the future, when I graduate, I want to help design good homes for my immediate and extended family. So that I can say I was able to help my family. Furthermore, if my family needs help with the construction of a new home, I want to be able to help them as well.

As for his academic self-efficacy, P1 stated that he always believed in himself and his ability to be successful in school. Also, when considering whether he could complete any task set before him, P1 considered other individuals and what they had done to accomplish the tasks set before them. As P1 discussed further in detail regarding his academic self-efficacy, he said:

I truly believe that I can complete something that others can. If other people can successfully complete something, then I should be able to as well. In believing in myself that I am as capable as others, I gain confidence in my ability to succeed.

In regards to whether or not he felt a sense of belonging at his institution, P1 did not share anything specific. P1 did, however, convey that the professors were fair and treated all the students equally. Professors supported the students in their academic endeavors. The institution also offered a scholarship to students, which was available due to the financial help they received from foreign countries.

The perception of the curriculum was something that P1 did not consider when deciding to continue his education. As suggested by P1, the university that he was attending was one of the top, if not the top, in the country. Though he felt that the curriculum was exceptional, he did
not consider it as a factor that contributed to his persistence. On his perception of the curriculum, P1 said:

So the institution that I am attending is the top in Laos. Whether the curriculum is good or not, since I decided to attend, I will continue to attend. Some professors may not teach the best curriculum, but there are also some professors whose curriculum is the best. As a student at a university, I need to just work hard and focus on my education, and I will be successful.

In regards to student support services, P1 shared that there was support from other countries around the world, such as Australia, Japan, Thailand, China, and Korea. These services were in the form of monthly financial support for students to help pay for their academic expenses. As for student support to help motivate students to persist in their education, the university did not have any systems in place at the time. When P1 needed assistance with motivation or support, he would go and speak with the professor with whom he had the best relationship.

**Participant 2 (P2).** The second participant was the youngest in the study, P2. She was a second-year student and the oldest child and daughter of her family. She was also a first-generation college student. P2’s mother had no formal education, and her father only completed the fourth grade.

As explained by P2, the most critical factor that contributed to her continued persistence was the prospect of having a better life, one in which she would not experience constant financial difficulty. P2 wanted to have a life that was better than her parents. Growing up, she saw her parents work hard in the fields because of their limited education. Her parents taught her at an early age that she had to focus and study hard so that she would have the chance of a better life.
As a college student, P2 majored in business, and her goals were to be a fashion designer and have her own line of clothing. P2 shared that she always had a goal of attending and graduating from college even before she started. Having a goal has been an essential factor in her continued persistence.

When sharing about her goals, P2 stated, “I tell myself that I have to dream big and far so that I will have more reasons to achieve them.”

Furthermore, P2’s goal extended beyond just graduating from her university. P2 wanted to achieve something greater after getting her business degree. When she was asked to explain what she wanted to achieve, P2 said:

I have a goal that after I graduate, I will have my own line of clothing. Also, I want to design cartoon keychains for cell phones and car keys. I also want to design and have my own line of shoes as well.

In regards to academic self-efficacy, P2 shared that she was not always the top student in the class. She was just average, like all her classmates. However, she believed in herself and her ability to succeed in college. P2, in discussing her academic self-efficacy, said:

I may not be the smartest student, but I do progress and pass my courses. I looked back at and saw that I passed my first year, and now I am in my second year. I can succeed just as much as everyone else. So my belief in my ability to succeed also motivates me to continue my education until today.

The curriculum of the institution was not an issue for P2. She believed that the professors taught the best curriculum available to the students, although there were instances in which the professors seemed unclear about the concepts they were teaching to students. P2 shared the following as it pertains to her experience with the university’s curriculum:
The professors at the university are different from the teachers in high school. They do not teach you about the specifics of the subject; rather, they give you the idea. As a student, you will have to take it upon yourself to research and understand the subject yourself. Through your research, you will truly know and understand the subject in your own capacity.

In regards to student support services, P2 shared that these services were available, but differed slightly from the type of services usually offered in the United States. Specifically, the university did not provide any counseling services for students. When P2 first attended college, she was informed of the student services that were available. One specific service offered to students was if they were involved in an accident or became ill. In such circumstances, the student would inform the university, and the university would try to assist with some of the financial burdens and pay for the medical bills. Another type of student support services came in the form of student support teams from other countries; these teams came to the university and provided motivational workshops to help the students.

Participant 3 (P3). P3, the third participant, was the oldest child in the family and a first-generation college student. His father completed seventh grade, and his mother never attended school. Both of P3’s parents were farmers. P3 was a fourth-year student and barring any unforeseen events, will be graduating at the end of the current year. As a Hmong college student, the biggest challenge P3 encountered was money because, like other Hmong students, P3 did not come from a wealthy family. Therefore, the most important factor that motivated P3 to persist with his education was the prospect of a better future. On his experience as a Hmong college student, P3 described:
By studying hard, even in the face of extreme difficulty, I will persist. When I graduate, I will be able to secure a good-paying job. What motivates and gives me the strength to persist is the thought of not being poor in the future. If I study hard and graduate, I will have an opportunity to have a good and prosperous life. I will not be financially challenged like my parents as my life will be different than theirs.

Like P1 and P2, P3 believed that having a goal motivated him to study hard and not drop out of school. The existence of a goal encouraged P3 in his academic endeavors with the hope that he would be able to accomplish it one day. Therefore, if a student wanted to help himself to persist, he must have a goal. P3’s goal was to work as an interpreter so that he could support himself and his family. P3, in regards to his goals, said:

Although I have many, my top goal is to graduate and work as an interpreter in the tourism industry. There is a lot of tourists who are vacationing in Laos, and I believe that the tourism industry will continue to grow in the foreseeable future. Working in the tourism industry will provide me the opportunity to earn a living to be able to support myself and my family.

P3 shared that he genuinely believed in his ability to succeed in college. He had always believed in himself because not succeeding was not an option. Regardless of how difficult his educational journey may have been, or the challenges that he encountered, P3’s belief in his ability to succeed never diminished. When sharing about his academic self-efficacy, P3 said:

As for myself, I have always believed in myself and my ability to succeed. I have no other choice. If I want to reach the goals that I have established for myself, I need to believe that I can achieve it. So I have to push forward and do what I must to succeed. I have told myself on several occasions that I have only just started to achieve some of the
goals that I have set for myself. I need to believe in myself because if I do not, nobody else will believe in me. Also, getting an education is something that I have always wanted. Hence, I have to endure all the difficulties and believe in myself so that I can obtain what I want.

According to P3’s experience at the university, he did not feel that the university had done anything to foster a student’s sense of belonging. He had not seen evidence of it, nor did he believe that the university had created a sense of belonging among its students. In regards to a sense of belonging at his university, P3 said:

What you asked [sense of belonging], based on my knowledge and experience, this university does not have it. In my university, even though I am not well versed in the policy, even if you perform well in your courses, the university does not have anything to help motivate you. Whether your academic performance is good or bad, it is the same. Regardless of whether I had a sense of belonging or not, I have a goal of attending and graduating, so I will continue to attend. I never thought about it or was concerned that I will drop out if the university does not make me feel like I belong. The thought of dropping due to a lack of a sense of belonging never entered my mind.

P3’s perception of the curriculum was different from the first two participants. According to P3, the curriculum that the professors taught was old and outdated. Furthermore, P3 stated that before attending the university, he heard through word of mouth that the university was excellent, but he was not able to verify how well the professors taught or how relevant the curriculum was. It was after he started classes that he realized his disappointment with the curriculum.
As shared by P3, “They taught us outdated materials. The curriculum that they taught us are from 1992. The professors do not seem like they are motivated or want to teach.”

When asked about the impact the outdated curriculum and unmotivated professors had on P3’s decision to persist, P3 expressed that they had no impact. He elaborated on why the curriculum and unmotivated professors had no impact on him and said:

Based on my personal belief and my way of thinking, regardless of how the professors taught and regardless of the curriculum, I will continue to persist. It is not something that will deter or prevent me from continuing to attend. I was not discouraged. Instead, I always persisted and relied on my motivation to continue forward so that I will achieve my goals.

In regards to student support services, P3 expressed that his university did not have the services. He believed that the institution should have student support services to help its students. When P3 needed support, the people who he spoke to were his friends. He would share about the struggles and hardships that he was currently experiencing and his friends would help him. P3 described his support and said:

The first individuals that I would speak to are my friends. I would speak with them and see if they had any ideas on how to help me. I would explain that I am stressed, and I do not want to continue my education. Furthermore, I want them [my friends] to give me their opinion and want to know if they can do anything to help me. After speaking with my friends, if I am still not content, I would call and speak with my parents for their opinion on what I should do.

**Participant 4 (P4).** The fourth participant was P4. He was the second child and also the first in his family to attend college. Both of P4’s parents had no formal education and were
farmers. Since P4’s parents never had an education, they were very supportive of him and his decision to attend college. However, P4’s parents were not wealthy, and therefore, P4 struggled yearly to meet the fiscal demands of his education.

As described by P4, two factors contributed to his persistence: his family and his friends. P4 shared about the factors of his persistence in college and said:

My family is the most important thing. Even if I do not have any money for my education, as long as my family supports me, I will have the desire and motivation to continue my education. Also, when I am attending school, and I do not have any motivation to stay, I would talk with my friends. They [my friends] would speak with me and encourage me to persist, which helps me. It gives me the strength to continue [my education]. So my friends are a factor in my persistence.

Like the first three participants, P4 perceived goals as an essential factor in his education. However, before attending college, P4 did not have any goals. It was not until after he was accepted into the university that P4 established a goal for himself; it was this goal that motivated him to work and study hard every day.

According to P4, his goal was to graduate so that he would be capable of helping his family in the future. He then elaborated on his goal and said, “My main goal is to attend and graduate. After graduation, I am hopeful that I will be able to secure an office job as an official so that I can help my family.”

Academic self-efficacy was not a concern for P4. He had always believed in himself and his ability to succeed in his education. P4 did, however, suggest that belief in oneself can only go so far. To truly succeed, an individual must also receive support from his family.
In terms of feeling a sense of belonging at the institution, P4’s sentiments were different from those of the first three participants. P4 suggested that his university did make him feel like he belonged there. This sense of belonging was something that gave P4 strength to continue his education. Furthermore, P4 believed that he would not want to attend any university if he did not feel like he belonged there.

In regards to the curriculum, P4 shared that the university was ranked among some of the most well-known in the country. Based on the reputation of the university, P4 was hopeful that the curriculum would be good; when he started attending college there, he felt that the curriculum was indeed good. P4 did point out, however, that regardless of how good the curriculum was, the presentation of the material varied as not all professors taught at the same level. Some taught well, while others did not. The professors with strong pedagogy taught in a way where students would genuinely comprehend the subject. The participant also shared that some professors did not seem to like Hmong students. When asked to explain, P4 shared:

When I think about it, I can feel a difference. Although the professor may want to teach so that I can truly understand the subject, if I was to compare my experience to a Lao student, it would be different. The professor does not give good grades to the Hmong students.

Student support services, as shared by P4, was available. He stated that the university had an office from which students could seek assistance. When asked to elaborate, P4 shared:

In the university, the most important thing is when you do not have any motivation to continue, you can take one year off. After taking one year off, you can come back to continue. However, before taking time off, you will have to talk to the head of your school. When talking to the head of your school, you will be advised to continue because
of the importance of education. The head of your school will never encourage you to take
time off, but if you need to, it is available.

**Participant 5 (P5).** P5 was the fifth participant and the oldest among all the female
participants. P5 was an only child and daughter. She was also a first-generation college student.
Both of P5’s parents have no formal education and are farmers. As the only child and daughter,
P5 believed that she had twice the responsibilities to fulfill; she was a college student who had to
concentrate on her studies, but she also had to assist her parents with their farming as well. In
explaining her dual role as a college student and a daughter, P5 said:

As a student, I have faced many difficulties and had to overcome several challenges.
Since I am from a poor family, my parents are not able to support me financially. So
when I started college, I had to find a job to support myself. Also, being a daughter, I had
to help my parents farm when I was not in school. However, because I want an education,
I will endure regardless of the difficulties that I encounter.

A key factor that contributed to P5’s persistence was her family’s poor economic status.
Growing up, P5 experienced how difficult her life was, in addition to seeing her family struggle
on a regular basis. These experiences of living in poverty motivated P5. She studied hard so that
she would not only graduate from school one day but also take her family out of poverty.

Like all the other participants before her, having a goal contributed to P5’s persistence.
As described by P5, having a goal gave her a sense of direction; through the goal, she was able to
visualize where she wanted to go and what she wanted to be in life. Ultimately, P5’s goals
motivated her to focus and work hard on her education.

P5 believed that her academic self-efficacy was an essential factor that motivated and
gave her the strength to continue her education. P5 had always believed in herself and her ability
to succeed in school. With that confidence, P5 was able to persist in her education regardless of the difficulties and challenges that she encountered.

