VOICES OF COLLEGE ASSISTANCE MIGRANT PROGRAM STUDENTS FROM REFUGEE BACKGROUNDS: AN ASSET-BASED APPROACH

By
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________________________________________

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Abstract

This dissertation study used an asset-based, qualitative approach to explore how refugee-background students who have participated in a College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP) at four different universities describe and make meaning of their paths to and through college. This study advances our understanding of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) and social capitals (Stanton-Salazar, 1995) as they relate to the educational experiences of refugee-background college students with a familial history of agricultural labor. Using a basic interpretive interview study methodology (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight current and former refugee-background CAMP students who were successfully progressing toward earning a bachelor’s degree at a four-year institution. Findings suggest that refugee-background college students with a family history of agricultural labor develop and utilize multiple sources of cultural, familial, and linguistic assets that when combined with institutional sources of supports, are key to overcoming systemic barriers to educational achievement. Implications for educational equity programs such as CAMP are discussed, including recommendations for developing policies, ongoing professional development, and programmatic practices that improve postsecondary outcomes for this distinct college student population. Continued qualitative and quantitative research is recommended to explore the experiences of refugee-background students with a familial history of agricultural labor and the impact of CAMP participation on educational outcomes within both two-year and four-year postsecondary institutions.
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Chapter I: Introduction

While seasonal, temporary, and migratory agricultural workers are responsible for putting food on American tables, they also represent some of the most economically disadvantaged and marginalized peoples in the United States (Thompson & Wiggins, 2002). Throughout history, agricultural labor – including the planting and harvesting of crops, as well as work in meat, poultry and dairy farms, feedlots, and slaughterhouses – has been accompanied by low wages (Hernandez & Gabbard, 2018), dangerous and arduous working conditions (Sebastian, 2017), high injury and illness rates (National Center for Farmworker Health, Inc., 2018; Stull, 2011), and sub-standard housing (Wiltz, 2016).

Because agricultural labor has a history of being underpaid, grueling, and dangerous work, few U.S. workers have been willing to engage in it (Thompson & Wiggins, 2002). Therefore, agricultural industries are constantly looking for new sources of labor, often from immigrant populations (Fink, 1998; Shavers, 2009; Thompson & Wiggins, 2002). In 1951, President Truman was quoted as saying, “We depend on misfortune to build up our force of migratory workers and when the supply is low because there is not enough misfortune at home, we rely on misfortune abroad to replenish the supply” (Truman, as cited in Long, 1951). Since the end of the Mexican-American War in the mid 1800’s, persons from Mexican descent have been overwhelmingly responsible for “replenishing the supply” of U.S. agricultural labor (Thompson & Wiggins, 2002). However, as U.S. policies have tightened on immigration from Latin America, large agricultural operations, especially meat and poultry processing companies, have looked to new refugee populations to work their factory lines (Broadway, 2007; Fink, 1998; Stull, 2011). As meatpacking-reliant communities become increasingly diverse with newcomer refugee families, U.S. educational systems from early childhood through postsecondary levels
are responsible for creating and implementing pedagogies, policies, and procedures that will positively impact educational outcomes for refugee-background children.

Historically, the majority of immigrant-background students served in meatpacking communities have been Spanish-speaking (Delgado & Becker Herbst, 2018; Kanno & Cromley, 2013; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Shapiro & MacDonald, 2017; Tandon, 2016); however, school districts such as those in Omaha, Nebraska, Garden City, Kansas, and Storm Lake, Iowa are increasingly serving refugee-background students from countries such as Sudan, Burma, Bhutan, Vietnam, Somalia, and Ethiopia because their families have come to work in the communities’ meatpacking plants (Boyer, 2019; Stull & Ng, 2016; World Herald Editorial, 2018).

Education is viewed as the most effective way out of the poverty related to agricultural labor (Perry, 1997; Salinas & Fránquiz, 2004); however, refugee-background students and students from agricultural labor backgrounds continue to have some of the highest high school dropout rates and lowest college-going rates in the U.S. (Cranston-Gingras & Anderson, 1990; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Tandon, 2016; Zarate et al., 2017). Prior research points to a number of systemic factors related to low educational outcomes, including interrupted schooling due to family mobility, poverty, low English language proficiency levels, trauma, and immigration stressors (Fallows, 2016; Garza et al., 2004; Hiott et al., 2008; National Commission on Migrant Education, 1992; Zarate et al., 2017). These factors are further compounded by: 1) U.S. educational systems that are underprepared to meet the unique academic needs of refugee-background students who are linguistically and culturally diverse; and 2) the use of deficit lenses and narratives by researchers and educators that translate into stereotype threat and lowered expectations (Delgado & Becker Herbst, 2018; Kanno & Cromley, 2013; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Shapiro & MacDonald, 2017; Tandon, 2016).
Shapiro and McDonald (2017) maintain that a deficit orientation in discourse and practice has a chilling effect on educational outcomes, particularly for students from refugee backgrounds. Research has found that educators, even those who are trying to provide support and advocacy, often utilize a deficit approach to their work with refugee students and overlook what they bring to their educational experiences (Harklau, 1999; McGinnis, 2015; Roy & Roxas, 2011; Shapiro & MacDonald, 2017). By failing to recognize the strengths and capacities refugee-backgrounds students bring, educators inadvertently contribute to inequitable educational access by perpetuating stereotypes and discouraging their students from pursuing academic rigor (McGinnis, 2015; Shapiro & MacDonald, 2017). This deficit orientation can be likened to what Nigerian author, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie describes as the problem with single stories, as illustrated in this excerpt from her 2009 TED Talk,

> All of these stories make me who I am; but to insist on only these negative stories is to flatten my experience and to overlook the many other stories that formed me. The single story creates stereotypes; and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are *incomplete*. They make one story become the only story (Adichie, 2009, 5:42).

Despite a number of systemic barriers that include persisting deficit-based orientations by some educators and researchers, more students from refugee and agricultural labor backgrounds are not only completing high school, but also pursuing postsecondary education in the U.S. (Doublestein, 2017; McGinnis, 2015; Tuliao et al., 2017).

My interest in this phenomenon, students in college who come from both refugee and agricultural labor backgrounds, comes from my experience as a higher education professional working for more equitable college access and educational outcomes for students who have been
historically underserved. For the past 17 years, I have worked at a predominantly-white public university supporting high school and college students from migratory, seasonal, and temporary agricultural backgrounds across several federally-funded and state-funded educational programs. These have included two separate federal-funded College Assistance Migrant Programs (CAMPs) and a state-funded, Migrant Education residential pre-college program for high school students. Many of these students in the Great Plains region of the U.S. do not meet the traditional definition of “migrant farmworker,” but rather are eligible for Migrant Education Program services because they are from a “temporary” agricultural labor background due to the high turnover rates in meatpacking and poultry processing plants (Branz-Spall et al., 2003; Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2017). Migrant Education also serves students whose families have worked in these processing industries, and once they have been identified as eligible for Migrant Education at the K-12 level, they are also eligible to be served by CAMP (Office of Migrant Education, 2012).

While the majority of the students I have served have identified as Latinx (a gender inclusive term that replaces Latino/a), I have also worked with a number of refugee-background students from Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, Burma, Bhutan, and Burundi. In this work, I have witnessed how refugee-background students utilize both individual strengths and community networks to be successful in their educational pursuits and steadily progress toward their academic goals. Their accomplishments have included admission into professional schools, congressional internships, research fellowships, and bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral degree completion. Each of these accomplishments demonstrate that while persons from a combination of refugee backgrounds and migratory, seasonal, or temporary agricultural backgrounds may face multiple systemic barriers to college access, progression, and graduation, they also possess
strengths, resiliencies, and capacities that serve as foundations for academic success at the college level.

**Purpose of Study**

This dissertation study seeks to gain a deeper understanding of these assets – personal, familial, communal, and cultural – that have the ability to mediate significant systemic barriers to college access and specifically to pursuing an undergraduate degree at a four-year institution. Utilizing a strengths-based approach, I conducted a qualitative interpretive interview study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) that explored the experiences and perspectives of eight refugee-background undergraduate students who were current or former participants in a federally-funded College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP) and who were progressing toward degree completion. The goal of this research has been to gain a deeper and more nuanced understanding of how students from these particular backgrounds utilize their families and communities as sources of social capital (Stanton-Salazar, 1997) and cultural wealth outside of the white, middle-class norm (Yosso, 2005) to prepare for and access college, and once admitted, to progress toward earning an undergraduate degree.

The research questions that guided this study are as follows:

1) How do refugee-background CAMP students describe and make sense of their families, cultural backgrounds, and key relationships as they relate to their experiences in college preparation, choice, and enrollment?

2) What challenges do refugee-background CAMP students describe in relation to their experiences pursuing a degree at four-year universities?

3) How do refugee-background CAMP students continue to develop and utilize social capital and unique sources of community cultural wealth to meet challenges and progress
toward their goals of college degree attainment?

This study investigated how students from these backgrounds - undergraduate students who hold multiple identities that have been historically marginalized and underserved in higher education - describe and make meaning of their pre-college and initial college experiences through a lens of cultural, familial, community, and personal assets and strengths.

**Theoretical Frameworks**

This study of strengths and assets outside of the white-dominant norm was informed by theories of ecological systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1976; Teater, 2014), community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) and social capital (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Ecological systems theory utilized within the fields of education (Bronfenbrenner, 1976) and social welfare (Teater, 2014) examines how individuals both impact and are impacted by environmental influences that surround them, from the immediate influences of family, home, and teachers, to systemic structures such as schools and workplaces, to social, political, and cultural systems. I posit that despite multiple systemic barriers, refugee-background CAMP students are able to draw from their environments to develop the strengths, skills, and self-efficacies necessary to access college and successfully progress toward earning a degree. I framed these environmentally-gained assets through the theoretical lenses of social capital (Stanton-Salazar, 1997) and community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005). These two frameworks challenge racial stereotypes and cultural deficit theories, understand their impact on inequitable educational outcomes for students of color, and “identify the resources and strengths of students of color and place them at the center of research, curriculum, and teaching” (Yosso, 2005, p. 7).