Having a sense of belonging was essential to P5. She believed that when an institution helped its students achieve a sense of belonging, the students would then be more inclined to continue to attend. When she explained the importance of a sense of belonging to a university, P5 said:

There are two reasons why an institution should provide a sense of belonging to its students. First of all, it shows that the institution is opening its doors and opportunities to the students. Secondly, by providing a sense of belonging, the institution is showing its support to the student.

As for the perception of the curriculum, P5 shared that it did not matter to her. As a student, since she decided to pursue her education, she was going to attend regardless of the curriculum and how the professors taught. Even if the professors did not teach well, as long as they had good intentions, she was satisfied with what was being taught. Also, P5 had faith in her professors. If the professors did not believe that the curriculum was useful, then they would not have taught it. The fact that the curriculum was being taught suggested that it was beneficial and relevant to the students.

When attending college, P5 encountered many difficulties that challenged her persistence. When she was challenged, P5 shared that her institution did not have a student support office. She had to rely on herself and her self-motivation to continue persisting. During her years at the university, she had witnessed how some of her classmates had worked and studied hard, only to drop out due to a lack of student support services. P5 strongly felt that a
combination of student support services and self-motivation would ensure more persistence among students.

Participant 6 (P6). The sixth participant was P6, and he was also a first-generation college student. He was the oldest child and the first in his family to attend college. P6’s father completed the fifth grade, and his mother had no formal education. As a Hmong college student, one of the biggest challenges for P6 was the adjustment process. P6 explained:

When I started my education at the university, I had to change myself and the way I thought. I was no longer just a student; I was now considered an individual who was highly educated. Therefore, I had to change who my friends were. I had new teachers, and the way I learned had to change. Most importantly, I had to know who I was and change the way I acted towards others. This process of adjusting to the changes around me was the most difficult thing that I had to endure when I started college.

Although there were many factors, P6 believed that the most critical factor that contributed to his persistence was his family. P6 shared that growing up in a poor family and witnessing the struggles of his parents was what motivated him to attend college and persist despite the challenges. In explaining why his family was a factor in motivating him to persist, P6 shared:

You see that your parents struggled financially. Having witnessed their struggles, I was motivated. I did not want to struggle like my parents. Also, I told myself that I would go to school and study hard so that one day I could help my parents out of their poor financial situation. So this was the biggest factor that motivated me because I wanted to help my parents.
Having one or multiple goals was also important to P6. Just as the first participant, P1, shared, P6 also believed that everyone should have a goal. P6 shared the following regarding the importance of having a goal and said:

As a human being, if you want to have the strength [to do anything], you must have a goal. Having one will motivate an individual to study hard and not drop out. A lot of the students who do not graduate are those who do not have any goals. By not having any goals, when the student encounters any challenges, he will waiver. However, if an individual has a goal, when there are challenges, he will know what is important. The individual who has goals will not allow any challenges to prevent him from doing what is necessary to reach his goal.

P6’s goal was to graduate from college. After graduation, P6 hoped to secure a good-paying job so that he could help his parents and family with their financial needs.

In terms of academic self-efficacy, similar to the first five participants, P6 strongly believed in himself and his ability to succeed in school. Also, P6 believed that his belief in his ability was another factor that contributed to his continued persistence.

When P6 first started attending the university, he was informed about the student expectations. For instance, he had to conduct himself in a certain way, and how he communicated with the professors had to be done in a certain way as well. The university also informed him of certain services, such as the availability of the professors. He was also notified about the individuals who would be able to help him. P6, however, shared that the services provided were not factors in his decision to persist. P6 explained further in detail as to why the services offered by the university were not a factor and said:
I truly believe that it was good that the university informed me about the services that are available to me. However, regardless of whether the university has any student support services or not, I will continue to attend my school because it is my goal. I have a goal that I will graduate. This goal was more important, so I will continue to attend until I graduate.

As a student, P6 believed that every student should select a major that they liked and would be worthy of their hard work. A student should not just attend and stop when they lose interest. P6 felt that the university he was attending had the curriculum that he needed and would help him in the future.

On the subject of student support services, P6 stated that his university did not have them yet. Therefore, whenever he was struggling or facing any challenges, he would go and speak with one of his professors. He would speak with the professor with whom he had the best relationship. In addition, he would consciously select the professor whom he felt would provide him with the best support and encouragement.

Participant 7 (P7). P7, the seventh participant, is the second son in his family. Like most of the participants, P7 was a first-generation college student. However, he was not the first in his family to attend college. He had an older brother who had graduated with a bachelor’s degree in computer science. Both of P7’s parents never had any formal education. Like most participants, P7 is also from a poor family and receives very little financial assistance from his family. In sharing his experience as a Hmong college student, P7 said:

Since my family does not have any money to support me, I have to be responsible for my living and everyday expenses. I had to rely on myself, and it was not easy. Not only do I
have to worry about going to school and pass my courses, but I also have to worry about working to earn enough money to meet my financial needs.

P7 explained that the factor that contributed to his continued persistence was his family and he said:

As I explained earlier, I come from a poor family. My parents have no formal education. They work in the fields and farms to support us. Therefore, my family is poor and are financially challenged. Because I have seen my parents and family struggle financially, I decided to go to college so that one day I will be able to secure a good job. After obtaining a good job, I will be able to help my family. When I started attending college, I encountered many challenges, but when I think about my family’s struggles, they give me the strength to persevere in my education.

P7 expressed the same sentiment as most participants that having a goal is essential. In regards to his perception of goals as a factor to his persistence, P7 said:

If you do not have a goal, you will not know where you will be going in the future. Therefore, when you first start your academic endeavor, you should have a goal. During your college years, when you encounter anything complicated, you will have the strength to continue. Having a goal is one of the best motivators one can have to continue to persist.

In terms of academic self-efficacy, P7 shared that he was not always the top student, but he had always believed in himself and his ability to succeed in college. P7’s belief in his ability to succeed originated from his belief that success was a result of hard work. As long as P7 studied and worked hard, he believed that he would be able to succeed.
P7 did not believe that his perception of the curriculum had any impact on his persistence. In explaining why his perception of the curriculum had no impact on his decision to persist, P7 said:

Regardless of whether the professor teaches a good curriculum or not, it is your responsibility as a student to either do well or not. The university that I am attending is considered one of the tops in the country of Laos. Therefore, when I started attending, I believed that the curriculum was good and was what I would need to be successful in the future.

Student support services, as described by P7, was not available at the institution that he was currently attending. P7 shared that he would go and speak with one of his professors when he became stressed or encountered anything that challenged his ability to persist. However, P7 did not just go to any professor. He went and spoke with the professor with whom he had the best relationship.

**Participant 8 (P8).** The eighth participant was P8, and she was a third-year student. P8 was the middle child of six children. She was the second in her family to attend college and was a first-generation college student. P8 had an older brother who attended and graduated from the same institution that she was currently attending. Unlike other participants, P8 was a transfer student. She attended a 2-year college before transferring to her current 4-year institution. P8’s father completed the fourth grade, and her mother never attended school. Although there were many, one of the biggest challenges for P8 was having to adjust to the living and social arrangements during her first year of attending the institution of higher learning. P8 explained about her challenges and said:
My home is not close to the university, so I had to find an apartment to rent. There were several challenges that I encountered in my educational journey. Some of those challenges included transportation issues, living arrangements, and a lack of financial support. Furthermore, I am Hmong, and I am attending a university that is predominantly Lao. Although I speak Lao, I still have an accent, which sometimes makes it difficult to communicate with others.

Similar to the other seven participants, a factor that contributed to P8’s persistence was her family. P8 echoed that she came from a poor family. Having witnessed the struggles of her family, especially the difficulties her parents had in providing for the family as farmers, motivated P8. She wanted to attend and graduate so that she would be able to secure a good-paying job in an aired condition office. After obtaining a job, P8 wanted to help her parents and family.

In regards to goals, P8 also considered having a goal as an essential contributor to her persistence. Whether or not she received support from anyone, P8 shared that as long as she had a goal, she would continue to persist. Having a goal had motivated P8 to continue going to college to this day.

P8 felt that the institution provided a curriculum that was essential to the success of the students. Also, the institution was always proactive in the review of its faculty. Whenever a student complained about the ineffectiveness of a professor, the institution would take immediate action in reviewing and, if necessary, disciplining the professor. P8 did not believe that her perception of the curriculum played a significant factor in her persistence.

Student support services, according to P8, were available at the institution she was attending. P8 had witnessed one of her friends breaking a rule of the institution, but instead of
expelling her immediately, the institution worked with her. The university administrator called and spoke with her friend’s parents and worked out an arrangement to allow her friend to continue attending her classes. For students who were considering dropping out, P8 stated that the student support services were available via the professors. It was the student’s responsibility to seek out services by talking to his or her professors.

**Participant 9 (P9).** P9 was the only participant who was not a first-generation college student. She was the oldest child in her family and in her fourth year of attending the university. Her father graduated from college, and her mother graduated from high school. Unlike other participants, P9’s parents are not farmers. Additionally, P9 was the only participant who lived in the same province as the university that she was attending. The biggest challenge for P9 was not financial, like the other participants. Instead, it involved her ability to adjust to the university environment itself. P9 explained her adjustment to the environment of the university and said:

As a daughter attending an institution of higher learning in Laos, I encountered few challenges. The challenges that I encountered revolved around my knowledge of the Lao language. I am not very well-versed in the Lao language, so there were instances when I did not understand or fully grasp the meaning of what was being taught. Also, I am not well-versed in the Lao culture and their belief system. As such, there were instances when I struggled to ascertain what I should do and how I should behave when I was around my Lao classmates.

Unlike the other nine participants, P9’s family played a different role in her continued persistence. She shared that her parents had always supported her in her academic endeavors. Furthermore, P9’s parents had invested a lot of time and money in her education. As a result, she
did not want her parents’ money to be for nothing. Therefore, she continued to attend school and would persist until she graduated with her degree.

P9 shared that having a goal was essential to her persistence. Throughout the past few years as a university student, it was during the difficult days that her goal helped her the most. P9 explained how important her goal was to her persistence and said:

When I started going to college, I had a goal that, though I was just a daughter, I would persevere in my studies and graduate. So when I encounter any challenges and difficulties, I endured because I wanted to accomplish my goal. Therefore, having a goal was important to me.

At an early age, P9 had always believed in her ability to succeed in school. Moreover, it was P9’s belief in herself that helped her through some of the most challenging times in her education. When P9 spoke about her sense of belonging to the university, she said that it was an extension of her goal and her academic self-efficacy. P9 elaborated and explained the sense of belonging to the university and said:

That [her sense of belonging] is also a part of my goal and academic self-efficacy. The university provided a sense of belonging by opening its doors to students across the country as long as the students pass the entry exam. As someone who was able to pass the entry exam, I was excited to attend the university. I believed in my goal and my ability, so I will attend until I graduate because I have the opportunity to attend while the university’s door is open to me.

In regards to her perception of the curriculum, P9 shared that she believed that it was good. P9 shared her perception and explained:
As it pertains to the curriculum of the university, I believe that it is good. The curriculum is good and will help in the attainment of my goal. However, like everything in life, there is always room for improvement. An area of improvement in regards to the curriculum is the elimination of unnecessary courses. For instance, my major is finance and banking but my primary interest was only finance. I want my courses to consist of only a depth study and an understanding of finance. I do not want a combination of finance and banking.

When P9 was asked to explain about student support services, she shared that there is a student support office at the university. Also, P9 shared about a lack of student support services specifically regarding the persistence of a student. In regards to the lack of service, P9 said:

Over here, when you are attending and you decide to just drop out, the university will call your parents and ask why you are no longer attending. If you just explain to the university that you simply do not want to attend anymore, the university does not pursue it any further. They just let you drop out without any discussions or offering of services to help you persist.

P9 elaborated further that students who drop out were able to return if they chose to do so in the future. However, during the four years that she had been attending, P9 had never witnessed a student dropping out and returning. Furthermore, P9 had never witnessed the university attempting to intervene or reach out to motivate a dropout student to return and reenroll in the university.

Participant 10 (P10). The tenth participant was P10. She was the youngest daughter and youngest child of her family. Although P10 was a first-generation college student, she was not the first in her family to attend college. P10 had an older brother who graduated with his
bachelor’s degree. In regards to her parents, P10’s father completed the eighth grade, but her mother never received any formal education. As a Hmong college student, P10 faced similar challenges as her fellow Hmong classmates. P10 shared about her experiences and challenges as a Hmong college student and said:

The challenge that I had to endure was the fact that I am poor. Because of that, I do not have the money to purchase the materials needed for my education. Also, because my home is in another province, I have to rent an apartment close to the university. Living away from homemade me homesick, and I missed my family a lot. Also, as a daughter, I worry about my family and their well-being.

The factor that contributed to P10’s persistence was the prospect of one day having a better life for herself. P10’s parents were farmers and struggled to provide for the family. Growing up, P10 witnessed these struggles and said to herself that she would have a better life, and the only way she could obtain it was to get an education.

Having goals was essential to P10 and her persistence. As P10 explained, in life, if an individual did not have any goals, that person would not be able to accomplish anything. Only through the existence of a goal did an individual have the motivation to do anything. P10 shared that she would not be where she was today if she did not have a goal for herself.

P10’s academic self-efficacy had never wavered from the time she started attending school as a young girl to now as a current college student. She had always believed in her academic ability in the pursuit of her education. In regards to the curriculum of the institution, P10 believed that it was good. However, she did not think that the institution provided enough opportunities for students to conduct research and she would like to be given the opportunity to gain some experience in a research study. P10 shared about the opportunity to study abroad for
students who were able to achieve a 3.5 to 4.0-grade point average. This information was not shared by any of the other participants. As explained by P10 in detail about studying abroad, she said:

The university informed us about the opportunity to study abroad if we have good grades. We will have the opportunity to study in South Korea, Japan, and Australia. Also, once accepted to study abroad, the university will cover all the expenses from the tuition to the living expenses and educational supplies. So the opportunity to study abroad is a motivational service that the university provides to the students.

**Research Questions Findings**

The central research question for this study was: How do Hmong students in Laos perceive the factors influencing their persistence and retention in higher education? To assist in answering the central research question and guide the study, six subresearch questions were created.

**Research Question 1: What motivated Hmong College Students in Laos to Persist in Higher Education?**

There were six main factors that motivated the Hmong college students in Laos to persist in higher education. The first factor was the Hmong students’ desire to help their families financially. Eight out of the 10 participants expressed that their desire to get an education was so they could help relieve some of the financial burdens of their families; it was a factor that motivated students to continue persisting during times of trial (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8). The second factor was the Hmong students’ goal of attaining a better life than their parents (P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P8, P10). To achieve a better life, participants wanted a career and a stable source of income (P1, P2, P3, P4, P8, P9), which was the third factor. Many of their parents were not
educated and this lack of education was the fourth factor that contributed to the participants’ persistence. Nine of the participants shared that their mothers had no formal education, and the highest level of education obtained by a father was a bachelor’s degree. The fifth factor that contributed to the participants’ collegiate persistence was the poor economic status of their families (P2, P4, P5, P6, P7) and the final and sixth factor was the fact that their parents were farmers (P3, P4, P7, P8, P10). For the most part, participants attributed their parents’ lack of a career, and therefore a stable income, to their lack of formal education. Farming was viewed as uncomfortable, laborious work that offered few financial benefits. Given a chance, participants indicated that they continued to persist so they could graduate, secure good jobs, and not be farmers like their parents.

**Research Question 2: How do Hmong College Students in Laos Perceive Goals as a Factor in Their Persistence and Retention?**

In terms of the four motivations that Tinto described as being important to persistence, only two were significant factors for the Hmong college students in Laos. The first factor was the student’s goal. All the Hmong college students shared that having a goal was important to them. The students’ goals contributed to their persistence. Furthermore, having a goal was especially critical when the Hmong students encountered challenges and difficulties in their education (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10). It was their goals that reminded them of why they were pursuing their education. To some of the students, they would not be where they are today if they did not have a goal (P1, P3, P4, P5, P8, P10). The goal motivated the Hmong college student to continue to persist regardless of their situations. Some of the students expressed that a person should have a goal in life (P1, P3, P4, P5, P6, P9, P10). Having a goal, as one student suggested, is something that every human being should have (P1).
Research Question 3: How do Hmong College Students in Laos Perceive Self-Efficacy as a Factor in Their Persistence and Retention?

All the Hmong college students believed in themselves and their academic self-efficacy. None of the students had any thoughts of not being successful in their education. Even in the face of opposition, the Hmong students never questioned or doubted themselves or their abilities. The students always knew that they were capable of succeeding as long as they continued their education (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10). This strong self-efficacy was a factor in the persistence of most of the Hmong college students in higher education (P1, P4, P5, P6, P7, P9, P10). One student expressed that his self-efficacy was derived from the ideology of “if others could, then I could as well” (P1). Another student articulated that he must believe in his ability because no one else would (P3). Lastly, one student suggested that self-efficacy was essential to his success in education. However, if he did not have family support, he would not have persisted (P4).

Research Question 4: How do Hmong College Students in Laos Perceive a Sense of Belonging as a Factor in Their Persistence and Retention?

Although some Hmong students shared that having a sense of belonging was important, it was not a determining factor that contributed to their persistence. Half of the students expressed that the university made them feel like they belong (P2, P4, P5, P6, P8). Other students claim that the university does not have anything that enhanced their sense of belonging (P4, P5, P6). Regardless of whether the university made them feel like they belonged or not, some of the students conveyed that they would continue to attend (P3, P6, P9). Other students claimed that in making them feel like they belonged at the university, it motivated them to persist (P4, P5, P6).
Therefore, the Hmong college students’ persistence in Laos was not affected by a sense of belonging.

**Research Question 5: How do Hmong College Students in Laos Perceive the Curriculum as a Factor in Their Persistence and Retention?**

The Hmong college students’ perception of the curriculum was not a factor in their persistence either. Most students shared that the institution they were attending was one of the top, if not the top, institution in the country (P1, P3, P4, P6, P7, P10). Every student shared that because of the prestige of the institution, the curriculum would not be an issue. When the Hmong students started attending, some realized that the curriculum was not perfect and needed improvements (P1, P3, P4). However, even if the curriculum was outdated or needed improvement, the Hmong students would continue to attend school (P1, P3, P4). Some students shared that the curriculum of the university was not something that will cause them to drop out or it was not a factor that impacted their decision to persist (P3, P5, P8).

**Research Question 6: What Student Support Services do the Universities in Laos Provide to Assist in Improving Hmong Students’ Persistence and Retention?**

Some of the Hmong students shared that the institution had student support services, while others shared that it did not. Four participants shared that the institution had student support services (P4, P8, P9, P10), while four shared that the institution did not provide these services (P3, P5, P6, P7). When asked to elaborate on the services provided to students, participants indicated that students were to seek out and speak with their professors for assistance whenever they were concerned about their abilities to persist (P1, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10). Other students shared about the university bringing in outside sources to conduct motivational workshops in order to help students persist (P2). Two of the participants shared about seeking
support from their friends (P1, P3). Due to their inconsistent responses, it was possible that the types of student support services offered in Laos were different from those typically offered in the United States. Regardless, the perception of the availability of student support services varied depending on the student.

**Chapter 4 Summary**

In this chapter, a comprehensive analysis of the findings of this study was presented. This exhaustive account of the results offered a thorough explanation in the form of thick descriptions and observations showcasing the lived experiences of 10 Hmong college students in Laos. Data were collected through the utilization of an interview and a reflection journal to better understand the experiences of Hmong college students. The data for the study were analyzed multiple times and coded for themes. After the themes were determined, they were organized according to the central and subresearch questions.

There were 65 general themes and seven significant themes that emerged from the data analysis. The seven themes were: (a) it was difficult being a Hmong college student, (b) family was a factor that motivated, (c) goal was a motivator to persistence, (d) Hmong students were confident in their abilities, (e) there was a sense of belonging, (f) the curriculum was the top in Laos but a nonfactor, and (g) the professor was their supporter. These seven themes provided an understanding of the factors that contributed to or had no bearing on the Hmong college students’ persistence in their education. In Chapter 5, these themes will be discussed in further detail.
Chapter 5: Discussions and Conclusions

The purpose of this case study was to explore the factors behind the persistence and retention of Hmong college students in Laos. In Chapter 4, the data and results of the study were presented. This chapter will discuss the meaning of the results and their significance to the learning community. The chapter will consist of the summary of the results, discussion of the results in relation to the literature, limitations, implications, and recommendations for future researchers.

Summary of the Results

According to some of the models of student persistence, there are a variety of factors that contribute to a college student’s decision to continue his education or drop out. This study was guided by the following central question: “How do Hmong students in Laos perceive the factors influencing their persistence and retention in higher education?” The theoretical framework that guided this study was Tinto’s two models: the institutional departure model (1993) and the model of student motivation and persistence (2017). However, other models of student persistence and retention such as Bean’s model of student attrition and Pascarella’s student–faculty informal contact model was taken into consideration.

Tinto’s institutional departure model, along with his model of student motivation and persistence, is aligned to all three of the research questions. The institutional departure model suggests that there are three roots to college students’ departure (Tinto, 1993). These three roots consist of individual experiences that students bring with them when they first attend college, and they are manifested over time. The students are influenced at an individual and institutional level. Furthermore, there are external forces that also shape an individual’s decision to persist in college or depart.
The first research question seeks to determine what it means to be a Hmong college student in Laos. The institutional departure model suggests that students are influenced on an individual level according to their intention (educational or occupational goals) and commitment (their level of motivation, drive, and willingness to work towards the attainment of their degree). Secondly, students are influenced on an institutional level based on adjustment (intellectual and social adjustment), difficulty (academic performance), incongruence (lack of interest in the institution or boredom from a mediocre curriculum), and isolation (lack of social contact with others in the academic community). Lastly, external forces such as obligations (family responsibilities or work schedule conflicts) and finances (lack of funds to pay for tuition and educational expenses) also influence a student’s persistence. By sharing their experiences as Hmong college students in Laos, the participants provided insights into the various factors that shaped their ability to persist.

Recently, Tinto’s institutional departure model was revised, and the new model provided greater insight from the perspective of college students. In this new model, Tinto suggests that student persistence is a manifestation of their motivation (Tinto, 2017). However, because a student’s level of motivation is continuously changing, it can either be heightened or reduced by their experiences while in college. Thus, a student’s level of motivation is the result of a connection between their goals, self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and perception of the institution’s curriculum (Tinto, 2017).

Understanding student persistence and retention is not a new phenomenon in higher education. This concept has been studied as early as the 1600s during the establishment of institutions of higher learning in Europe (Aljohani, 2016). Over the years and all across the world, there have been many studies and research on student persistence and retention.
Nevertheless, there is still a gap in the literature as it pertains to the persistence of Hmong college students in Laos. This gap in the literature is what makes this single-case study noteworthy. Furthermore, because of the gap, there may not be sufficient data to recommend changes for the institutions of higher learning in Laos. This study will contribute to much more research in the future that will bring about change in Laos’ institutions of higher education.

Since 2019, multiple peer-reviewed articles have been placed in the Concordia University Library regarding college student persistence. Although none of the articles pertained to Hmong college students in Laos, some articles focused on various student populations. One of the articles focused on understanding student persistence in Commuter Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Another article focused on student persistence among community college students. There was an article that focused on student persistence and STEM majors. Among these studies, however, two specific peer-reviewed articles were prominent.

The first article explored factors influencing students’ intentions for institutional persistence. This mixed-methods study was conducted in Vietnam and examined the factors influencing students’ intention to persist at several foreign-affiliated universities in Ho Chi Minh City (Cam et al., 2019). The participants responded to a questionnaire and were also interviewed. Overall, the results of the study suggested that academic and social integration positively affected students’ goals and institutional commitment. Secondly, career outcome expectation, goal, and institutional, social, and cultural capital directly influenced students’ intentions to persist (Cam et al., 2019).

What made this study so novel was that it was conducted in Southeast Asia using Tinto’s institutional departure model as the conceptual framework. Although the student population of this study was not Hmong, the student population and the purpose of the study were very similar
to the present study. According to Cam et al. (2010), the students who attended the foreign-affiliated universities were those who resided in other parts of the country and they come “to big cities to keep their studies further, many of them cannot continue their studies due to the lack of ability to finance tuition fee and the basic demands of life when studying far away from home,” (Cam et al., 2019, p. 2229).

The second article investigated how students decided to persist or drop out of their undergraduate research experiences. This quantitative study, unlike the one conducted in Vietnam, was much bigger in scale. The researcher sampled 25 research-intensive public institutions across the United States. A total of 768 life science undergraduate students participated by answering several open- and closed-ended questions regarding the factors that they perceived as having influenced students’ persistence in their undergraduate research experiences (Cooper et al., 2019). The study revealed that students persisted in undergraduate research programs because they “recognized the benefits or value of being involved in research” (Cooper et al., 2019, p. 29). Although the result of this study was different from the current study, it provided similar themes. The students persisted because they saw the value of their education and what that education would provide for them in the future.

All the new literature about college student persistence is evidence that the topic is still important and relevant today. The study and understanding of student persistence in higher education have been studied extensively over the last 50 years. As long as there are still institutions of higher learning, understanding student persistence will continue to be significant and relevant in the foreseeable future because it is closely tied to student success.

While this study is a contribution to the research on student persistence and retention, it also specifically addresses a gap in the field since it pertains to Hmong college students in Laos,
a topic that is currently understudied. This study utilized a qualitative method with a single case study design, and there were 10 participants. The study used two data sources: individual interviews and reflection journals. The interview questions that were asked of the participants were deliberate in gathering data that would provide an understanding of the participants’ lived experiences as Hmong college students in Laos. They were intended to understand the individual, institutional, and external forces that are the root of the participants’ persistence in college. The interviews were conducted one-on-one and online via Messenger or the WhatsApp application. Once the interviews were completed, they were transcribed and organized. The data were then analyzed and manually coded for themes. This process was also completed for the reflection journals.