The early construct of *cultural capital* as conceptualized by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1986) theorized how institutions recognize and reward one’s “class-based socialization of
culturally relevant skills, abilities, tastes, preferences, or norms” that favors the dominant, middle-class white-norm (as cited in Winkle-Wagner, 2010, p. 5). However, other scholars have argued that non-dominant, non-elite sources of cultural capital also have the ability to translate to college success (O’Keeffe, 2013; Tierney, 1999). Solórzano et al. (2005) maintained that college students from minoritized backgrounds do not have to “break away from their family and community to be successful” nor reject their cultural backgrounds, but in fact are bolstered by “strong family and community ties” (p. 285).

Yosso (2005) further argued that attributing poor academic performance among students of color to a lack of white-normative cultural capital is a racist ideology that reflects seeing white communities as culturally wealthy and communities of color as culturally poor. Yosso (2005) identified a number of forms of cultural capital gained outside of the dominant white middle-class norm, including capitals that are “aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant” (p. 76) and that are based in the cultural norms of interdependence and collectivism. While Yosso’s work has centered on the Latinx student experience, other scholars have used her research as a theoretical framework for understanding the experiences of students of color from other racial and ethnic backgrounds, including those from Southeast Asian, Somali Bantu, and Burmese refugee origins (Museus, 2014a; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Roy & Roxas, 2011; Tandon, 2016).

The theoretical construct of social capital (Lin, 2001; Stanton-Salazar, 1997) will provide an additional framework for understanding and interpreting the pre-college and college experiences of refugee-background CAMP students. Lin and Smith (2001) described social capital as an investment in social relationships that enables flow of information, provides social connections, reinforces identity, and influences institutional agents to help with resource access.
Stanton-Salazar (1997) further defined social capital as “social ties and networks that carry the potential to generate valued resources” (p. 8). Applied to the educational experiences of students of color, Stanton-Salazar argued that educational systems inadvertently reproduce social inequality when institutional agents (i.e. teachers, counselors) give or withhold knowledge and “situate youth within resource-rich social networks by actively manipulating the social and institutional forces that determine who shall ‘make it’ and who shall not” (1997, p. 11). To combat implicit biases and institutional barriers that exist within school systems, Stanton-Salazar (1997) also found that students of color develop resiliencies through family and community relations and learn how to “cross borders” to navigate multiple worlds that have competing norms and expectations by creating a “bicultural network orientation” (p. 25) between the “other worlds” of formal education and existing familial and communal support systems (p. 33).

Asset-based research on community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), social capital (Museus & Mueller, 2018; Stanton-Salazar, 1997), and refugee-background student experiences (Museus, 2014a; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Roy & Roxas, 2011; Tandon, 2016) provided important theoretical frameworks for approaching the qualitative exploration of how refugee-background CAMP students utilize their familial and cultural backgrounds and key relationships to prepare to attend college and to meet systemic challenges while in college. This prior scholarship provided a lens for rejecting the deficit model of viewing difference from the dominant culture as an obstacle to college success. A continued discussion of how these theories informed the dissertation study will be provided in the literature review chapter.

**Contributions to the Workplace and Field**

Refugee-background students with a family history in migratory/seasonal/temporary agricultural labor are a relatively small population across the country (Hernandez & Gabbard,
however, as students from refugee backgrounds graduate from high school and wish to pursue postsecondary opportunities, college equity programs have the opportunity to provide culturally responsive college preparation, recruitment, and retention strategies that recognize and utilize students’ strengths and capacities as integral components. One such program, the College Assistance Migrant Program, assists students from seasonal, temporary, and migratory agricultural backgrounds in successfully completing their first year of college and persisting in post-secondary education (Araujo, 2011; Office of Migrant Education, 2012).

TRIO, a relatively larger set of federally-funded college opportunity projects that supports first-generation, low-income students (U.S. Department of Education, 2019) is also in a position to increase college access and support for this student population. Other federal programs specifically designed to improve educational outcomes for migratory children and their families include the Migrant Education Program (MEP) under Title 1, Migrant Head Start, and the High School Equivalency Program (Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2017; Office of Migrant Education, 2012).

This dissertation study contributes to the body of knowledge that professionals in Migrant Education, CAMP, TRIO, and other educational equity programs can utilize to inform their policy and practice in serving refugee-background students both at the pre-college and college levels. Although there is a small but growing body of research that explores the experiences of students from agricultural labor backgrounds and the impact of programs designed to improve their educational outcomes, the existing scholarship overwhelmingly centers the experiences of migratory field workers from Latinx descents (Araujo, 2011; Garza et al., 2004; Graff et al., 2013; Gutierrez, 2016; McHatton et al., 2006; Mendez & Bauman, 2018; Nuñez, 2009; Ramirez, 2018; Nebraska Migrant Education Program, 2016; Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2018; Perry, 1997).
This existing body of research is reflective of the demographic reality that the vast majority of agricultural labor in the U.S. continues to be performed by the Latinx community (National Center for Farmworker Health, Inc., 2018); however, meat and poultry processing work is increasingly done by refugees from other countries of origin as well (Broadway, 2007; Gilhooly & Lynn, 2015; Isik-Ercan, 2011; Stull, 2011; Stull & Ng, 2016). This study will contribute to the body of scholarship on refugee-background college students and provide insights for educational access and opportunity programs such as Migrant Education, CAMP, and TRIO.

Furthermore, this study has the potential to contribute to understanding the strengths and capacities refugee-background students bring to their pre-college and college experiences. Gutierrez (2016) argued, “Although migrant children and youth face difficult life circumstances, narratives of pain do not improve the social, economic, and educational challenges migrant children and youth experience” (p. 5). This concept of “narratives of pain” is also explored by critical theory scholars Tuck and Yang (2014) who maintain that social science research must be critical of “damage-centered studies, rescue research, and pain tourism” (p. 1). I refer to these scholars to make several final points regarding my intentions with this study. First, by gaining a deeper understanding of the strengths and capacities of college students from refugee and agricultural labor backgrounds, this research contributes to the expansion of the construct of non-dominant cultural wealth and social capital utilized within higher education. Second, specifically exploring the strengths and capacities of students who have been historically marginalized provides a counter-narrative and refusal to solely engage in the exploration of “narratives of pain” (Tuck & Yang, 2014, p. 1). Third, this research contributes to best practice in higher education by utilizing humanizing pedagogical approaches that encourage educators to “listen to
and learn from their students and recognize the varied and valuable life experiences and knowledge students bring to learning” (Bartolome, 1994, p. 190).

For higher education practitioners, a humanizing pedagogical approach (Bartolome, 1994) to working with students from refugee and agricultural labor backgrounds includes first recognizing that their life experiences may be uniquely different from other students from marginalized backgrounds, including other students who may hold a combination of first-generation, high financial need, and immigrant identities (Tuliao et al., 2017). Second, understanding and validating these life experiences, as well as the inherent strengths within refugee-background students’ cultural and familial backgrounds, can have a positive impact on their college retention and persistence (Maramba & Palmer, 2014; Tuliao et al., 2017). By understanding both the unique systemic challenges this student population faces and the strengths and capacities they bring to meet those challenges, I hope to expand practitioner knowledge about ways to engage in culturally sensitive interactions with students, and enact culturally relevant higher education policies and programs that are able to positively impact their educational outcomes.

In this chapter, I have provided introductory information about college students from a combination of refugee and agricultural labor backgrounds and the research questions this dissertation has sought to explore. While research is clear that students from these backgrounds often face a number of challenges to accessing and succeeding in college; there is also a growing body of research that is giving voice to how personal, familial, and community assets combined with key relationships assist in overcoming these challenges. The next chapter (Chapter II) will provide a more in-depth summary of the current literature that has informed this study. Next, Chapter Three outlines the qualitative methodology I utilized, as well as site and participant
selection criteria, data collection procedures, data analysis, and my own positionality in the research process.

Chapter II: Literature Review

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore how college undergraduates from a combination of refugee and agricultural labor backgrounds who have participated in a CAMP project utilize non-dominant sources of social and cultural capital in both their pre-college and college experiences. The purpose of this chapter is to provide context for the study by examining relevant prior research that has informed the work. To begin, this study is grounded in a critical epistemology that believes that: a) persons who hold multiple, intersecting marginalized identities are “holders and creators of knowledge outside of the dominant, Euro-American epistemology” (Delgado Bernal, 2002, p. 107), and b) that the knowledge of marginalized persons occurs within social, historical, and political contexts (Berry & Bowers Cook, 2018).

This literature review will begin by providing an overview of the theoretical frameworks that are aligned with this critical epistemology and that utilize an asset-based discourse, to include Yosso’s concepts of community cultural wealth (2005) and Stanton-Salazar’s work surrounding social capital (1997).

I will then describe how prior research and historical contexts will be framed within an ecological systems framework that investigates how individuals interact with and are impacted by different environmental and systemic layers (Bronfenbrenner, 1976; Teater, 2014). Teater (2014) describes ecological theory as the concept that “individuals do not operate in isolation but are influenced by the physical and social environments in which they live and interact” (Teater, 2014, p. 1). Using the ecological perspective as a method for organizing relevant prior
scholarship, I will begin by describing refugee-background students as a distinct population and provide a brief historical overview of the refugee backgrounds represented by the CAMP students who participated in this study. I will then provide contextual background on the meatpacking industry in the U.S. and their increased reliance on an immigrant and refugee labor force. Next, I will discuss research findings on educational outcomes for children of both populations – agricultural laborers and persons from refugee backgrounds.

Programs designed specifically to support educational access and success for students from temporary, seasonal, and migratory agricultural backgrounds will be reviewed next, including the K-12 Migrant Education Program (MEP) and CAMP. This section will be followed by a review of research findings on those environments that have been found to directly impact refugee and agricultural-labor background students: families and educators. Finally, I will provide a brief overview of research on individual factors that have been found to contribute to educational outcomes.