Based on data from the study, there were six factors that motivated the Hmong students in Laos to persist in higher education and they revolved around the students’ families. The Hmong students were mostly first-generation college students whose parents did not have a college education. Of the 10 participants, only one student had parents who had graduated from high school and college. The other nine students had parents who did not even attend a school or did not finish high school. Since the students’ parents did not have a college education, they worked in the fields as farmers which impacted the family’s socioeconomic status and financial earnings. The ramifications of graduating from college were significant to these students, especially since they came from low-income families. Attending and graduating from college would afford the students the opportunity to help their parents and family financially.

The findings from this study also revealed that goals and self-efficacy were essential factors to the Hmong student’s persistence and retention. In addition, goals and self-efficacy were the only two factors from Tinto’s theory that were found to have contributed to the Hmong
college students’ persistence. A sense of belonging and the perception of the curriculum, although necessary to some, were not significant factors to all the students. These findings did not align with some of the literature and shed light on this complex and multi-faceted issue.

Furthermore, the findings also suggested that student perceptions of the support services offered by their institution varied. Some students were aware of the student support services provided by the university, while others were not. While there are some systems in place to assist students, they are not readily accessible to all students. The Hmong students shared that having a career and employment center and emotional and motivational support were services they would find beneficial if they were provided by the university.

**Discussion of the Results**

Through the data analysis of the Hmong student interviews and the reflection journals, it was clear that most of the participants had similar experiences as a Hmong college student in Laos. After the analysis of the data, seven themes were utterly noticeable. These themes confirmed that Hmong college students perceive their family, parents, and goals as essential in their persistence and retention. Each theme is discussed in this section, along with its relationship to the central and subresearch questions.

There exist many roots that contributed to the persistence of a college student, and they are closely connected to the student and his experiences in college. As suggested by Tinto (1993), students bring personal traits such as their family background, skills and abilities, and prior school experiences (positive and negative) with them when they begin their college careers. The Hmong college students of this study were asked to share their experiences as college students and explain the factors which contributed to their persistence. Based on the responses
and shared experiences of the students, many of their experiences consisted of several commonalities.

When the Hmong students shared stories of their experiences as college students in Laos, the subject of their family and their struggles were always at the forefront. As evident from the first theme of the study, being a Hmong college student was difficult. In the individual interviews and reflection journals, the students shared that they came from low-income families. While this revelation may have been unique to the Hmong college students in Laos and their college experiences, the Hmong’s financial struggles as an ethnic minority group were not. Coleman and Kull (2012) confirmed that the socioeconomic status of ethnic minorities in Laos when compared to the majority Lao Loum population, was low.

In the past, the ethnic minorities of Laos were more focused on their survival than their education. However, now that education is essential for their social and economic advancement, the ethnic minorities of Laos have become trapped by their financial disadvantages (Coleman & Kull, 2012). Even though the ethnic minorities of Laos value education, going to college or sending their children to college has become even more difficult due to their low socioeconomic status and lack of income. Also, due to the cost of education and the need to work to support the family, some children living in poverty were deliberately kept out of school (Human Rights Council, 2019). The fact that the Hmong students in this study came from poor families (P1, P3, P4, P5, P6, P8, P10), had parents who were uneducated (P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7), and believed that education would help them provide a better life for themselves and their families (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8) were all factors influencing their persistence and retention.
As P1 shared about the factors that influenced his decision to persist, he said:

From birth, my family has been poor, and we live in a village on the mountain top. I have witnessed my parents’ life and how poor my family was. My parents have always said to me to study hard so that one day I can attend a university. So that one day I will be able to help my parents and improve the life of my family.

As sons and daughters from low-income families, the Hmong students had multiple responsibilities beyond those of regular college students. Hmong students could not just go to college and simply focus on their studies. Instead, they were also expected to work so that they could have the money needed to meet their educational expenses. There were instances in which the Hmong students had to budget wisely; otherwise, they would not have enough money to meet their expenses the following month.

P7, one of the Hmong student who expressed the multiple responsibilities he had as a college student, said:

Being a Hmong college student is not easy. The biggest challenge is that my parents and my family are poor. And because of that, my family is not always able to help me financially. Therefore, I will have to help myself the majority of the time, and it makes it difficult to just focus on my education. The university that I am attending is in the city and is far from the village where my family lives. Because of the distance, I will have to rent an apartment, which further complicates everything. A part of me will have to stay focused on my education, but another part of me will have to go find a way to support myself and my living arrangements.

Another aspect influencing the persistence of Hmong college students in Laos was the prospect of obtaining a good-paying job so that they can financially help their families. Though
the students’ parents may not necessarily have a college degree, they placed a high value on attaining a degree in higher education because they believed that it is the path out of poverty (Her et al., 2019) and the generational cycle of relying on farming and physical labor to earn a living. Most of the Hmong students shared that they did not want to be farmers like their parents. In a report prepared by Dr. Khamphone Nathavong, a faculty member at the National University of Laos, farming and livestock are the primary sources of income for rural villagers in Laos. Although there has been an increase in income growth over the last 20 years, there is still a distinct income gap between the richest and poorest citizens of Laos (Estudillo et al., 2013).

P2 shared what motivated her to persistence and said:

A motivation for me was, I do not want to be poor in the future. Also, I want my life to be better than my parents’. As I look at my parents and the life that they lead, they did not have an opportunity to get an education. Therefore, they have to use their physical strength to earn a living. Seeing how difficult it was for my parents to provide for the family, I want to study hard so that I will have an opportunity for a better life.

P3 also shared similar sentiments about the factors that motivated him and explained:

In most instances, my parents’ and grandparents’ generations were all farmers. So if I attend college and drop out because of the difficulties that I encountered, my life will be much harder than my parents’. Also, if I study hard, even though it may be difficult now when I graduate, I will have an opportunity to get a good-paying job. My life in the future will not be as challenging as my parents’.

Education, regardless of which level, as concluded by Kyophilavong et al. (2018), was related to the long-term economic growth of the country of Laos. The attainment of an education is even more critical in Laos now as the country is working towards graduating from the United
Nations Economic and Social Council’s list of Least Developed Country (LDC) in the world. Also, as suggested by a report from the Human Rights Council (2019), the route out of poverty for Lao children is relevant access to a top-notch education. For the Hmong college students, being able to attain a college education will help them improve their families’ socioeconomic status in the future. Furthermore, education will enable the Hmong students to transition out of agricultural work (Human Rights Council, 2019).

However, in Laos, access to higher education has been a challenge. It has been particularly challenging in regards to the enrollment of ethnic minorities and students from the remote provinces of the country (Moxom & Hayden, 2015). Coupled with being from poor families, ethnic minority students face an even more challenging time having access to education. The education gap between the poorest and wealthiest households in urban and rural areas is significant. Cerdan-Infantes et al. (2016) reported that 23% of children from the most impoverished homes never receive a formal education as compared to only 3.6% of children from the wealthiest households. In a recent report by the Human Rights Council (2019), in Laos, 58% of students from the most impoverished population complete primary education as compared to 98% of students from the wealthiest population.

Moreover, ethnic minority girls are less likely to be given the opportunity to attend school than boys (Coleman & Kull, 2012). Berge et al. (2016) asserted that female ethnic minorities are at a disadvantage in Lao education even after the reforms had taken place. As shared by the majority of the participants, they are first-generation college students. The majority of Hmong college students shared that their mothers had no formal education, which was consistent with Coleman and Kull’s (2012) findings. Most of the students’ fathers, however, received an education, but only one Hmong student shared that her father graduated from
college. In addition, many never graduated from high school as the majority had dropped out by the fourth grade, as a study by Boualaphet and Goto confirmed (2019). Boualaphet and Goto (2019) found that there was a significant dropout rate of Lao students in the 5th, 8th, 12th, and 15th years. Furthermore, Boualaphet and Goto (2019) also found that one of the factors that contributed to college dropout rates in Laos was parental education. Although the majority of the Hmong college students’ parental education was low, it did not cause them to drop out. Instead, it had the opposite effect and motivated students to continue to persist even in the face of difficulties.

In sharing about his parents’ lack of education, P7 said:

My parents never had the opportunity to get an education. As a result, their primary occupation is farming. Because of their lack of education, our family is poor and does not have financial stability like others. There are other families whose parents are well-educated and have jobs working in an office. Being a witness to how financially difficult it was for my family, I decided that I will study hard so that in the future, I will be able to get a job that will enable me to help my family.

Tinto (2017) claimed that every student who decided to attend college does so with a purpose. Each student will have his own purpose, which is uniquely his own, and his purpose is a good indicator of his persistence (Tinto, 1993). However, although a college student may have a goal when he first starts, the goal may not always be clear. Moreover, a college student’s goal may not be solid. Because of this, other factors may influence his goal.

Furthermore, a student’s purpose in college may change during his education based on his experiences (self-efficacy, sense of belonging, perception of the institution’s curriculum). These experiences may influence a college student to either drop out or persist. It is especially
more so for students who are not intensely committed to their goals, because it may indicate that the students will not persist (Tinto, 2017).

The result of this study confirmed Tinto’s assertion that students have a purpose before attending college. Of the 10 Hmong college students who participated, all 10 shared that they had a goal before starting college. The goals that the Hmong students had prior to attending college remained strong even in the face of adversity.

When explaining the goals that he had, P1 shared:

When I was still in high school, I had a goal that I will graduate and go to a university.

There, I will major in architecture. Also, once I graduate with my degree in architecture, I want to help build houses for my family and relatives.

All the Hmong students believed that having a goal was a significant factor that contributed to their continued persistence. As suggested by some of the Hmong students, one must have a goal to progress or achieve anything in life. For the students in the study, it was their goal that helped motivate them to persist.

P10 shared about the importance of her goal in motivating her to persist and said:

I believe that as a person, you should have goals. For example, when a person comes to college, if he does not have a goal that he wants certain grades, then he will not achieve it. Also, if a person has goals, he will work hard towards the achievement of his goals.

P8 expressed the importance of her goals in her persistence. In regards to her goals, P8 shared:

What motivated me to continue my education at a university was my goal. I believe that in life, one must have a goal, something that will help motivate and drive one forward.

When a person has a goal, she will always proceed forward until she reaches her
destination. Even if an individual were not able to reach her desired destination, she would have gone further anyway.

The goal(s) of the Hmong students extended beyond them as individuals. It also encompassed their families as well. Similar to the factors that influenced them to persist in higher education, the goals that the Hmong college students had for themselves revolved around their families. The majority of the Hmong students’ goals was to attend and graduate from college so that they could secure good-paying jobs. Once they had a job, they wanted to help their families financially. The result of the study suggests that their trials and hardships did not faze their goals. Also, all the participants were clear in their goals, in that they knew exactly what they wanted to accomplish. These findings differed from those of Tinto’s. As discussed in detail below, the Hmong college students’ goals were not influenced by their experience in college.

An individual’s belief in their ability to accomplish any specific task, as described by Tinto (2017), is the foundation of persistence. A college student must believe that he can succeed in college if he is to persist. Tinto (2017) further suggests that an individual’s sense of self-efficacy can be challenged by the difficult experiences that they encounter while in college. It is especially more so during the first year of a college student’s career. The challenges that a college student faces during their first year are not purely related to academic issues. Instead, it is a combination of all the other tasks that the student has to juggle, such as responsibilities at home, employment, and other financial issues. Tinto (2017) asserts that the reason why first-generation and low-income college students do not persist is because of non-academic related issues.

In this study, the Hmong college students’ sense of self-efficacy was not an issue. All the students shared that they had always believed in themselves and their ability to succeed in their
education (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10). Their confidence in their ability to be successful existed well before the participants started college. It was something that was instilled in them at an early age when they started grade school. Some of the Hmong students shared that their parents had always encouraged and believed in their abilities. The belief in one’s ability to succeed is not inherent. Rather, it is learned over time through experiences (Tinto, 2017).

As shared by P4, his self-efficacy was a motivating factor in his persistence. In explaining his self-efficacy, P4 said:

I believe that your belief in yourself and your ability to succeed is one of the best motivation a person can have to help him persist. As for myself, I always believed in myself and my ability to perform well in school. However, you also need support from your family, as well. You can be confident in your abilities, but if you do not receive family support, you will not be as motivated to succeed.

P5 also shared about her self-efficacy and said, “When you start your education, you have to believe that you can succeed and graduate. When a person believes that he can succeed in his education, he will be patient and endure through anything until graduation.”

As it pertains to her persistence, P2 shared that she believed in her ability and, “Because I believe in my ability, I know that I will be able to succeed in my education. Therefore, I will continue to persist every day and every year until I graduate.”

Each student in this study was asked to explain their high level of self-efficacy. As stated earlier, some students shared that their self-efficacy was instilled in them at an early age through encouragement from their parents. Most explanations were associated with the student’s perception that their success was possible because others were able to succeed in the same situation and task.
As demonstrated by P1’s explanation regarding his self-efficacy:

I truly believe in the philosophy of “anything that others can accomplish; I too can accomplish it as well.” I witness others and their ability to succeed at a task, so I tell myself that I am must believe in myself and my ability to succeed at the same task.