**Need for Relevant Asset-Centered Research**

Despite the fact that Migrant Education (MEP) has existed since the mid 1960’s, and CAMP since 1972, scholarly research on students from migrant, seasonal, and temporary agricultural labor backgrounds and the educational programs designed to support them is relatively scant. Furthermore, the research that does exist centers the majority experience that is Latinx students whose families work in the fields. Similarly, what is known about refugee-background students who attend college is also quite sparse (Museus, 2014a; Ramsay & Baker, 2019). In their recent literature review of studies on higher education and refugee-background students, Ramsay and Baker (2019) state, “Although the literature emphasizes that ‘refugees’ are not a homogenous group, there is general consensus that students from refugee backgrounds
have specific experiences that make access to and participation in higher education distinct for them” (p. 65). The lack of disaggregated demographic data by postsecondary institutions and the lack of scholarly research that makes distinctions between domestic students of color, immigrant-background students and refugee-background students have each contributed to a gap in what is known specifically about the educational experiences of refugee-background students (Museus, 2014a; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Tuliao et al., 2017).

While the research literature is relatively limited, findings on refugee-background students outside of the Migrant Education context do reflect some similarities with findings on Latinx children of migrant fieldworkers, as both student populations are more likely to be English language learners, have experienced hardship and trauma, have personal, familial and cultural characteristics outside of the white, middle-class norm, and have experienced systemic oppression due to those differences (Araujo, 2012; Delgado & Becker Herbst, 2018; Fuentes, 1975; Garza et al., 2004; McGinnis, 2015; McHatton et al., 2006; Museus, 2014; Tandon, 2016; Tuliao et al., 2017). At the same time, while research is clear that persons from refugee-backgrounds and/or agricultural labor backgrounds are likely to have experienced significant traumatic events and systemic oppressions, many current scholars who have studied their experiences argue that both system- and asset-based frameworks are also necessary for informing research, policy, and practice that have the ability to improve their access to better life outcomes (Araujo, 2012; Garza et al., 2004; McGinnis, 2015; McHatton et al., 2006; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Ramsay & Baker, 2019; Reyes III, 2009; Roy & Roxas, 2011; Shapiro & MacDonald, 2017; Tandon, 2016; Tuliao et al., 2017). Put another way, Shapiro and McDonald (2017) write that “key words such as trauma, victimization, and limited education” …are “not necessarily inaccurate, but tend to construct an incomplete account” (p. 80) that fails to recognize the
inherent strengths, capacities, resiliencies, and agency within persons from marginalized backgrounds. They further argue for an “asset discourse” that “emphasizes the resources and strategies that refugee-background persons employ toward their goals” (Shapiro & McDonald, 2017, p. 81). Researchers who seek to better understand the life experiences of both refugee-background students and students from migratory agricultural backgrounds are increasingly using an asset-based lens to frame their studies (Delgado & Becker Herbst, 2018; Garza et al., 2004; McGinnis, 2015; McHatton et al., 2006; Roy & Roxas, 2011; Shapiro & MacDonald, 2017). This asset and strengths-based lens in prior research was vital to this study, beginning with the theoretical framework that informed each stage of this dissertation design, implementation, and data analysis.

**Asset-Based Theoretical Frameworks**

I explored the strengths and capacities of refugee-background CAMP students specifically via the lens of two theoretical frameworks based in a critical epistemology: community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) and cultural capital (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Yosso’s (2005) theory of community cultural wealth emphasizes the importance of recognizing and embracing the cultural knowledge and practices that exist within marginalized communities and rejects viewing persons of color as lacking the necessary knowledge, abilities, and capitals (social and cultural) “required for social mobility” (p. 70). She further argued that Bourdieu’s initial concept of cultural capital was based on a white, middle-class standard and did not account for the many forms of accumulated and valuable knowledge, skills and abilities that persons of color utilize to “survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression” (Yosso, 2005, p. 77). Yosso argued that persons of color develop cultural wealth to benefit their communities through a variety of forms, including aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic,
familial, and resistant capital. The following provides a brief description of each form of capital, as defined by Yosso (2005):

1) Aspirational capital is defined as the ability to “maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers” (p. 77).

2) Linguistic capital refers to the intellectual and social skills one gains through being multilingual, as well as the communication styles via storytelling, visual art, music, and poetry.

3) Familial capital is defined as the cultural knowledge that exists within families, the importance of extended families, and the value of interdependence and connectedness.

4) Social capital refers to the social networks that communities of color utilize to share information and resources, lift each other, and provide mutual aid.

5) Navigational capital is defined as the skills and strategies used to navigate social institutions that were “not created with Communities of Color in mind” (p. 80).

6) Resistant capital refers to the knowledge and skill that comes from opposing and challenging subordination and injustice.

An increasing number of scholars who have explored the experiences of different communities of color have utilized Yosso’s community cultural wealth theory as a theoretical framework for their studies, including Kolano’s (2016) work on reinterpreting the concept of smartness as a form of cultural wealth among Asian immigrants, research by Pérez II (2014) on the ways in which Latino males utilize cultural wealth to navigate higher education, and research by Tuliao, Hatch, and Torraco (2017) that explored how educators fail to recognize and value the cultural capital within refugee communities. Yosso’s (2005) theory of community cultural wealth

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was a key theoretical framework for this study, as it provided a lens for the qualitative exploration of how CAMP students utilize varying forms of capital outside of the dominant, white-Eurocentric norm to be successful in their college endeavors.

Stanton-Salazar’s (1997) work on social capital also provided an important framework for the study. Social capital as theorized by Bourdieau (1986) is defined as the accumulated social connections and relationships that can be converted into material (socioeconomic) and symbolic gains. Lin and Smith (2001) further described social capital as the ways that social relationships with others influence persons who can provide recognition as having worth, access to important resources, and a flow of information and social credentials. Stanton-Salazar (1997) applied the concept of social capital to marginalized students of color, arguing educational systems perpetuate “toxic manifestations of institutionalized individualism” that emphasize “competition, self-sufficiency, autonomy, and meritocracy” (p. 31) and undermine help-seeking behavior, peer supports, and collaborative learning. He further argued that in response to systemic oppression, working-class students of color adopt a bicultural social network in order to influence powerful institutional agents to provide resources and support. As institutional agents, educators play a critical role in the educational trajectories of students of color (Stanton-Salazar, 1997; Uy et al., 2019). Stanton-Salazar’s application of social capital theory is key to one of this proposed study’s research questions - how do refugee-background CAMP students continue to develop and utilize social capital and unique sources of community cultural wealth to meet challenges and progress toward their goals of college degree attainment?

**Ecological Systems Framework**

I will further frame and organize the findings from prior scholarship on refugee-background and agricultural labor-background students by using an ecological systems
framework that reflects how individuals interact with and are impacted by varying levels of environments and systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1976; Teater, 2014). Teater (2014) describes ecological theory as a “person-in-environment” conceptual framework often utilized within the field of social welfare to understand that “individuals do not operate in isolation, but are influenced by the physical and social environments in which they live and interact” (p. 1). The ecological systems paradigm is also used within the fields of psychology and education, with much of the initial theory attributed to Urie Bronfenbrenner, a Russian-born American developmental psychologist (Bronfenbrenner, 1976, 1979).

Similar to ecology theories utilized within social welfare (Teater, 2014), Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (1976) has been utilized within education scholarship to understand how a person’s development and learning influences and is influenced by layers of systems that are nested within each other. Bronfenbrenner’s theory (1976) includes: the micro-system as the most immediate setting (e.g. one’s family, home, peers, and teachers); the meso-system as the combination of and interactions between two or more microsystems; the exosystem that consists of formal and informal social structures and societal institutions that indirectly influence the immediate environments (e.g. neighborhoods, parents’ workplaces, educational institutions, governmental agencies); and the macro-system, described as the overarching cultural, political, legal, and social systems. Figure 1 provides a visual depiction of how the remaining sections of this literature review will use ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Teater, 2014) to think about and organize prior research on how different environmental systems are related to the pre-college and college experiences of refugee-background CAMP students.
I now turn to exploring how researchers have described the history and experiences of refugees, focusing on the cultures and ethnicities that were represented in this dissertation study. These findings reflect both chronosystems defined as life experiences and macrosystems defined as overarching cultural, political, legal, and social systems that impact a student’s experience (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Teater, 2014).

Recent data reflect that the vast majority of seasonal, temporary, and migratory agricultural labor in fields, farms, and processing factories is being conducted by persons who
were born outside of the U.S. and who have a variety of immigration statuses. These include laborers with guest worker visas, unauthorized persons who came to the U.S. without inspection or overstayed their visas, and persons who immigrated to the U.S. with permanent legal status to include refugees resettled in the U.S. (Miroff, 2018; National Center for Farmworker Health, Inc., 2018; Stull, 2011). These distinct circumstances of relocation in the U.S. determine eligibilities for employment and public benefits and subsequently may carry differing psychological and social effects; however, whether in the U.S. as a refugee, permanent resident, or unauthorized person, many seek a home in the U.S. because of significant economic hardships, traumas or violence, political upheaval, or religious/ethnic discrimination in their countries of origin (Yakushko et al., 2008). Because the focus of this study is the experiences of CAMP students specifically from refugee-backgrounds, it is important to understand the contextual factors related specifically to refugee resettlement in the U.S. According to the U.S. Immigration and Nationality Act (1980) the United States defines a refugee as the following:

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

This legislation that defined refugee status for immigration purposes was enacted in direct response to the humanitarian crisis in Southeast Asia post-Vietnam War, and resulted in over half a million persons from Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and Hmong communities coming to the U.S. within a four-year period during the early 1980’s (Migration Policy Institute, 2013).
Since that time, the countries of origin of refugees have continually shifted to include large number of Soviet nationals in the 1990’s, persons from Somalia, Cuba and Laos in the early 2000’s, and more recently persons from Burmese, Bhutanese, Iraqi, Somali, and Congolese backgrounds (Krogstad, 2019). While these represent some of the largest refugee groups to come to the U.S. in the last 35 years, the current population also reflects over 60 nationalities and 162 languages (Capps et al., 2015).

Multiple reports demonstrate that the world is currently experiencing the largest refugee crisis in history, with ever increasing numbers of displaced persons living in refugee camps in underdeveloped countries that lack the resources to provide humane living conditions (Krogstad, 2019; United Nations, 2017; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2016). These conditions include lack of basic shelter, food, and clean water; high incidences of violence and sexual assault; limited access to health care and education; and minimal legal protections (de Bruijn, 2009; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2016). Further illustrating the crisis is the sobering reality that only 1% of displaced persons are actually being effectively and permanently resettled in a new country (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2016) because United Nations policies are limited to determining refugee status and providing temporary camp placement, but do not include requirements for countries to offer permanent resettlement. Subsequently, the average time spent in a “temporary” refugee camp worldwide is 20 years (Besteman Catherine, 2016; Krogstad, 2019; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2016).

While the United States has historically led the world in accepting refugees for resettlement, the current administration has drastically reduced the annual cap for accepting refugees from 110,000 in 2016 to 30,000 in 2019, the lowest cap since the program’s inception
in 1980 (Krogstad, 2019). Furthermore, those who are resettled in the U.S. continue to face a number of systemic challenges, including: prejudice and racism within unwelcoming communities (Ngo & Lee, 2007; Tandon, 2016; Vachon, 2013); decentralized, underfunded community supports that rely heavily on volunteer-based organizations (Capps et al., 2015; Vachon, 2013); and U.S. policy pressures to become quickly self-sufficient that result in the likelihood of taking low paying, manual labor and factory jobs, such as meatpacking and poultry processing (Capps et al., 2015; Stull, 2011; Vachon, 2013).

**Refugee Populations Represented in the Current Study**

Recent government reports, research findings, and journalism reports all indicate that the current demographic make-up of refugee-background families laboring in U.S. agriculture is largely Southeast Asian, Bhutanese, Burmese, Congolese, Somali, and Ethiopian (Boyer, 2019; Nebraska Migrant Education Program, 2016; Stull & Ng, 2016; World Herald Editorial, 2018). As students from many of these backgrounds were included in this study, it is important to understand their communities’ distinct experiences as chronosystems or changes over time that influence a student’s development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This next section will provide a brief overview of how persons from Southeast Asia, Bhutan, Burma, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo have come to the U.S. as refugees.

**Southeast Asian Refugees.** After the end of the Vietnam War, over 1 million Southeast Asian refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos fled their countries to escape Communist rule and were resettled in the U.S. between 1975 and 1994, with another 159,000 refugees resettling since 1994 (Kula & Paik, 2016). Over 66% of Southeast Asian refugees resettled in the U.S. have been Vietnamese, followed by 22% either Laotian or Hmong, and 12% Cambodian Khmer (Kula & Paik, 2016). Southeast Asian refugees came in three waves, with the first wave
being predominantly Vietnamese families from educated, professional and affluent backgrounds; however, the second wave and third waves included many subsistence farmers from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia who had lived for years in refugee camps before coming to the U.S. (Ngo & Lee, 2007). The second two waves of Southeast Asian refugees were more likely to have low English proficiency, limited formal education, and few labor skills outside of farming (Kula & Paik, 2016; Ngo & Lee, 2007). In their historical analysis of Southeast Asian refugees, Kula and Paik (2016) found that the Vietnamese refugee community, in particular, benefitted from the first wave of professionals who came to the U.S., as they created co-ethnic businesses and organizations, established social networks, pooled resources, and provided access to jobs for the Vietnamese refugees who came after them. In contrast, the Cambodian Kher, Hmong, and Laotian refugee communities did not have that same elite first wave to help create the same level of co-ethnic resources (Kula & Paik, 2016).

The majority of current college students from Southeast Asian refugee backgrounds (Vietnamese, Hmong, Cambodian, and Laotian) are 1.5 generation in the U.S., meaning the student was resettled in the U.S. at a young age, or second generation, meaning the student was born in the U.S. and has at least one parent born outside of the U.S. (Capps et al., 2015). The most recent U.S. census data show that 49% of Asian Americans earned a bachelor’s degree or higher; however, when the Asian American population data is disaggregated, one finds that less than 16% of Cambodian, Hmong, and Laotian Americans and 25% of Vietnamese Americans have a postsecondary degree (Uy et al., 2019). These statistics are important to this study, as they debunk the “model minority” myth that all Asian students are high achieving and therefore do not require systemic supports to ensure equitable access to education.

**Burmese Refugees: Karen and Chin.** Between 2008 and 2014, more than 100,000
ethnic minority refugees from Burma, also called Myanmar, were resettled across the U.S. after living for many years in Malaysia and Thailand refugee camps (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019). Burma is located in the western part of mainland Southeast Asia and is bordered by India, China, Laos and Thailand. Since becoming independent from British rule in 1948, Burma has experienced ongoing civil unrest, military rule, ethnic cleansing, and political repression (Aung et al., 2019; Tandon, 2016; Trieu & Vang, 2015). Since 1984, the Burmese army has driven out hundreds of thousands of persons from religious and ethnic minority groups, with the largest groups being the Karen and Chin (Barron et al., 2007; The National Center on Cultural and Linguistic Responsiveness, 2010). Most Karen and Chin refugees to the U.S. are Christian, but some may also be Buddhist or Muslim (The National Center on Cultural and Linguistic Responsiveness, 2010). Similar to other refugee-background persons, many Karen and Chin refugees spent an extended period in refugee camps before coming to the U.S. and had limited access to formal education (Barron et al., 2007). Burmese students have the highest high school dropout rate (44%) among Asians in the U.S., and 33% live below the poverty line (Tandon, 2016).

**Ethnic Nepalese from Bhutan.** Ethnic Nepalese, also known as Lhotsampas or people of the south, have lived in Bhutan since the late 1800’s, initially moving there to work in forest clearing (Trieu & Vang, 2015). In the 1980’s, the Bhutanese leadership was threatened by growing numbers of ethnic Nepalese and attempted to wipe out their cultural, linguistic, and religious practices, declaring a “One Bhutan, One People” policy (Roka, 2017, p. 101) that discriminated against Hindus from Nepali origins. After the Lhotsampas attempted to protest, the Bhutan government labeled them unlawfully present and used military force to remove them from the country (Capps et al., 2015; Roka, 2017; Trieu & Vang, 2015). The Nepali Bhutanese
(Lhotsampas) lived over 15 years in refugee camps in Nepal before being designated as eligible for permanent resettlement by the United Nations (Trieu & Vang, 2015). Approximately 85% of 100,000 ethnic Nepali Bhutanese refugees were resettled in the U.S. between 2008 and 2015 (Capps et al., 2015; Trieu & Vang, 2015). While in Bhutan, the Lhotshampa were restricted in their access to formal education, and subsequently, a large number of the adult community was illiterate (Benson et al., 2012; Brown, 2001). Research has shown that in comparison to other refugee communities in the U.S., Bhutanese adults are less likely to have formal education, especially those middle-aged and older (Capps & Newland, 2015). However, in contrast to the Chin and Karen refugees from Burma, the children of Bhutanese Nepali refugees have had more access to formal education while living in Nepal refugee camps (Brown, 2001).

Congolese Refugees. The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is the largest sub-Saharan country in Africa, with over 70 million people, 250 ethnic groups, and 700 different languages and dialects (Bureau of African Affairs, 2020; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016; Cultural Orientation Resource Center, 2014). Since gaining independence from Belgium in 1960, The DRC has experienced ongoing violence and conflict, especially during the last two decades with the most significant armed conflict known as Africa’s World War involving nine African countries and resulting in more than 3 million deaths (Bureau of African Affairs, 2020). Since then, continued violence has forced many Congolese to leave their homes in search of safety, with over 500,000 refugees fleeing to neighboring countries such as Uganda, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Burundi (Cultural Orientation Resource Center, 2014). Women in particular have been victims of rampant sexual violence throughout the conflict (Wachter et al., 2016). “Used as a weapon of war, [sexual and gender-based violence] is so common that human rights groups have called the eastern section of the DRC the most dangerous place is the world to be a woman”
Between 2008 and 2013, close to 11,000 Congolese refugees from 36 different countries were permanently resettled in the United States, with the largest groups initially settling in Texas (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016). Ninety-seven percent of Congolese refugees in the U.S. are Christian, and many point to their church communities as significant sources of support. “Religion plays an extremely important role in the lives of Congolese in general and refugees in particular. Religion is considered a refuge, a place of great comfort and peace that provides a solution to personal problems. Because of the important role of religion, religious leaders are highly respected” (Cultural Orientation Resource Center, 2014, p. 5).

With regards to their educational experiences, according to a recent report generated by the Center for Applied Linguistics (Cultural Orientation Resource Center, 2014), most Congolese adult refugees arrived in the U.S. with little to no English proficiency and have therefore been limited to finding only entry-level, low-paying jobs. While many Congolese refugees arriving in the U.S. reported having some formal education in DRC or in their countries of first asylum, about 20% of adults were not literate in their first language (Cultural Orientation Resource Center, 2014). A 2015 study by the Migration Policy Institute found that Congolese refugee youth were likely to not only have experienced limited and disrupted educational opportunities prior to coming to the U.S., but also language barriers, inadequate instructional quality, and discrimination in the formal school settings of their first asylum countries (Dryden-Peterson, 2015). Congolese refugees have faced significant trauma and upheaval, but research has also identified a number of cultural strengths within this newer U.S. community, including perseverance, resilience, interdependence, communal support, and strong religious beliefs (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016; Cultural Orientation Resource Center, 2014).
Many refugee communities were represented by the current and former CAMP students who participated in this study, including the Vietnamese, Hmong, Karen, Chin, Bhutanese, and Congolese ethnicities. It is important to have a general overview of the context of their histories prior to coming to the U.S., and the challenges they were likely to have faced once arriving as newly resettled refugees. Although this study’s purpose does not include delving into past trauma related to the refugee experience, ethical qualitative research with vulnerable populations requires that researchers be prepared with contextual and historical information that may present during interviews. I provide more detail regarding ethical considerations and trauma-informed research in Chapter Three that describes my research methods.