However, a factor that may contribute to the Hmong student’s strong sense of self-efficacy is the fact that they were able to attend a university. According to the literature, the quality of the education system in Laos is incredibly low (Human Rights Council, 2019). Ethnic minorities in Laos face multiple challenges in primary and secondary education because the language of instruction is in Lao. Since most ethnic minorities do not speak Lao, it puts them at a disadvantage (Human Rights Council, 2019; Inui, 2015; Itthida, 2015). As an ethnic minority, the Hmong students of this study were able to navigate through and successfully complete primary and secondary school in spite of the disadvantages they encountered. Their success in primary and secondary school may have enhanced their belief in themselves and their ability to succeed in college.

Furthermore, entrance into higher education in Laos requires a student to pass an entry examination (Moxom & Hayden, 2015). The Hmong students of this study are not only attending a university; they are attending one of the top universities in the country. These Hmong students must have been some of the top students in their class in high school, if not the top students. Thus, the students were already successful in their previous educational experiences, contributing to their confidence in themselves and their ability to succeed in college.

Also, there is the pressure of sacrifice and commitment from the Hmong student’s family. Regardless of the grade level, attending school in Laos involves a degree of commitment from the student’s parents. By allowing their child to attend school, the parents have invested time and
money into their child’s education. Coleman and Kull (2012) suggested that poor ethnic minorities in Laos may highly value education. Still, the loss in labor due to a child going to school is a more immediate need. Therefore, because a child is going to school, he or she will not be available on weekdays to help with the family farm. It is, therefore, imperative that the Hmong students are confident in their abilities to succeed in college. If Hmong students do not believe that they will be successful in their education, they would not have attended. Instead, they would stay home to help the family with farming.

The participants shared that they encountered many challenges and difficulties as college students. Nevertheless, none of the challenges and difficulties affected their sense of self-efficacy. As P8 described the challenges, she said:

So the subject math was a challenge for me at first. I was never good at math, and no matter how hard I studied, I struggled. I asked myself; I cannot learn math; will I be able to succeed? However, as I continued to attend college, I have friends who were able to tutor me. Ultimately, I was able to succeed and persist until today. There may be times when a person may feel that he is unable to learn, but he must keep an open mind. There are others, such as one’s professors or friends, who are always willing to help. As long as one continues his education, he will be able to succeed.

Seeing oneself as a member of a learning community and feeling that one belongs or matters to an institution is equally as crucial as self-efficacy (Tinto, 2017). When a student feels that he belongs to the institution, a bond is established between the student and the school. When challenges arise, the bond with the institution will help the student’s persistence.

Although the concept of belonging to an institution was important in Tinto’s model, the Hmong college students in Laos did not perceive it as a factor contributing to their persistence.
Some students shared that the feelings of belonging to an institution sounded good and was desirable. Three Hmong students shared that the university did make them feel like they belonged and it motivated them to persist (P4, P5, P6). It is, however, not a factor in their tenacity. Regardless of whether the institution made them feel like they belonged or not, the Hmong students stated that they would still persist (P3, P6, P7, P9).

There were a couple of Hmong students who shared that during their first day at their university, it was explained to them their responsibilities and their roles as students of the institution. In regards to her experience on the first day of school, P6 reflected:

When you first attend the university, you are taught your roles and responsibilities. The university teaches you what it means to be a good student. Furthermore, the university also teaches you how you should treat others, such as your professors and classmates. What the university taught me on the first day of instruction has helped me become the student that I am today. I will continue to persist because getting my degree is my goal.

The Hmong students were asked about student organizations or clubs, and they shared that these associations were not available. The university did not allow students to establish student organizations and clubs. However, the students were able to create a contact list on the WhatsApp application on their cellular phone.

In discussing their opportunity for a shared learning environment, P10 said:

Right now, we have the WhatsApp application. If there are Hmong and Lao students who want to come together, they can do so on the application. There is also Facebook, which allows the students can come together. When there is an issue that requires the student to assemble and help each other, we can do so. For example, if there was a student in the hospital, and he does not have any money to pay for his medical bills, everyone can
contact each other through the applications. The students can then collect money to help pay for the medical bills.

The perceived worth and relevance of the institution’s curriculum also influence a college student’s motivation to persist (Tinto, 2017). This perception of the curriculum consists of the quality of the materials and the teaching quality of the faculty. Based on the responses from the Hmong students, their perceptions of the institution’s curriculum had no impact on their decision to persist. It was a nonfactor.

The university that the Hmong students were attending is considered one of the top institutions in the country of Laos. To some of the Hmong students, the university is the top in the country (P1, P3, P4, P6, P7, P10). The curriculum, too, is also considered the top. Some Hmong students researched the university before enrolling. Others took the reputation of the university at face value and did not do any research. Regardless, even if something was lacking in the curriculum, the participants stated that they would continue to attend. The curriculum of the institution, regardless of whether it was good or bad, was not something that would cause the Hmong students to drop out (P3, P5). Some of the students shared mixed experiences regarding their perception of the curriculum. As P10 shared about her perception of the curriculum, she said:

In regards to my perception of the curriculum, this is a university. Therefore, it must be good. Of course, nothing is perfect, but as long as the curriculum is 80%–90% good, then it is fine. Before I decided to attend this university, I researched about the curriculum and the academic majors. I also wanted to know if the university also provided vocational training as well.
Additionally, I researched the quality of the curriculum. I also spoke with others who attended the university. After speaking with others, I got their opinions on the quality of the university before making my decision to attend. Overall, after researching, I concluded that the curriculum of the university was good.

P8 shared her perception of the curriculum and said:

The quality of teaching from professors is good. As I mentioned earlier, if the professor did not provide a quality curriculum, he would have been fired already. However, some professors are better at teaching the curriculum than others. In terms of whether my perception of the curriculum had any impact on my persistence, I can say that it somewhat did.

P7 reflected on his perception of the curriculum and shared:

I believe that regardless of the quality of the professor’s teaching style, the individual is still responsible for his education. Even if the professor is the best, if you do not study, then you will not learn anything. The professor can provide an average curriculum, but if you study hard and you commit yourself to your education, you will be successful.

Multiple factors may contribute to the persistence of a college student. As suggested by Tinto (2017), an institution can enhance a student’s experience and increase the chances of persistence. To enhance the student’s experience, the institution must be understanding and willing to bridge the gap that exists between student persistence and drop out (Tinto, 2017). One way in which the institution can enhance a student’s experience is to provide student support services.

However, what are student support services, and how effective are they? Based on the results of this study, the participants did not seem to have a clear definition of student support
services. Also, the services seemed to vary based on the experiences of the student. Some of the Hmong college students shared that the university provided student support services, while others shared that these services were not available. Some students described the support services as the opportunity to receive a scholarship from foreign countries. As described by P1 in regards to student support services, he said:

At this university, there are support programs from foreign countries such as Australia, Thailand, China, and Korea. They provide services in the form of 30–40 U.S. dollars to help the student with the materials needed for their education. In regards to student support services that will help with motivation for persistence, this university does not have them yet. If you have a good relationship with any of your professors, you will be able to seek support from him or her. However, every year there are a lot of students who are not able to continue, and they drop out.

P3 described the lack of student support services and explained:

There are no student support services at this institution. Regardless, I have never considered not continuing my education. The unavailability of it [student support services] is not something that will discourage me. I have to always find what motivates and gives me the strength to continue my education so that I can achieve my goal. When I need support, I sought out and spoke with my friends. I would speak with my friends about the challenges that I encountered, which was causing me to consider dropping out. After talking with my friends, if I am still not satisfied with my friends’ suggestions, I would call and speak with my parents for their guidance.

A student shared about the institution inviting delegations from international universities to provide motivational workshops to the students. Although these types of workshop were
outsourced, the student still considered them to be support services provided by the institution. Another student shared about speaking with one of his professors, someone whom he had a close relationship with and trusted. During the conversation with his professor, the student would receive advice and guidance. The advice and guidance assisted him in how to deal with his current situation. Other students shared that they would seek advice and guidance from their close friends when they are dealing with any challenges.

**Discussion of the Results in Relation to the Literature**

The literature on college student persistence includes a wide range of theories and models. Some theories placed the responsibility of student retention on the institution, while others suggested the students were responsible for their success (Aljohani, 2016). Tinto’s models were a combination of both. As previously stated, the institutional departure model, which was Tinto’s earlier model, suggested individual, institutional, and external factors as influential agents in the departure of a college student. This model proposed that persistence is a combination of the student’s reason(s) for attending and the experiences he gained while in college (Tinto, 1993). The results of this study confirmed one aspect of Tinto’s institutional departure model. The results confirmed that the Hmong college students’ individual attributes did have an impact on their persistence.

On a personal level, a student’s decision to attend school is a reflection of his intentions and his level of commitment to his education (Tinto, 1993). The intent of attending college is the goals set forth by the student before enrollment. A student’s intention may be to attend until graduation. It may also be to attend for several semesters until he can transfer to another institution or until employment has been secured. As suggested by Tinto (1993), intentions are
personalized to each student and are not contingent upon the attainment of a degree or a specific occupation.

The Hmong students in this study all had an intent as to why they were attending college. Each student shared that his or her reasons were both intrinsic and extrinsic. In terms of the intrinsic motivation for attending, some of the Hmong students shared that they wanted more knowledge and understanding of the world. Through their education, they would gain more knowledge. Some wanted to be able to develop relationships with educators outside of their country. As for extrinsic reasons, all of the Hmong students shared that they intended to secure employment. Through the attainment of employment, the Hmong students would earn money needed to better their lives and the lives of their family members. Ultimately, the students persisted because they were very intentional about attending college and wanting to graduate. Since it was their intent, the Hmong students were committed to persisting.

Commitment refers to the student’s willingness to do what is necessary to ensure that he achieves his goals when in college (Tinto, 1993). When attending college, the student must be willing to devote his time, energy, resources, and effort into meeting the academic and social demands of the institution. A student cannot simply enroll in classes but not attend them. Furthermore, a student cannot attend a class but not spend the necessary time to study or complete the course assignments.

As shared by the majority of the Hmong students in the study, there were reasons why they decided to attend college and fully committed themselves to their decision. When they started attending college, the Hmong students encountered difficulties that challenged their ability to persist. However, the students endured because they always remembered their commitment to their education, even if the underlying reasons may have been different. Some of
the students shared that their commitment to their education was so they could graduate. Others
shared that their commitment stemmed from a desire to not waste the funds that had already been
invested in their education. If the student were to stop attending school, then the money that had
already been used for their education expenses would have been wasted. Their unwavering
commitment was a driving force behind their ability to persist.

Another aspect of Tinto’s institutional departure model indicates that events that occur
after a student enters college are significant and contribute to the student’s persistence (Tinto,
1993). Furthermore, the theory asserted that a student’s interactions with other members of the
college are also important. The students not only persist because of interactions with the college
but also because of their interactions with members of the academic community.

There were four aspects of institutional attributes that factored into college student
persistence (Tinto, 1993). The first pertains to the student’s ability to adjust to the college setting.
This attribute consists of intellectual and social adjustment. The student would be in a new
environment and would have to interact with individuals with whom they are not familiar.
Hence, the student must be able to adjust appropriately to be able to persist.

Secondly, there is a level of difficulty that the student must contend with. Unlike high
school, the curriculum in college is more complicated. The student will have to perform at a
more advanced level in order to meet the higher standards of the university. This new level of
criteria will challenge the student academically and may force the student to experience possible
academic failures. The student will have to endure this new level of academic difficulty if he is
to persist. Should the student fail to meet this new standard, even if he wanted to continue, the
institution would not allow it.
Another aspect of institutional attributes is congruency. There must be a fit between the student and the institution. A student must maintain a high level of interest in the curriculum of the institution. Furthermore, the physical environment of the institution must meet the student’s personality. For example, if attending the institution necessitates that the student commute to attend his classes, but the student is unable to do so, then persisting would not be feasible. In this instance, the student would have to drop out. Basically, the student and institution must be a good fit on various levels if the student is to persist.

Lastly, the student must not be in isolation. A sufficient level of interaction must exist between the student and others within the social and academic community. This type of interaction may be with faculty members. It could also be with other classmates or other students of similar backgrounds and interests. The absence of this type of interaction would cause the student to be in isolation and could lead to his decision to stop persisting.

Although these institutional attributes were significant to Tinto’s institutional departure model, they do not seem to be factored in the persistence of Hmong college students in Laos. The Hmong students were asked to share about their institution. In terms of adjustment, only one student shared about the challenges of adjusting to college life. Most of the Hmong students did not reside in the city where their institution was located; in fact, the majority did not even live in the province of their university. Many had to move away from home in order to attend school. In regards to the difficulty of the curriculum, only one Hmong student shared that he struggled. His struggle was not because the curriculum was particularly challenging. Instead, the student struggled because the major required that he know how to draw, and he had never drawn before attending the university. Because of a lack of experience in drawing, the student had to
familiarize himself with those skills, which the student found to be very challenging. However, after he acquired drawing abilities, he did not experience any problems with the curriculum.