I now turn to scholarship on the macrosystem of the meatpacking industry. Providing an overview of the labor practices within meatpacking helps to contextualize refugee-background CAMP students’ reflections of their lived experiences as children of persons who have engaged in this work in the U.S.

**Agricultural Processing Workers and Communities**

A common perception of seasonal, temporary, and migratory agricultural workers is that the population solely consists of persons of Mexican or Central American descent working in the fields sowing and harvesting fruits and vegetables. However, although less visible, meat, dairy, and poultry processing industries were also included in the federal definition of temporary agricultural labor since the late 1980’s due to exceptionally high turnover rates in food processing factory work (Branz-Spall et al., 2003; Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2017). These large, industrial agricultural operations have relied on the labor of persons of color and newcomer immigrant or refugee populations starting in the early 1980’s – not only from México and Central America, but also more recently from Vietnam, Laos, Burma,
Bhutan, and African nations such as Somalia, Ethiopia, and the National Republic of the Congo (Eaton, 2013; Swanson, 2013). This study explored the experiences and perspectives of this latter minority population within the context of having participated in a College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP) - students from refugee backgrounds with a family history of agricultural labor that may have included meat and poultry processing. Therefore, it is useful to provide some historical information about the meatpacking industry, and the ways in which it has impacted the experiences of students and families from refugee backgrounds in the U.S.

Scholars point to industrialization and the use of the “disassembly” line as a key reason for the growth in immigrant and refugee labor in meatpacking, especially since the early 1980’s (Stull & Broadway, 1995). In the pursuit of cutting costs while increasing productivity and profits, the meatpacking industry took the skill out of butchering, replacing high skilled, high paid union meat cutters with fast moving factory lines that gave each worker responsibility for a single repetitive movement throughout the work shift (Stull & Broadway, 1995). A report published by Human Rights Watch (Compa, 2004) included multiple interviews with workers in meat and poultry processing plants that illustrated the harsh and dangerous working environments. One interviewed meatpacking worker told the following story:

The line is so fast there is no time to sharpen the knife. The knife gets dull and you have to cut harder. That’s when it really starts to hurt, and that’s when you cut yourself. I cut my hand at the end of my shift, around 10:30 at night. . . . I went to the clinic the next day at 11:00 a.m. They gave me stitches and told me to come back at 2:30 before the start of my shift to check on the stitches. They told me to go back to work at 3:00. I never stopped working (Compa, 2004, p. 35).

This report (Compa, 2004) further described how poultry processing was “even more
frenzied” with “line workers making more than 20,000 repetitive hard cuts in a day’s work” (p. 36) and one out of every seven workers injured on the job. Interviews with poultry plant workers also included the following descriptions: “The lines are too fast. The speed is for machines, not for people…you have to work the knife too hard. That’s when injuries happen” (p. 37). An example of injury reports documented by OSHA at one meatpacking plant within a four-year period included the following descriptions: “cleaner killed when hog-splitting saw is activated…cleaner dies when he is pulled into a conveyer and crushed…cleaner loses legs when a worker activates the grinder in which he is standing…cleaner loses hand when he reaches under a boning table to hose meat from chain…hand crushed in rollers when worker tries to catch a scrubbing pad that he dropped” (Omaha World-Herald as cited by Compa, 2004, p. 30).

Low wages, deteriorating working conditions, high injury rates, and high worker turnover rates have resulted in the meatpacking industry turning more and more toward immigrant communities of color to work their factory lines, especially persons from Mexico and other Latin American countries. As the U.S. tightened immigration from Latin American countries and conducted immigration raids in meatpacking plants, the industry then turned to new refugee groups for labor (Broadway, 2007; Stull & Broadway, 1995). Meatpacking labor recruitment practices have transformed not only meatpacking worker demographics where 70% are immigrants (Eaton, 2013), but also the racial, ethnic, cultural and linguistic makeup of surrounding communities and schools. For example, in their recent study of Garden City, Kansas, a town that reflects the demographics of many of the country’s rural meatpacking communities, Stull and Ng (2016) found that one in five residents were foreign born and 66% were persons of color. In the public school system of the same Kansas meatpacking town, 2016 data reflected that three quarters of their students were low-income students of color and half
qualified for English language learner (ELL) supports (Kansas State Department of Education, 2017; Stull & Ng, 2016).

Garden City’s student population is representative of many districts across the country that serve students whose families work in meat, poultry, and dairy industries: overwhelmingly low-income, 1st or 2nd generation immigrants or refugees to the U.S., persons of color, often English language learners, and representing a wide range of immigration statuses (Boyer, 2019; Fink, 1998; Grey, 1995; Stull, 2011; Swanson, 2013). Furthermore, as meatpacking communities continue to recruit new populations of workers, educational programs designed to support the academic success of their children, programs like English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and state Migrant Education Programs (MEPs) now support students from multiple countries of origin representing numerous cultures and languages (Cohen, 2017; Long, 2017; Stull & Ng, 2016). The next sections of this literature review will first explore the intersections between education levels, agricultural labor, and refugee-status, followed by contextual information about Migrant Education Programs designed to improve educational outcomes for their students.

**Education and Agricultural Laborers.** Macrosystems within ecological systems theory are defined as the social, political, and cultural systems and values that impact individuals, including political climates, laws, and governmental policies (Bronfenbrenner, 1976). Prior research on refugee-background students and agricultural-labor background students have explored how macrosystems such as anti-immigrant legislation and sentiments, societal stereotypes, governmental policies regarding refugee resettlement in the U.S., and poverty associated with agricultural labor can each have direct and indirect effects on student experiences in the U.S. (Araujo, 2012; Capps et al., 2015; Delgado & Becker Herbst, 2018; Garza et al.,
Furthermore, newly resettled refugees and immigrants with limited English proficiencies and minimal access to formal education have few opportunities for social mobility in the U.S. Being an agricultural laborer, whether in the fields or in the meatpacking plant, often means being part of the U.S. society’s working poor. (Fremstad et al., 2020; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019; National Center for Farmworker Health, Inc., 2018).

Migratory and seasonal labor is closely associated with generational poverty, with the most recent statistics reflecting that 71% of farmworkers fall below the poverty line (National Center for Farmworker Health, Inc., 2018). Within the meatpacking industry over 80% of frontline workers are non-white, almost half live in low-income families, and one in eight fall beneath the U.S. poverty line (Fremstad et al., 2020). High poverty rates among agricultural laborers are further associated with poor nutrition, poor health, limited health care, and children attending underfunded schools. In turn, these factors have been associated with lower academic outcomes, and ultimately lower college aspirations and completion (Coley & Baker, 2013; Green, 2003). Recent surveys reflect that 56% of migrant farmworkers have a 6th grade or lower education (Hernandez & Gabbard, 2018) and educational achievement gaps for their children continue to persist (Murphey, 2014; Nevárez-La Torre, 2012). The most recent national data provided by the U.S. Department of Education reflect that students served by their states’ Migrant Education Programs are still significantly less likely to score proficient in reading, language arts, and math than other marginalized student groups, including Hispanic students on a whole, English language learners, and low SES children (Meyertholen & Choudhary, 2019).

Migrant Education data is not disaggregated to reflect educational outcomes by types of agricultural labor nor by race/ethnicity (Meyertholen & Choudhary, 2019). Furthermore, the
existing body of research literature on students within the context of Migrant Education is relatively small and overwhelmingly centers the experiences of the majority - students from Latinx backgrounds whose families have worked in the fields. However, research on this majority population has found that multiple barriers exist to achieving educational goals, including learning a new language and new culture, often lacking literacy in the first language, frequent educational disruptions due to high mobility, the need to either work alongside parents in the fields or take care of siblings while their parents work, and existing in highly segregated racial and ethnic communities (Araujo, 2012; Branz-Spall et al., 2003; Cranston-Gingras et al., 2004; Cranston-Gingras & Anderson, 1990; Garza et al., 2004; Irizarry & Williams, 2013; McHatton et al., 2006; Mendez & Bauman, 2018; Nevárez-La Torre, 2012; Perry, 1997; Reyes III, 2009; Salinas & Fránquiz, 2004). In particular, high mobility combined with social isolation in neighborhoods and schools create further barriers to creating and maintaining social networks that help to 1) achieve integration into new communities, and 2) develop English language proficiencies (Nevárez-La Torre, 2012).

**Education and Refugee-Background Persons.** Conversely, little is known about the associations between labor in meatpacking and educational outcomes for refugee-background families. What is known about refugee-background students outside of the context of familial work in agriculture primarily comes from studies of persons from Southeast Asia, including Vietnamese, Cambodian, Hmong, and Laotian Americans (Museus, 2013, 2014a; Museus & Mueller, 2018; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Uy et al., 2019). Ngo and Lee (2007) provided an extensive review of research literature on the Southeast Asian population in the U.S. and argued that a “model minority myth” serves to exclude some Asian Americans from social and educational programs that support students from marginalized backgrounds. To reiterate, although recent
U.S. census data show that 49% of Asian Americans earned a bachelor’s degree or higher; Americans from Cambodian, Hmong, Laotian, and Vietnamese backgrounds demonstrate much lower educational outcomes (Uy et al., 2019).

In fact, there are vast differences in nations of origin, generational status, languages spoken, income levels, and educational outcomes among Asian-background students in the U.S. – differences that are not reflected when Asian Americans are portrayed in the aggregate (Museus, 2014a; Ngo & Lee, 2007). Multiple scholars point to the use of aggregated data as being a significant issue that: 1) inflates reports of educational outcomes; 2) masks inequitable outcomes for Southeast Asian students; and 3) reinforces the “model minority” stereotype (Museus, 2014a; Museus & Mueller, 2018; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Uy et al., 2019). Ngo and Lee (2007) argue that the model minority stereotype perpetuates the myth that all “Asian Americans are able to make it on their own without special assistance” (p. 415).

Research has also demonstrated that other newer refugee populations to the U.S. have experienced similar challenges in educational attainment as those from Southeast Asia. As stated earlier in this chapter, frequent educational disruptions, poverty, violence, lower rates of literacy in one’s first language, and a lack of access to a formal education while in refugee camps have each been significant challenges faced by Karen, Chin, Bhutanese Nepali, and Congolese refugees (Barron et al., 2007; Benson et al., 2012; Brown, 2001; Cultural Orientation Resource Center, 2014; Fremstad et al., 2020; Tandon, 2016). Upon arrival in the U.S., first-language literacy, English proficiency levels, and age have each been found to be particularly significant factors related to high school graduation rates, college-going rates, and upward mobility (Capps et al., 2015). For example, in an analysis of national data from 2009-2011, Capps et al. (2015) found that over half of newcomer adult (over 18 years of age) Bhutanese and Burmese refugees
lacked a high school degree and over 65% were living within 200 percent of the federal poverty level. Tandon (2016) also reported that Burmese students (including Karen and Chin ethnicities) had the highest high school dropout rate (44%) among Asians in the U.S. However, arriving in the U.S. at an earlier age has also been associated with higher educational outcomes for students from refugee backgrounds. A recent analysis of American Community Survey data found that Burmese and Hmong refugees who arrived in the U.S. as children were much more likely to graduate from high school, attend college, and complete a bachelor’s degree than those who arrived as adults (Kallick & Mathema, 2016). Each of the studies on educational outcomes of refugees in the U.S. included in this literature review have occurred outside of the context of familial agricultural labor. However, it is likely that these statistics are also relevant to the small subsection of refugee-background students whose families have worked in meatpacking and poultry processing.

As their parents and other family members have engaged in the difficult labor of agricultural processing in the U.S., refugee-background children have progressed through the K-12 system and received supports as English language learners. If they meet eligibility requirements and are successfully identified by their school districts, the children of agricultural workers also receive academic supports from the federally funded Migrant Education Program (MEP). A small percentage of those MEP students who continue beyond high school to pursue postsecondary education may be eligible to receive academic and financial supports from a federally funded College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP). The next section will provide historical contexts for these two programs, MEP and CAMP, that were specifically created to serve students from migratory, seasonal, and temporary agricultural labor backgrounds, including students who meet eligibility requirements and whose family members work in
meatpacking and poultry processing.

**History of Migrant Education.** Much of the published research on U.S. college students from seasonal, temporary, and migratory agricultural labor backgrounds has been conducted within the context of CAMP projects (Araujo, 2011, 2012; Cranston-Gingras et al., 2004; Mendez & Bauman, 2018; Ramirez, 2012; Willison & Jang, 2009; Zalaquett et al., 2007). Furthermore, CAMP projects located in four-year universities across the U.S. served as important sampling sites for this dissertation study as they were the most likely places to find potential undergraduate participants who had both a refugee-background and a family history of seasonal, temporary, or migratory agricultural labor. Therefore, it is important to understand the historical and current context of Migrant Education Programs and CAMP projects in the U.S. as systemic influences on the educational outcomes of their target populations.

On the day after Thanksgiving in 1960, CBS aired the documentary *Harvest of Shame* (Murrow, 1960) to place a spotlight on the appalling living and working conditions that migrant farmworker families endured. Murrow reported that migrant workers had the highest illiteracy rates and lowest education rates in the country, emphasizing “there is no case upon the record of a child of a migrant laborer ever receiving a college diploma.” (Murrow, as cited in Fallows, 2016, p. 1). During the same time period, Cesar Chávez and Dolores Huerta were organizing the United Farmworkers Union in the central valleys of California to combat unfair labor practices and inhumane working conditions, improve farm work conditions and pay, and include farmworkers in the opportunities and benefits afforded to other American workers (Barger & Reza, 1994; Tye, 2016).

Shortly thereafter, from 1966 to 1972, Congress established three educational programs aimed at changing the trajectory for migratory farmworkers and their children: the Migrant
Education Program (MEP) under Lyndon Johnson’s “war on poverty”, the High School Equivalency Program (HEP), and the College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP) (Branz-Spall et al., 2003; Garza et al., 2004). MEP is a Title 1 program that was created to address the educational challenges associated with poverty and constant mobility at the K-12 level and now consistently serves around 225,000 children annually across the country (Title I, Part C: 2016-2017, 2017). MEP provides a number of services to their students and families, including health screenings, transportation services, home visits, tutoring, teaching assistants, and summer school (Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2017; Perry, 1997).

Per federal regulations, a child is “migratory” and eligible for MEP services if: 1) the child made a qualifying move in the preceding 36 months as a migratory agricultural worker or to join a parent/guardian or spouse who is a migratory worker; and 2) the move was between school districts and due to economic necessity (Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2017). A child may also qualify for MEP supports under the definition of “temporary” agricultural labor (that typically occurs within meat and poultry processing) if: 1) again, a qualifying move occurred; and 2) their parent/guardian’s processing work is projected to last less than 12 months (Branz-Spall et al., 2003; Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2017). A student is eligible for MEP services for three years after a qualifying move for family labor in agriculture. If no more moves between school districts occur after that three-year period, eligibility for MEP services ends (Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2017).

It is important to note that neither race, language, nor nationality determines one’s eligibility for Migrant Education services (Branz-Spall et al., 2003); however, students from Mexican descent historically have made up the majority of those served by Migrant Education because their families continue to do the bulk of agricultural labor across the U.S. (Hernandez &
Gabbard, 2018; Thompson & Wiggins, 2002). Even so, MEP is not a homogenous program (Branz-Spall et al., 2003). As qualifying agricultural work has expanded from its fieldwork origins to add fishing labor in the 1970’s, and then slaughterhouse and other food processing labor in the mid 1980’s, MEP demographics in some regions have also changed to include the children of new immigrant and refugee families outside of Mexican and other Latin American backgrounds (Branz-Spall et al., 2003; Fallows, 2016; Nebraska Migrant Education Program, 2016; Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2018; Perry, 1997). However, with the exception of one research article on the experiences of MEP students from Cambodian Khmer backgrounds (McGinnis, 2015), my literature search for studies on students who have been served by Migrant Education has solely reflected the experiences of students from Latinx backgrounds.

MEP is a feeder program for the College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP), the only federal program specifically created to assist eligible students from temporary, seasonal, or migratory agricultural backgrounds make a successful transition to and through college (Bueno & Aduviri, 2015; Office of Migrant Education, 2012). Students who have been served in a K-12 Migrant Education Program are eligible to participate in CAMP if they are also U.S. citizens or permanent residents, are enrolled full-time in postsecondary education, and can demonstrate need for CAMP’s academic and financial supports (Office of Migrant Education, 2012).

Established in 1972, CAMP has maintained the same mission and basic program design since its origins - to provide intensive supports and services to eligible students so that they may successfully complete their first year of college and persist in post-secondary education (Branz-Spall et al., 2003). Starting with four initial projects in 1972, CAMP has remained a relatively small federal program, often targeted for cuts since inception (Fuentes, 1975; National Commission on Migrant Education, 1992; Perry, 1997; Rincón, 2008). The most recent attempt
at cutting CAMP by the Clinton administration was countered with a surge of activism and
lobbying by Migrant Education groups and allies that resulted in significant growth in CAMP
funding and an increase in the number of projects across the country (Heritage University, n.d.;
M. Kelley, personal communication, April 23, 2018; E. Yacono, personal communication, April
11, 2018). Current data show that 52 CAMP projects are now serving over 2,000 students across
the U.S. (Office of Migrant Education, 2019).

Unfortunately, not all students served by K-12 MEP, nor all students whose families have
labored in meat and poultry processing are eligible to receive CAMP postsecondary supports due
to different eligibility requirements between MEP and CAMP. First, as a result of the Supreme
Court decision in *Plyler v. Doe* (1982) that ruled all children in the U.S. have the right to a free,
K-12 public education, MEP is able to serve all students whose families meet the mobility and
agricultural labor criteria regardless of the students’ immigration status (Office of Elementary
and Secondary Education, 2017). However, this court decision did not extend to federally-funded
postsecondary education programs; therefore, students with unauthorized presence in the U.S.,
including DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) students who may have been served
by MEP in the public schools are not eligible for CAMP services within higher education (Office
of Migrant Education, 2012). Second, meat and poultry processing are not, by themselves,
qualifying work for CAMP participation, *unless* the student was previously served by MEP
(Office of Migrant Education, 2012).

Ultimately, Migrant Education programs like MEP and CAMP are meant to address the
educational challenges related to mobility and school interruption that frequently occur among
families who provide U.S. agricultural labor; therefore, the addition of meatpacking and other
agricultural processing labor as qualifying work for K-12 MEP has been contentious because it is
the temporary nature of this work (not migratory) that qualifies students for services (Branz-Spall et al., 2003). However, because the populations who work in meatpacking are overwhelmingly from immigrant and refugee backgrounds, their children continue to have a number of other challenges to progressing in education including ongoing poverty, low parental education levels, limited English proficiency, and systemic barriers within educational systems (Fallows, 2016; Grey, 1995; McGinnis, 2015; Stull & Ng, 2016).

As previously noted, the context and history of MEP and CAMP are salient to this dissertation research because these two programs were specifically created to support the success of students from migratory, seasonal, and temporary agricultural labor backgrounds and served as vehicles for recruiting undergraduate students as participants. Also, while limited in volume and mostly centered on the majority Latinx experience, much of the research conducted on students from agricultural labor backgrounds has been within the context of their participation in MEP and/or CAMP (Araujo, 2012; Branz-Spall et al., 2003; Cranston-Gingras et al., 2004; Cranston-Gingras & Anderson, 1990; Garza et al., 2004; Irizarry & Williams, 2013; McGinnis, 2015; Mendez & Bauman, 2018; Nevárez-La Torre, 2012; Perry, 1997; Reyes III, 2009; Salinas & Fránquiz, 2004).