All the Hmong students did not share about any incongruence with the university they were attending. The students expressed that the university they were attending was considered one of the top in the county. They all wanted to attend the university, and when they were accepted, there was never any doubt that the university was not for them. Some students shared that some of the professors did not teach well; others also had questions about the relevancy of the curriculum, but these issues were not enough to deter the students from persisting at the university.

In regards to isolation, the Hmong students stated that it was never an issue. During the interviews, the students were asked about student organizations and opportunities for social events. All the Hmong students shared that student organizations did not exist in the university. Some students shared that the institution made them feel like they belonged, while others did not express any feelings of belonging to the institution. Regardless, the students shared that it did not have any effect on their decisions to persist.

The results of this study also suggested that the Hmong college students’ persistence was not affected by any external forces, as indicated by Tinto’s institutional departure model. In addition to individual and institution attributes, the institutional departure model also indicated that external factors such as the students’ obligations and finances play a role in their decision to persist (Tinto, 1993). Students who had work- or family-related obligations would find it difficult to persist. Also, students who did not have the necessary financial resources to meet their educational expenses would also find it difficult to persist.
In this study, the majority of the Hmong students experienced both obligations and issues with finances. Most of the students came from families that were financially challenged. Therefore, the students had to work for the necessary funds to meet their educational expenses. Yet, none of the Hmong students who worked shared that their obligations and financial issues were cause for them to consider dropping out. They persisted while dealing with these additional responsibilities.

Tinto’s later model, a model of student motivation and persistence, focused on the student’s motivation as a factor in his or her persistence. The model of student motivation and persistence suggests that student persistence is a manifestation of motivation. Furthermore, the students are motivated by the interactions of their goals, self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and perception of the institution’s curriculum. The results of this study suggested that only goals and self-efficacy are relevant factors in the persistence of Hmong college students in Laos.

Goals, as defined by the model of student motivation and persistence, are not a sufficient condition in the persistence of college students. Tinto (2017) suggests that a student’s goal can be influenced by his college experience. Also, not all students have the goal of attending college to graduate. Therefore, having a goal alone is not enough to motivate a college student to persist. The student’s goal, along with his experiences with self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and perception of the value of the institution’s curriculum, are interconnected and work together to motivate the student to persist.

This study, however, suggests otherwise, in that the Hmong college students’ goals alone were enough to motivate them to persist. All the Hmong students shared that they had goals before attending their current university. Also, when the students encountered difficulties that challenged their persistence, it was their goal that kept them motivated. These goals worked to
empower and bolster students. When the students had thoughts of dropping out, they remembered their goals, and those thoughts disappeared.

Secondly, the Hmong students’ self-efficacy was another factor that was enough to motivate their persistence. In this study and Tinto’s (2017) model of student motivation and persistence, self-efficacy was perceived in a general sense. It pertained to a student’s belief in his or her ability to succeed in a specific environment or on a specific endeavor. Self-efficacy was not specific to a student’s ability in a particular subject. In the study, all the participants shared that they believed in themselves and their ability to succeed at their institution. In the absence of their goals, just knowing that they could succeed and graduate was sufficient to motivate them. This confidence in their ability was a characteristic that the Hmong students had established early on in their academic careers and it never wavered, even when they were academically challenged.

A college student’s sense of belonging, as Tinto (2017) explained, is an essential factor in his persistence. Students have a need to belong and see themselves as valuable members of the institution and its community, which in turn, creates a bond. It is the existence of this bond that connects the student to the institution and assists with persistence in the face of adversity. In this study, however, the Hmong college students did not share any experiences that suggested their sense of belonging or lack of was a factor in their persistence. Some students shared that the university made them feel like they belonged. There were some Hmong students who shared that having a sense of belonging to the university was another motivation that contributed to persistence. However, the same students shared that regardless of whether the university made them feel like they belonged or not, they would continue to persist.
The perception of the value and relevance of the curriculum, according to Tinto (2017), can influence a student’s motivation to persist in his education. When a student has a negative perception of the curriculum, he does not want to engage with the materials. Moreover, the student’s perception of the curriculum as irrelevant would lead to a lack of motivation, and ultimately, the student would drop out. Despite their positive or negative emotions about their institution’s curriculum, the students’ level of motivation did not waver. They all continued to persist—none of the Hmong students considered ceasing their education because of their perceptions of the curriculum. As several of the students had shared, the university that they were attending was considered one of the top in the country. Therefore, the curriculum was also considered the top in the country as well. Even those Hmong students who had a negative perception of the curriculum did not consider dropping out since their goal was to attend the university and graduate. As a result, the students conveyed that they would continue to persist regardless of how they felt about the institution’s curriculum.

Another aspect of the literature that was validated through this study was Pascarella’s student–faculty informal contact model. As described in the literature section, the student–faculty informal contact model suggested that a positive relationship between a student and faculty member will result in student retention. This relationship exists outside of the classroom and is informal (Pascarella, 1980). As shared by some of the Hmong college students, whenever the students needed to talk to someone about the challenges that they were facing or when they had thoughts of dropping out, the students would meet and talk with one of their professors. These discussions between the Hmong students and their professors occurred outside of the classroom and they were positive experiences.
As shared by P1, P6, P7, P8, P9, and P10, whenever they faced any difficulties, especially stressors that cause them to contemplate dropping out, they sought out one of their professors. The professor that was being sought out was one in which they had a good relationship with and will provide support to them. After talking with the professor, the students have a different perspective on their situation and a different outlook on the challenges that they were encountering. Moreover, the professor was able to motivate the student to continue their education and not drop out.

This finding supported Pascarella’s (1980) student–faculty informal contact model that a positive relationship and informal contact between the student and faculty member outside of the classroom does result in student retention. The Hmong students in Laos persisted and continue to be retained by their university because they have a positive relationship with their professors. This positive relationship with their professors propelled the Hmong students to make informal contacts with their professors outside of the classroom and motivate them to persist.

Limitations of the Study

This single case study had limitation. One of the limitation of the qualitative case study was the research design. As stated by Yin (2018):

Perhaps the greatest concern has arisen over a presumed need for greater rigor in doing case study research. Too many times, a case study researcher has been sloppy, has not followed systematic procedures, or has allowed equivocal evidence to influence the direction of the findings and conclusions (p. 18).

Although the researcher attempted to conduct the research as rigorously as possible, research was a relatively new process, and the researcher lacked experience. This lack of experience may have led to flaws in the study design. Furthermore, researcher bias may have inadvertently been an
issue as well, and these biases may have impacted how the researcher analyzed and identified the themes from the data.

**Implications of the Results for Practice, Policy, and Theory**

The findings of this study have several implications. There is an implication for professionals in higher education, such as counselors and professors. There are also implications for the university leadership, such as the administrators in Laos. In the following section, these implications will be discussed.

**Implications for Practice**

The first implication for practice is that it provides data for the Hmong community and the Hmong college students in Laos. The findings from this study will help the Hmong community in Laos understand why their sons and daughters persist or drop out of college. Moreover, the findings will provide future Hmong college students in Laos an understanding of some of the challenges they can expect to encounter when in college. It will also provide student support professionals in Laos, such as counselors and professors, an understanding of what type of services the Hmong college students need to facilitate their continued persistence. Lastly, the findings will assist university faculty and administrators in enacting or establishing services to remove barriers to Hmong college students in Laos. However, how will the student support professionals and university administrators access the data? The findings must be shared with the appropriate community members.

This study will be published in ProQuest and will be accessible to the general public. For those who have access, such as the faculty and university administrators, they can access the study through ProQuest. Secondly, if available, the research finding will be shared at educational conferences, especially if there are any educational conferences in Laos. Through the educational
conferences, the result of the study can be shared with the Hmong students or the Hmong community who do not have access to the findings of the study via ProQuest. Lastly, the study will be submitted to a peer-review journal for publication.

**Implications for Policy**

A second implication of the study pertains to the policy of the institutions of higher learning in Laos. Some of the Hmong college students relied on their professors and friends for support or counseling when they were experiencing challenges. Based on the findings of this study, one crucial policy recommendation for the universities in Laos would be to establish and implement a system of student support services. If the university does not already have these services, it needs to adopt them for the sake of its students.

Several student support services should be adopted. The first services are counseling and advising services. When asked to share, some of the Hmong students in the study stated that counseling services were not available at their university (P3, P5, P6, P7). If the student needed to speak to someone regarding their education or an issue they are facing, then they would seek assistance from one of their professors (P1, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10). While professors may be able to counsel their students, it should not be their responsibility to provide counseling services in addition to teaching.

Furthermore, not all professors are equipped with the skills and knowledge of effective counseling. The task of counseling students should be given to academic counselors. Also, counseling the students is an additional responsibility that the professors should not have. The professor’s primary focus should be to teach the students and update the curriculum.

Murray et al. (2015) concluded that university counseling services are useful in assisting students in reclaiming their emotional well-being. That is, of the 305 college students who
participated in the study, a significant number of them showed signs of meaningful improvement in their functionality after receiving counseling services. Also, students who received advice from counselors were more likely to succeed in college because of the knowledge and information that they received (Smith et al., 2014). The counselor not only provided academic and, in certain instances, psychological advising, they also assisted in connecting the students to other programs and services on campus. If there were tutorial services or social events on campus, the counselor would be able to provide this information to the students (Smith et al., 2014). Of the 10 participants in the current study, half shared that they would like to have a student support office that provided emotional and motivational support to students (P3, P5, P6, P7, P10); otherwise, students have no choice but to seek this support elsewhere. It is, therefore, essential that Hmong students have access to proper counseling and advising services through their universities.

If counseling and advising support were to be established, it would be beneficial to have academic counselors available for students. Academic counselors would be filling a current need, particularly a need pertaining to student goals. One of the factors of persistence was the establishment of goals. All 10 Hmong college students in the study persisted because they had a prominent goal they wanted to achieve. Students who may not have a goal at the onset of their college careers should be allowed to attend a goal development workshop led by academic counselors. The workshops would assist the Hmong college students with the establishment of their intrinsic and extrinsic goals.

Academic advising is even more imperative as the Hmong students are first-generation college students. Swecker et al. (2014) concluded that the student persistence rates for first-generational college students increase by 13% for every meeting with an academic advisor.
Providing students with academic advising services would, therefore, have considerable, positive ramifications.

Secondly, because the majority of the Hmong students were the first in their families to attend college, the university needs to implement a program that would specifically address the needs of first-generation college students. This type of program would not only benefit the Hmong students but all first-generation students within the university. Some of these services can consist of a bridging program. Since the parents of first-generation students never attended college, they have little experience with what being a college student entails. Because of a lack of knowledge on the part of their parents, first-generation college students are not prepared for rigorous academic work and the social adjustments of college. When first-generation students start their college careers, they begin at a disadvantage compared to other students whose parents are college graduates (Quinn et al., 2019). Through a bridging program, first-year college students, whether they are Hmong or not, would have an opportunity to visit and experience several class sessions at the university before the actual start of the school year.

Additionally, a mentoring program for first-year Hmong college students would be beneficial. As shown in this study, the Hmong students sought and received support from their friends when they were faced with challenges. A mentoring program would help facilitate this peer support process more effectively. As shown in the interviews, the majority of the Hmong college students shared similar experiences. The establishment of a mentoring program would allow senior Hmong college students to mentor the incoming Hmong underclassmen. In this way, the students who have endured and persisted could share their knowledge, experience, and advice to those who are attending the university for the first time.
Mentoring provides a tremendous opportunity for the academic and professional development of college students (Leidenfrost et al., 2011). It benefits the mentor by allowing him to share his experiences with his mentee. Mentors can further develop their relationship with other students, along with promoting a deep sense of satisfaction through their contributions to the learning community. In addition, the mentee would benefit by receiving guidance from a colleague who had already experienced the challenges of higher education. Furthermore, this process enables the mentee to establish social networks. In terms of academic performance, according to Leidenfrost et al. (2014), students who are mentored have a better grade average and course completion rate than those who are not. In another study by Larose (2013), college students who were mentored displayed a higher level of perceived self-efficacy. Also, as concluded by Larose et al. (2011), academic and vocational mentoring is beneficial in improving the motivational level of students pursuing math, science, and/or technology careers. Mentoring also helps a student thrive in college (Sparks, 2017). It also assisted in decreasing the drop-out rates for students in these fields (Larose et al., 2011).

As a method to further enhance the persistence of Hmong college students, a mentoring program would promote the sharing of student experiences. This mentoring program would pair the first-year Hmong college students with one of the senior Hmong students. First-year Hmong college students in Laos would greatly benefit from having a mentor. As part of the mentoring program, the first-year Hmong college students would receive guidance from someone who has gone through what they will be experiencing. In having a mentor, the first-year Hmong college student would be more equipped to navigate some of the challenges and difficulties of being a Hmong college student in Laos. Furthermore, the first-year Hmong college students would increase their chances of persisting.
Lastly, a career and employment center must be made available to students, so that they may receive assistance in exploring potential careers and finding employment while they are attending school (P1, P4, P7, P8, P9). As P1 shared, “the university lacks services that help students in getting the ‘real work’ experience. Furthermore, the university does not provide support in finding jobs or a career.”