**Educational Program Impacts**

I now shift to discussing relevant studies not only on the impact of Migrant Education Programs and CAMP, but also on the impact of other educational programs as they relate to refugee-background students and students from agricultural labor backgrounds. Using the ecological systems framework as an organizational tool (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Teater, 2014), the following section will discuss relevant literature on the systemic impacts that educational policies, programs, and personnel have on students’ educational experiences. These will include
the macrosystems of national and state policy, the exosystem that includes local community schools and educational programming, and the mesosystem that includes interactions between students, their families, and educational personnel.

**Impacts of K-12 Programs.** Laws and policies such as English-only rules, barring or limiting bilingual education, reduction in funds for ESOL instruction, and barriers to postsecondary access for undocumented/unauthorized students each have had a negative impact on educational access and success for refugee-background and agricultural labor-background students (Delgado & Becker Herbst, 2018; Nevárez-La Torre, 2012; Perry, 1997). At the same time, a number of qualitative and descriptive studies have also explored the ways in which educational environments and programs can provide effective academic supports for English language learners, refugee-background students, and students served by Migrant Education. Nevárez-La Torre’s (2012) literature review of K-12 Migrant Education programs that serve English language learner students suggested that a number of systemic factors have the ability to better support students’ academic success, including educational leadership that views “linguistic and cultural diversity as resources to develop, not as problems to overcome” (p. 22), ongoing access to ESOL professional development for teachers, coordination for accessing migrant student records and providing credits across states, expanded lengths of ESL and bilingual education courses, and extended school (i.e., before and after school, summer programming) to bolster language and content development.

Pre-college programming targeting historically marginalized student populations has also been linked to improving academic outcomes for refugee-background students and students whose families work in agriculture. For example, a recent study by Uy et al. (2019) found that Southeast Asian American students who participated in a pre-college TRIO Talent Search
program learned how to navigate the college application and choice process because of the guidance and support they received. Similarly, Nuñez (2009) found that students who participated in a month-long pre-college Migrant Education program were twice as likely as a comparison group to apply to California’s top tier of public institutions. These findings on the impact of ESOL teacher professional development, bilingual education, extended school programming, and federally-funded projects such as TRIO and Migrant Education services are relevant to the current dissertation study as they provide examples of educational macrosystems and exosystems that can serve as important sources of educational supports, social capitals, and cultural capitals and positively impact refugee-background CAMP students’ pre-college and college experiences.

**Impacts of K-12 Educators as Institutional Agents.** Research has also demonstrated that at the micro- and meso-system levels, secondary-level educators (faculty, instructors, administrators, and staff) have the potential to serve as key institutional agents (Museus & Mueller, 2018) who have the ability to provide important college information, access to educational resources, and recognition as being college material (Garza et al., 2004; Museus & Mueller, 2018; Nevárez-La Torre, 2012; Perry, 1997; Roy & Roxas, 2011; Stull & Ng, 2016). However, several research studies also reveal that students from agricultural labor backgrounds continue to interact with school personnel who hold low expectations of them (Garza et al., 2004; McGinnis, 2015; Nevárez-La Torre, 2012; Perry, 1997). In their ethnographic study of three adults who grew up in migrant farmworker families, Garza et al. (2004) found that each participant described experiences with school personnel who told them they were not “college material” (p. 85) or prevented them from enrolling in advanced courses because despite good grades, their standardized test scores were not considered high enough. Migrant Education
students have also perceived that few teachers understood their lived experiences and backgrounds or were willing to do whatever it took to help them succeed in the classroom (Irizarry & Williams, 2013).

In her ethnographic study of the ways a MEP teaches citizenship to Khmer Cambodian refugees, McGinnis (2015) found that program staff had a lack of faith in their students’ abilities and described them as self-destructive, hopeless, at risk, and vulnerable and “centered on the perceived deficiencies of the youth, which needed to be corrected for their potentials to be achieved” (p. 5). Roy and Roxas (2011) found that ESL teachers of Somali Bantu refugee-background students expressed intentions of wanting to help them be successful, but placed any lack of success on perceived deficits of the children and families, for example: behavioral issues, lack of intrinsic motivation, poor attitudes, and perceiving a lack of valuing education within the Somali Bantu culture. These authors argued, “while attitude and motivation are, in many ways, temporal characteristics that can be the result of a particular situation or environment, they are often assigned to marginalized populations as permanent deficiencies” (Roy & Roxas, 2011, p. 531). Furthermore, McHatton et al. (2006) found that students may take on these types of deficit beliefs held by educators, contributing to low self-efficacy, self-doubt, and lack of academic confidence. Given these findings, a primary goal of this dissertation study was to provide a space for counter-story telling, one that provided a space for refugee-background students with family histories in agricultural labor to speak about their experiences and explore the ways in which their families, cultures, and communities have been assets toward their college journeys.

It is important to note that research has also shown how key interactions with educators can have a positive impact on refugee and migrant youths’ self-perceptions, school engagement, and educational outcomes. Garza et al. (2004) contend that educators are most effective when
they implement a “pedagogy of hope” that recognizes the strengths and capacities of Migrant Education students and connect their students’ “culture, language, and cognition as the foundation to acquire knowledge” (p. 147). Characteristics of educators who have had a positive influence include those who: are from similar backgrounds (Museus & Mueller, 2018; Perry, 1997); have high regard for migrant and refugee-background students and believe they can meet high expectations (Garza et al., 2004; Museus & Mueller, 2018; Perry, 1997; Stull & Ng, 2016); spend time learning about students’ strengths (Roy & Roxas, 2011); advocate for students and families within school systems and provide personalized support and guidance (Cranston-Gingras et al., 2004; Garza et al., 2004; Reyes III, 2009); and who have the training to effectively teach English language learners (Nevárez-La Torre, 2012; Roy & Roxas, 2011; Stull & Ng, 2016). Research findings by Roy and Roxas (2011) further found that teachers who had ESOL training and expertise were less likely to engage in deficit language. These findings are important to this study as they reinforce the relevance of asset-based research and pedagogy and critical epistemologies that challenge dominant white, Euro-centric ideologies (Delgado Bernal, 2002). Furthermore, this prior research demonstrates the impact individual K-12 educators can have on the educational trajectories of students from marginalized backgrounds at the micro- and meso-system levels.

**Impacts of Postsecondary Systems and Educators.** Once students from agricultural labor backgrounds enter college, the research on their interactions with educational systems are typically contextualized within their participation in a College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP) (Araujo, 2012; Cranston-Gingras et al., 2004; McHatton et al., 2006; Reyes III, 2009; Salinas & Reyes, 2004; Willison & Jang, 2009). This contextualization is logical, as CAMP is the only educational program specifically designed to support college access and success for
students from migratory, seasonal, or temporary agricultural labor backgrounds (Bueno & Aduviri, 2015). Research shows that CAMP projects support student success during the first year in college by providing navigational supports (Araujo, 2011; Cranston-Gingras et al., 2004), academic supports through tutoring (Cranston-Gingras et al., 2004), and the development of migrant students’ sense of agency and empowerment through “key interactions” with CAMP staff, students, and others from similar backgrounds (Reyes III, 2009, p. 107). I could find no prior studies that explored the experiences of refugee-background students specifically within a CAMP context. Therefore, I will now point to studies that have explored refugee-background student experiences within the larger context of postsecondary education.

Museus et al. (2016) found that Southeast Asian students valued physical campus spaces that allowed for connections with others from similar backgrounds, courses and student organizations that centered their identities and life experiences, and opportunities to give back to their own communities within the college setting. In their literature review and practice brief, Tuliao et al. (2017) contended that cultural competence among college faculty, staff, and administrators is vital to refugee students’ engagement. They found that actions conveying cultural competence included exploring and validating students’ experiences, identities, and cultural wealth to better understand both challenges and strengths; creating space for ongoing communication and interaction with refugee-background students; and providing professional development for key institutional agents (Tuliao et al., 2017). In another study, Museus and Mueller (2018) found that a number of postsecondary educator attributes had a positive impact on the development of social capital in refugee-background students, including being from similar backgrounds, utilizing proactive and humanizing approaches, and role modeling passion and success. Finally, in their literature review and meta-scoping study of refugee-background
students in higher education, Ramsay and Baker (2019) found that refugee-background students need access to “tailored academic, social, and practical support throughout the process of applying to and studying in higher education contexts” and “help learning the tacit norms of university life” (p. 67). These prior findings from both CAMP studies and studies on refugee-background college students are important to this dissertation study, as they provide insight into potential sources of social capital and holistic supports within postsecondary settings.

**Familial and Cultural Impacts on Educational Goals**

Qualitative researchers have also explored the roles that both agricultural labor-background families and refugee-background families play in their children’s educational pursuits. Although family members from both communities may not be familiar with the culture of college (Cabrera & Padilla, 2004) nor be able to help navigate the specific steps to and through college (Graff et al., 2013; McHatton et al., 2006), refugee-background and agricultural labor-backgrounds students point to family as core to their postsecondary goals. First, both populations of students have indicated that a key motivator for attending college is to have a better life for themselves and for their families (Garza et al., 2004; McHatton et al., 2006; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Zalaquett et al., 2007) and potentially for those in their communities who are still living in their countries of origin or refugee camps (Jack et al., 2019). This cultural orientation valuing interdependence has been found among both populations of students, and includes family unity, responsibility to family, and cooperation for the good of the family (Delgado & Becker Herbst, 2018; Garza et al., 2004; McHatton et al., 2006; Moinolmolki, 2019; Ngo & Lee, 2007).