The career and employment center could also help the students in finding a job once they graduate. Through this center, workshops such as resume writing and mock interviews can be provided to the students. The university would also be able to host career or job fairs, which would help connect its students to the businesses and professionals within the country.

Although some of the student support services may be lacking at the university, it may not necessarily be something that the university can control. As Moxom and Hayden (2015) concluded, the public institution of higher learning in Laos is highly regulated by the state. Furthermore, the adequate infrastructure for institutions of higher education in Laos has been limited, especially in regards to funding (Siharath, 2010). As a result of insufficient funding, staff and faculty members are severely under-compensated for their services. Even if the universities in Laos wanted to provide student support services, the task itself would be extremely challenging. Therefore, the researcher must recognize the university for its innovation in utilizing its faculty members in student support. The researcher also commends the faculty members for their willingness to serve their students in multiple capacities, not only as professors but also as counselors and advisors. As the country of Laos continues to progress and meet the graduation requirements for the “Least Developed Nation,” its infrastructure for higher education will continue to improve. The researcher is hopeful that the institutions will have appropriate student support services available to its students in the near future.
Implications for Theory

The conceptual framework of the study was Tinto’s two models: (a) the longitudinal model of institutional departure and (b) the model of student motivation and persistence. The longitudinal model of institutional departure suggested that a student’s withdrawal from college is a process that involved the interactions between the student, his experiences with the college, and other social systems (Tinto, 1993). According to this model, a college student brings with him personal attributes such as family background (parents’ education level, social-economic status), skills and abilities, and prior schooling (good or bad experiences) to the college. Also, a college student has his own intentions and commitments for attending college. The student also has other external commitments as well that are unique to him. When in college, the student’s personal attributes, goals, and commitments cause them to experience college in a certain way. This experience will have an impact on the college student’s decision to persist or drop out.

The results of this study suggest that the Hmong college student’s experience in college did not have an impact on their persistence. Instead, it was their family background and intentions that had a significant impact. Through the longitudinal model of institutional departure, Tinto (1993) explains that adverse experiences weaken a college student’s intentions and commitments, which may result in the possibility of the student dropping out. In this study, the Hmong college students shared that they encountered many negative experiences. Some students had to work while they were going to school in order to pay for their educational expenses. Other students did not have a positive experience with the institution’s curriculum. Yet, the negative experiences had minimal impact on the participants and did not cause them to drop out. For most of the students, these negative experiences had a converse impact by actually serving as motivation for students to continue persisting.
As P5 shared regarding the challenges she encountered as a college student, she said:

As a Hmong college student, there were many challenges. Some of the students who are from a wealthy family they do not encounter any difficulties. But as a student from a poor family, I have to go to school, but I also have to work to support myself as well. Furthermore, I have to also help my parents on the farm. Nevertheless, receiving a degree in higher education is something that I want, so regardless of how difficult the situation may be, I will persist through anything.

The model of student motivation and persistence asserts that a college student’s goals, sense of self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and perception of the curriculum are essential in motivating students to persist (Tinto, 2017). Although all four may be crucial to college students in the West, not all of them may be essential or applicable to Asian students. This observation is consistent with Kommers and Pham’s findings that certain aspects of the relationship between academic and social interactions and persistence differ for Asian students (Kommers & Pham, 2016). As exhibited through the results of this study, both of Tinto’s models appeared to be applicable to the Hmong college students in Laos to a certain extent. However, because of the uniqueness of the Hmong college student population, the factors that contributed to their persistence were slightly different.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

One of the limitations of the current study was the fact that it was a single-case study. As a result, the findings from this study cannot be generalized to the larger Hmong college student population in Laos. Therefore, one recommendation is to replicate this study as a multiple-case study. The institution for this study was only one of five major universities in the country of Laos. There are four other universities in Laos, and they also have Hmong students. Also, the
other four significant institutions are located in other parts of the country. Considering the location of other universities, the Hmong student population may exhibit different characteristics that affect their perception of the factors that contribute to their persistence. Regardless, the usage of a multiple-case study may enhance the findings of this study and fill the gap in the literature.

Another recommendation is to replicate the present research but as a comparative case study. The Hmong resides in other countries in Southeast Asia, such as Thailand and Vietnam. The literature on Hmong college students and their persistence in other Southeast Asian countries is also lacking. Replicating the current research in other Southeast Asian countries would help confirm this study’s findings as well as fill the gap in the literature. Further research is needed to shed greater light on the issue of persistence among Hmong college students in Laos.

One of the unexpected findings of the study was the positive relationship between the Hmong students and one of their professors. This positive relationship afforded the Hmong students with someone in the university whom they can speak with when they were undergoing challenges. A recommendation for future research is to replicate the present research. However, instead of utilizing Tinto’s models as the theoretical framework, utilize Pascarella’s student–faculty informal contact model. When asked about the student support services provided by the university, six participants shared that they sought support and received it from one of their professors. Through the support received from their professors, the participants were motivated to persist in their education. Further research through the student–faculty informal contact model may yield beneficial findings to better understand and support the incorporation of this model to other institutions of higher learning in the country of Laos if it has not already been utilized.
All the Hmong students expressed a high level of self-efficacy. As shared by some of the students, there was never any remission of their self-efficacy, even in the presence of hardships. This high level of self-efficacy is worthy of future research because it will provide a better understanding of why the Hmong students are so confident in their ability to succeed. An understanding of the reasoning behind the Hmong student’s strong sense of self-efficacy may prove invaluable to future Hmong and other ethnic minority students of Laos. Through the understanding of the Hmong student’s self-efficacy, school administrators, especially those in primary and secondary schools, will be able to assist in the removal of any existing barriers.

However, to get to the root of the Hmong students’ strong self-efficacy, future research must be different from the current study. First, the study can still be a case study design, but it should be a multiple-case design. The research will need to be conducted at multiple schools and will need to involve multiple units of analysis. Secondly, the research population would differ. The population should consist of Hmong students, their parents, and the teachers. It is essential to know and understand how the Hmong students perceive their self-efficacy. Next, it is also essential to understand what factors shape Hmong students’ self-efficacy. Perhaps Hmong parents play a role in shaping their student’s self-efficacy. Therefore, it is essential to include them in the study. Lastly, the Hmong students’ teachers may play a role in the shaping of their self-efficacy as well.

Another difference in the study would be the instruments used to gather the data. In this study, an in-person interview and reflection journal were used. For future research, an instrument that should be utilized is the observation of the Hmong students in their natural learning environment. Future researchers should observe the interactions between the Hmong students and their instructors, along with their interactions with other students. Observing Hmong
students and their interactions with their parents at home would also provide an in-depth understanding of their self-efficacy.

Finally, future research on the Hmong student’s self-efficacy should be conducted across a more extended time. To fully understand the factors contributing to their self-efficacy, the study should be conducted for at least one full school year. This length of time would provide future researchers with ample time to observe, interview, and collect detailed data that would yield comprehensive findings.

The last recommendation for future research pertains to the study of dropouts. This study examined the factors influencing the persistence and retention of Hmong college students in Laos. Based on the findings, the students in this study persisted because of the seven factors related to their parents. While understanding Hmong student persistence and retention is essential, it is equally important to understand why some Hmong students drop out. Similar to the students of this study, the Hmong students who dropped out must have had similar experiences and encountered similar challenges. Nevertheless, they chose not to persist. Uncovering and understanding the factors that cause Hmong students to drop out would be a contribution to the field, as well as serve as another resource to the Hmong community and Lao universities.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this case study was to explore the factors that contributed to the persistence and retention of Hmong college students in Laos. The central research question was: How do Hmong students in Laos perceive the factors influencing their persistence and retention in higher education? Six subresearch questions also helped drive this case study, and they were as follows: (a) What motivated Hmong college students in Laos to persist in higher education?
(b) How do Hmong college students in Laos perceive goals as a factor in their persistence and retention? (c) How do Hmong college students in Laos perceive self-efficacy as a factor in their persistence and retention? (d) How do Hmong college students in Laos perceive a sense of belonging as a factor in their persistence and retention? (e) How do Hmong college students in Laos perceive the curriculum as a factor in their persistence and retention? (f) What student support services do the universities provide to assist in improving Hmong students’ persistence and retention? To answer the central and subresearch questions, 10 Hmong college students in Laos participated in the study.

The participants completed and submitted a reflection journal and responded to questions during a in person interview. All interviews were transcribed and analyzed, along with the participants’ reflection journals, for themes. Upon completion of the data analysis, multiple themes emerged. Some of the significant themes were: (a) it was difficult being a Hmong college student, (b) family was a factor that motivates, (c) goal was a motivator to persistence, (d) Hmong students were confident in their abilities, (e) there was a sense of belonging, (f) the curriculum was the top in Laos but a nonfactor, and (g) the professor was their supporter (see Appendices H and I).

The findings of this case study suggest that being a college student in Laos was difficult for Hmong students. As a result, they perceive their family’s poor economic status, their parents’ lack of education, and the opportunity to improve life for themselves and their family as significant factors in their persistence. Also, goals and self-efficacy are factors that contribute to the Hmong college student’s motivation to persist in their education. To help the Hmong students persist, the universities in Laos should provide services that address the financial needs and the need to secure a career post-graduation. Moreover, services that will assist the Hmong
students in the development of their goals, such as workshops, will further motivate the students to persist.

Overall, the findings from this study were similar to what the researcher expected, as discussed in Chapter 2. Before the data collection, the researcher expected to find that goals and self-efficacy will be factors that influence the Hmong college student to persist in their education. The researcher also expected that a sense of belonging and the perception of the curriculum were not going to be a factor. However, the researcher did not expect that the Hmong student’s family would have a role as an essential factor in their decision to persist.
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Appendix A: Current Map of Lao’s People Democratic Republic

Lao maps provinces (Maps Laos, 2019).
Appendix B: Map of Universities in Laos

Google Maps (n.d.): Universities in Laos.
Appendix C: Prescreening Demographic Questions

What is your name? ______________________________

What is your age? _______ What is your gender? _____ Male _____ Female

Are you Hmong? ____ Yes ____ No

Have you completed one year? ____ Yes ____ No

What is your major? ____________________________

What is your primary language? ________________

How far do you live from the institution? ________

What was the highest grade that your father completed? ______

What was the highest grade that your mother completed? ______
Appendix D: Interview Questions

1. Describe your experiences as a Hmong college student in Laos?

2. What do you perceive as some of the factors that have contributed to your motivation to persist or stay in the university?

3. How do you perceive the following factors in you continuing to persist in your education?
   a. Goals
   b. Self-efficacy
   c. Sense of belonging
   d. Perception of Curriculum

4. What are some of the student support services that are provided by the university to help motivate you to persist?
Appendix E: Reflection Journal Questions

- Think about your impression as you first arrived to the first day of class and the last day of the first year. Explain why you perusing your degree in higher education and what factors influenced your decision to continue?

- Think about your academic experience as you pursue your degree. What role does goals, academic self-efficacy, a sense of belonging, and curriculum have in your decision to continue your education?

- Imagine that you are an administrator of your university. What type of student support services would you enact to assist students and their motivation to persistence?
Appendix F: Interview Protocol Form

**Research Question:** Factors Influencing Hmong College Students’ Persistence and Retention in Laos

Date __________________________

Time __________________________

Location ________________________

Interviewer ______________________

Interviewee ______________________

Release form signed? ____

**Notes to interviewee:**

Thank you for your participation. I believe your input will be valuable to this research and in helping grow all of our professional practice.

Confidentiality of responses is guaranteed

Approximate length of interview: 30–60 minutes, five major questions

Purpose of research:
Student persistence and retention is important not just for students but also for institution of higher learning. The purpose of this qualitative research is to examine the factors influencing the persistence and retention of Hmong college students in Laos. This research seeks to answer the following questions:

Central research question:
1. How do Hmong students in Laos perceive the factors influencing their persistence and retention in higher education?

Associated subresearch questions:
1. What motivated Hmong college students in Laos to persist in higher education?
2. How do Hmong college students in Laos perceive goals as a factor in their persistence and retention?
3. How do Hmong college students in Laos perceive self-efficacy as a factor in their persistence and retention?
4. How do Hmong college students in Laos perceive a sense of belonging as a factor in their persistence and retention?
5. How do Hmong college students in Laos perceive the curriculum as a factor in their persistence and retention?
6. What student support services do the universities provide to assist in improving Hmong students’ persistence and retention?

To understand and answer the central and associated subresearch questions, I will be asking you five open-ended questions. Please do not rush and take as much time as you need to digest and answer the questions. Also, please be truthful in your response. To ensure that I capture your full response, I will be recording the interview. Do you have any questions before we start the interview? If participant have questions, answer and address the questions. If no answer, start the recording and ask the first questions.

1. Describe your experiences as a Hmong college student in Laos?

Response from Interviewee: (Notate the participant’s response and observe nonverbal response)

2. What do you perceive as some of the factors that have contributed to your motivation to persist or stay in the university?

3. How do you perceive the following factors in you continuing to persist in the university?
   a. Goals
   b. Academic Self-efficacy
   c. A Sense of belonging
   d. Perception of the curriculum

4. What are some of the student support services that are provided by the university to help motivate you to persist?

   • Closure
     o That was the last question of this interview. Do you have anything you would like to add? If not, thank you for your time and for participating in this study.
     o I want to assure you that the information from this interview will remain confidential.
     o Furthermore, if you approve, I would like to follow-up with you in the future as needed on any confusion of your response.
     o After this in person interview, I will be sending you three reflection journals questions for you to answer. These questions are to be completed by you at your discretion.
     o Read and review the reflection journals to the participant.

   • After each interview, take time immediately to reflect on the response from each participant. Make notation on the interpretation, understanding, and discrepancy in the participant’s response.
Appendix G: Informed Consent

Research Study Title: Factors influencing Hmong college students’ persistence and retention in Laos: A Case Study
Principal Investigator: Kou Xiong
Research Institution: Concordia University–Portland
Faculty Advisor: Dr. Libi Shen

Purpose and what you will be doing:
The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore the factors behind the persistence and retention of Hmong college students in Laos. I expect approximately 10–15 volunteers. No one will be paid to participate in the study. I will begin enrollment in the month of January 2020 and end interactions with participants at the end of the month of March 2020.

To be in the study, the participant will have to meet the following requirements:
1. Must be of Hmong descent and must identify him/herself as Hmong.
2. Must be a current college student at an institution of higher learning in Laos for at least one year.
3. Must be willing to discuss and disclose information relating to his/her persistence and retention as a college student at his/her respective institution of higher learning.

Upon receipt of your consent form as confirmation of your participation in the study, you will be sent two sets of questions. The first set of questions will consist of three open-ended questions. These questions are reflection questions which you will respond to in the form of a reflection journal. You are free to complete the reflection journal at your discretion. I expect that you will be honest in your response and you will share as much detail as possible. You will need to reflect, complete, and send your reflection journal to me within two weeks of receiving the questions. I need to receive your reflection journal prior to your one-on-one interview.

The second set of questions will consist of five questions. These questions are the one-on-one questions that will be asked via a conference call through WebEx. Based on the number of questions, I anticipate that your one-on-one interview will a minimum of 30 minutes and will not exceed 45 minutes.

Risks:
The are no risks to participating in this study other than providing your information. As the principal investigator, I will take precautions to protect the confidentiality of your information. First of all, I will substitute your name and any other identifying information with a code (a pseudonym) that only I will know. None of the data will have your name or identifying information written on them. I will not identify you in any publication or report. Furthermore, your information such as your name and/or any other personal information will be kept in a secure (locked) files. Your one-on-one interview will be recorded to ensure that I capture all the details of the interview. Upon the completion of your one-on-one interview, it will be transcribed verbatim. However, the recordings and transcription will be extracted and saved on a USB drive that has a 256-bit AES encrypted software and locked via a password. Similarly, your reflection journal will also be saved on a USB drive that has a 256-bit AES encrypted software and locked via a password.
Recordings will be deleted immediately following transcription and member-checking. All other study-related materials will be kept securely for 3 years from the close of the study and will then be destroyed.

**Benefits:**
Information you provide will help in the understanding of the factors that influence Hmong college students’ persistence and retention in Laos. This information can be utilized by your institution or other institutions to ensure that appropriate services are provided to support the persistence and retention of Hmong college students in Laos. Furthermore, the study will fill a gap in the literature of student persistence and retention.

**Confidentiality:**
This information will not be distributed to any other agency and will be kept private and confidential. When the data are reported, it will not include any information that will identify the participants. The data will be shared in a manner that will protect the identity of all the participants.

**Right to Withdraw:**
Your participation is greatly appreciated, but I acknowledge that the questions I am asking are personal in nature. You are free at any point to choose not to engage with or stop the study. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer. This study is not required and there is no penalty for not participating. If at any time you experience a negative emotion from answering the questions, I will stop asking you questions at your discretion.

If you want to withdraw from the study and withdraw your information from analysis, you will need to contact me in writing as described as soon as possible. Upon receipt of your written request, I will withdraw you from the study. Also, any information you had provided will be destroyed.

**Contact Information:**
You will receive a copy of this consent form. If you have questions, you can talk to or write the principal investigator, Kou Xiong at email [redacted]. If you want to talk with a participant advocate other than the investigator, you can write or call the director of our institutional review board, Dr. OraLee Branch (email [redacted] or call [redacted]).
Your Statement of Consent:
I have read the above information. I asked questions if I had them, and my questions were answered. I volunteer my consent for this study.

_______________________________                  ___________
Participant Name                    Date

_______________________________                  ___________
Participant Signature                Date

_______________________________                  ___________
Investigator Name                    Date

_______________________________                  ___________
Investigator Signature                Date

Investigator: Kou Xiong; email: [redacted]
c/o: Professor Dr. Libi Shen
Concordia University–Portland
2811 NE Holman Street
Portland, Oregon 97211
### Appendix H: Interview Categories and General Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Categories</th>
<th>Themes and Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experiences as a Hmong college student in Laos</td>
<td>Being a Hmong college student has been difficult (P1, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I was a poor student from the highlands (P1, P8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Come from a poor family (P1, P3, P4, P5, P6, P8, P10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I have to go to school and work to support myself (P5, P7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Difficulty in term of finance (P8, P10)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I have to also help my parents with the farm (P5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parents always encourage me to get an education (P1, P7)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lived with other Hmong college students who are also poor (P1, P3, P4, P7, P8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Saw how much parents struggled to financially provide for the family (P1, P3, P6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Believe that I will provide for my family financially (P1, P3, P4, P6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Believe in myself that I will succeed because education is something that I desire (P1, P5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lao was not my primary language so it was difficult (P8, P9)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Difference in belief system (P9)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Because I come from a poor family, I have to study harder (P10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of educational supplies (P10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factors contributing to your motivation to persist in the university?</td>
<td>My family was a factor in motivating me to persist (P4, P6, P7, P8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Inspiration come from my parents and how hard they work (P1, P3, P6, P10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>My family’s poor socioeconomic status was motivation (P2, P4, P5, P6, P7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>My parents lack of education (P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>My parents are farmers (P3, P4, P7, P8, P10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parents always encourage me to get an education (P1, P2, P4, P8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I want a better life than that of my parents (P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P8, P10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Get an education so that I can help my family financially (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P8, P10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Want a career and opportunity to a stable income (P1, P2, P3, P4, P8, P9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do you perceive goals as a factor in your persistence?</td>
<td>My friends are factors that motivate me to persist (P4)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>My parents invested a tremendous amount of resource in my education, I must graduate for them (P9)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A person should have a goal (P1, P3, P4, P5, P6, P9, P10)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>It is important to have a goal (P6, P7, P8)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Having a goal helped motivate me to persist to what I want to achieve (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Categories</th>
<th>Themes and Codes</th>
</tr>
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</table>
| How do you perceive self-efficacy as a factor in your persistence? | I am where I am today because of my goals (P1, P3, P4, P5, P8, P10)  
Even if my parents support me, if I do not have a goal, I would not have been able to succeed (P8)  
I always believed in myself and my ability to accomplish a task (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10)  
My belief in my ability is what motivated me to where I am today (P1, P4, P5, P6, P7, P9, P10)  
I believe that I can succeed in my education because it was my goal (P3)  
If others can succeed, then so can I (P2)  
Even if I believe in myself and my ability to succeed, if my family does not support me, I will not persist (P4)  
If I do not believe in myself and my ability, no one else will (P3) |
| How do you perceive sense of belonging as a factor in your persistence? | This university treats everyone equally (P1)  
The professors care for and support all the students (P1, P10)  
The university makes me feel like I belong (P2, P4, P5, P6, P8)  
In making me feel like I belong, I was motivated to persist (P4, P5, P6)  
The university does not have anything to enhance my sense of belonging (P3, P7)  
The feeling of belonging to the university was not a factor in my persistence (P3)  
Regardless of the sense of belonging, I will continue to persist (P3, P6, P9)  
When you decide to attend you attend regardless (P7)  
The teaching and learning at this university still need improvements (P1, P3, P4, P5)  
The professors teach well (P2, P8)  
The university that I am attending is the top in the country (P1, P3, P4, P6, P7, P10)  
Regardless of the curriculum, since I am attending I will continue and just work hard (P1, P3, P4)  
The curriculum of the institution is not something that will cause me drop out (P3, P5)  
The perception of whether the curriculum is good or not is dependent of the student (P7)  
If a student study hard, he will succeed regardless of the curriculum (P7)  
I believe that the curriculum of the university is good (P7, P8, P9)  
My perception of the curriculum does factor into my persistence (P8) |
<p>| How do you perceive the perception of the curriculum as a factor in your persistence? | There is no institutional help for the student (P1) |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Categories</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>the university provide to help motivate you to persist?</td>
<td>This university does not provide student support services (P3, P5, P6, P7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>There is an office that provides support to the students (P4, P8, P9, P10)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other countries have financial support of $40-$50 dollar per month (P1)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prior to the first day of instruction the university reviewed some of the services available (P2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>There are teams from Japan who come in to provide motivation workshops (P2)</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>The university bring in outside source</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>If you need to talk to anyone for advise, you will talk to one of your professor whom you have a good relationship with (P1, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>You can also talk to your friends and seek advice from them (P1, P3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>For the most part, the professors are only there to teach (P5)</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>The institution provides students the opportunity for a foreign exchange program (P10)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix I: Reflection Journal Categories and General Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reflection Journal Categories</th>
<th>Themes and Codes</th>
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| Think about your first impression on the first day and last day of the first year. Explain why you are perusing higher education and what influence persistence? | It was difficult as I have to learn about a subject that was very new and I have no background in it (P1)  
I had to take it one step at a time (P1)  
Challenges of living arrangements (P2, P3, P6, P7)  
I will not be able to help my parents (P3)  
I have will have to study hard to succeed (P5, P7)  
I was accepted into the university; I have to make sure I succeed (P10)  
A better future for myself (P1, P2, P3, P5, P6, P7)  
I have a goal for myself and I must study hard (P1, P3, P8, P9, P10)  
I want to earn income for myself (P1, P3, P8, P9)  
I do not want a life in which I struggle financially (P3)  
My family was my motivation (P4, P5)                                                                                                                                 |
| What role does goals, academic self-efficacy, a sense of belonging, and curriculum have on decision to persist? | My university is the best in the country (P1)  
The curriculum is good (P1)  
Network with other foreign universities (P1)  
Opportunities to study oversea (P1)  
My goal was what motivated to continue my education (P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10)  
My goal had a big role in my decision to persist (P10)  
Academic self-efficacy had a role in my decision to persist (P10)  
Sense of belonging does not have a role in my decision to persist (P10)  
The curriculum of the university has a role in my decision to persist (P10)                                                                                                                                 |
| What student support services to enact to assist and motivate persistence?                    | A Reading Center (P1)  
Student Help Center (P1, P2)  
Career and Employment Center (P1, P4, P7, P8, P9)  
Fundraising opportunities for students (P1, P10)  
Provide tutorial support to students (P3)  
Emotional and motivational support for students (P3, P5, P6, P7, P10)  
Services to assist with the establishment of goals (P3, P7)  
Opportunities for academic research (P10)                                                                                                                                 |
Appendix J: Statement of Original Work

The Concordia University Doctorate of Education Program is a collaborative community of scholar-practitioners, who seek to transform society by pursuing ethically-informed, rigorously-researched, inquiry-based projects that benefit professional, institutional, and local educational contexts. Each member of the community affirms throughout their program of study, adherence to the principles and standards outlined in the Concordia University Academic Integrity Policy. This policy states the following:

Statement of academic integrity.

As a member of the Concordia University community, I will neither engage in fraudulent or unauthorized behaviors in the presentation and completion of my work, nor will I provide unauthorized assistance to others.

Explanations:

What does “fraudulent” mean?

“Fraudulent” work is any material submitted for evaluation that is falsely or improperly presented as one’s own. This includes, but is not limited to texts, graphics and other multi-media files appropriated from any source, including another individual, that are intentionally presented as all or part of a candidate’s final work without full and complete documentation.

What is “unauthorized” assistance?

“Unauthorized assistance” refers to any support candidates solicit in the completion of their work, that has not been either explicitly specified as appropriate by the instructor, or any assistance that is understood in the class context as inappropriate. This can include, but is not limited to:

- Use of unauthorized notes or another’s work during an online test
- Use of unauthorized notes or personal assistance in an online exam setting
- Inappropriate collaboration in preparation and/or completion of a project
- Unauthorized solicitation of professional resources for the completion of the work.
Statement of Original Work (Continued)

I attest that:

1. I have read, understood, and complied with all aspects of the Concordia University–Portland Academic Integrity Policy during the development and writing of this dissertation.

2. Where information and/or materials from outside sources has been used in the production of this dissertation, all information and/or materials from outside sources has been properly referenced and all permissions required for use of the information and/or materials have been obtained, in accordance with research standards outlined in the Publication Manual of The American Psychological Association.

Kou Xiong

Digital Signature

Kou Xiong

Name (Typed)

04/03/2020

Date