Research has also shown that both migrant farmworker families and refugee-background families may instill cultural values that are beneficial in college, including a strong work ethic,
persistence, courage, resilience, and sacrifice (Garza et al., 2004; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Roy & Roxas, 2011). Roy and Roxas (2011) found that parents of Somali Bantu students spoke often about the importance of doing well in school and used storytelling as a method of providing guidance for life and school, for instilling hope and encouragement, and for emphasizing the importance of an education. In their literature review on Southeast Asian student research, Ngo and Lee (2007) also found that a number of familial and cultural factors support educational attainment, including an emphasis on educational achievement as a route out of poverty, viewing education as an investment in the future to benefit the whole family, and the value of a strong work ethic. Finally, both Latinx migrant and refugee-background students who are successfully navigating college point to the support, care, and encouragement their families provide, along with high expectations and a sense of hope for the future (Garza et al., 2004; Museus, 2013; Roy & Roxas, 2011).

At the same time, both student populations also confront familial and cultural factors that serve as challenges to educational achievement. For refugee-background students, although they may have access to formal education and avenues for learning English, often times their parents and older family members do not (Capps & Newland, 2015; Tandon, 2016). Refugee-background parents and older family members are also more likely to have low educational attainment, low English proficiency, high incidences of trauma, physical and mental health concerns, and more likely to be employed in manual labor with little hope for socioeconomic mobility (Capps et al., 2015; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014, 2019; Tandon, 2016). Therefore, although older family members may be supportive of their children’s academic pursuits, they are also more likely to ask their children to take on multiple family responsibilities that compete with their studies, including navigating U.S. systems, translating, caring for siblings
and older family members, and working to help support the family (Delgado & Becker Herbst, 2018; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Tandon, 2016).

Similarly, Graff et al. (2013) conducted a case study of six non-traditional Latina students from migratory farm work backgrounds and found their participants perceived varying degrees of support from their family members. Their respondents discussed the challenges of traditional norms and expectations for women, and that although their families wanted them to have access to better lives, they did not always understand how a college education was beneficial. These prior research findings help to inform the ways that familial and community ties, norms, and responsibilities have the potential to impact the pre-college and college experiences of both refugee-background and agricultural-labor backgrounds students. It is important to recognize the challenges that may be connected to refugee-background CAMP students’ family and cultural backgrounds; however, of equal if not more importance to this dissertation research is the ways in which family members have had a positive impact on their students’ educational trajectories.

**Individual Factors**

In the Graff et al. study (2013), although the female students described varying levels of familial support, they also described ways of utilizing individual strengths toward academic success, including personal drive and a strong internal locus of control. Other researchers have also identified individual qualities within Latinx Migrant Education students that helped them succeed in college, including knowledge developed through working alongside family members in the fields (Araujo, 2012), positivity, goal directedness, and resiliency (Garza et al., 2004), a strong bicultural identity, being proactive, and self-discipline (Zalaquett et al., 2007). Similarly, research on refugee-background college students have also found that when researchers purposefully use an asset lens, findings support the existence of many individual strengths and
capacities, including agency, resilience, resourcefulness, self-advocacy (Shapiro & MacDonald, 2017), high aspirations (Ramsay & Baker, 2019), a strong work ethic, kinship, and cooperation over individualism (Ngo & Lee, 2007). This scholarship on individual factors reinforces the environmental systems approach that explores how interactions with multiple layers of nested systems can influence individual traits and impact educational trajectories (Bronfenbrenner, 1976; Teater, 2014).

**Literature Review Summary**

The purpose of this chapter was to provide an overview of the theoretical frameworks, prior research literature, and contextual historical information that has informed this dissertation study. I first provided a description of both ecological systems and asset-based approaches to conducting research with marginalized populations, with an emphasis on the two theories that provided the theoretical framework for this study - community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) and social capital (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). I then used ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1976; Teater, 2014) as an organizational tool and a vehicle for recognizing systemic sources of cultural and social capitals. I have described how prior research on both refugee-background and agricultural labor-background students have demonstrated that a number of systems interact to impact educational outcomes, including socioeconomics, sociopolitical climates, educational systems, interactions with educators, culture, family, and individual student attributes. I began by providing contextual information about the refugee experience and the meatpacking industry as well as the reasons why refugee-background families are a growing source of labor in food processing. Because there is a paucity of research on refugee-background students connected to agricultural labor in the U.S., I provided a brief overview of how refugee-background students have distinct histories and experiences within the U.S. immigrant population, with an emphasis
on those from Southeast Asia, Burma, Bhutan, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. I then provided relevant educational contexts by discussing MEP and CAMP, two educational programs specifically created to support the success of students whose families have worked in seasonal, temporary, or migratory agriculture. These two programs, especially CAMP, are important to my dissertation research because they served as sampling sites for finding students who were both from refugee-backgrounds and familial agricultural labor backgrounds. Finally, I provided an overview of important research that has explored the ways that educational programs, educators as institutional agents, family members, and individual attributes have served as sources of social and cultural capitals, and impacted the educational outcomes of students within Migrant Education and refugee-background students. Because this study is interested in exploring these factors using an asset-based lens, I included a number of studies that explored the ways that these different systems have had a positive impact on students’ educational experiences and trajectories. I now turn to describing the research methods I employed in this study, giving a detailed description of how I explored the pre-college and college experiences of refugee-background CAMP students using qualitative inquiry.

**Chapter III: Research Design**

The purpose of this study is to explore the educational experiences of refugee-background undergraduate students who have participated in a College Assistance Migrant Program due to their family history in seasonal, temporary, or migratory agricultural labor in the U.S. Prior scholarship on this student population and professional practice among K-12 MEPs and postsecondary CAMP projects overwhelmingly center the experiences of children from the agricultural labor majority who are Latinx persons working in U.S. fields planting and harvesting crops (Araujo, 2011; Garza et al., 2004; Graff et al., 2013; McHatton et al., 2006; Mendez &
Bauman, 2018; Ramirez, 2012; Zalaquett et al., 2007; Zarate et al., 2017). However, meat, dairy, and poultry production and processing industries are increasingly recruiting and employing persons from waves of new refugee populations, most recently persons from Southeast Asia, Burma, Nepal, Ethiopia, and other African nations (Broadway, 2007; Gilhooly & Lynn, 2015; Isik-Ercan, 2011; Stull, 2011; Stull & Ng, 2016). This study utilized qualitative inquiry to learn more about their particular perspectives and experiences, especially the ways that they described developing and utilizing social capital (Stanton-Salazar, 1997) and community cultural wealth outside of the white, middle-class normative (Yosso, 2005) in relation to their postsecondary education pursuits. In particular, this study is interested in how social capital and community cultural wealth acquired through interactions with one’s environment help refugee-background students to (a) access post-secondary education; (b) navigate differing cultural norms and expectations between their families, home communities and their campus communities; and (c) progress through their undergraduate studies. The research questions this study seeks to answer are:

1) How do refugee-background CAMP students describe and make sense of their families, cultural backgrounds and key relationships as they relate to their experiences in college preparation, choice and enrollment?

2) What challenges do refugee-background CAMP students describe in relation to their experiences pursuing a degree at four-year universities?

3) How do refugee-background CAMP students continue to develop and utilize social capital and unique sources of community cultural wealth to meet challenges and progress toward their goals of college degree attainment?
Jones, Torres and Arminio (2014) contend that qualitative inquiry has two overarching purposes: “to illuminate and understand in depth the richness in the lives of human beings and the world in which we live” and “to use new understanding for emancipating practices” (p. 11). My goal with this study is to center the experiences and perspectives of students from both refugee and agricultural labor backgrounds and who are attending four-year universities, a student population that has received very little attention in prior research literature. Although Delgado-Bernal’s critical research (2002) and Yosso’s work on community cultural wealth (2005) centered the experiences of Latinx students, I argue that their theoretical lenses are applicable to other marginalized student populations as well. With the influence of prior critical scholarship that has explored the experiences of students from many different racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Museus, 2014; Roy & Roxas, 2011; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001; Tandon, 2016; Yosso, 2005), I sought to engage with college students from refugee and agricultural backgrounds as “holders and creators of knowledge” despite the ongoing reality that their “histories, experiences, cultures, and languages” are often “devalued, misinterpreted, or omitted in formal educational settings” (Delgado Bernal, 2002, p. 106).

The purpose of this research is not to explore causation between students’ cultural wealth and social capital and educational outcomes, nor to generalize findings to other students or educational settings. Instead, the purpose is to develop a deeper, more nuanced understanding of their unique perspectives and experiences to inform student-focused practice that acknowledges and centers cultural and community strengths and capacities. To that end, this chapter will describe the qualitative research design to include the epistemologies that situated the research, the methodology, research methods, my positionality as researcher, site and participant selection, and the data analysis procedures. I will then discuss the strategies I used toward achieving
trustworthiness and describe the important ethical issues I considered in relation to conducting research with vulnerable populations.

**Constructivist and Critical Epistemologies**

This study is situated between two epistemologies: constructivist and critical theory. A constructivist epistemology believes that reality and knowledge are not objective entities, but rather co-constructed and interpreted on multiple levels between the researcher, the participants, and the readers (Jones et al., 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Constructivists value the perspective of participants and believe that while the nature of truth lies within the individual, “knowledge and meaning are always partial, conditional, and perspectival with no possibility of timeless and universal knowledge” (Pascale, as cited by Jones et al., 2014).

The goal of constructivist qualitative research is to provide an emic, or insider voice to describing and understanding perspectives and experiences; but an important caveat to note is the existing tension between the emic or insider perspectives of participants and etic or outsider perspectives of the researcher (Olive, 2014). I recognize that by choosing a qualitative approach to exploring the experiences of this particular population of college undergraduate students, I inherently served as an active instrument (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) in making and communicating meaning from the students’ shared narratives. As a white researcher born and raised in the United States who is interested in the experiences and perspectives of CAMP students of color from refugee backgrounds, I continually strove to attend to this emic/etic tension through reflecting on how my lived experiences and positionality may have biased my interpretations. I will provide more detail regarding the strategies I used for minimizing researcher bias in the sub-sections that attend to positionality, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations.
My goal was to also situate this proposed study within a critical epistemology that a) acknowledges and values methods of knowing held by persons who hold multiple, intersecting marginalized identities; and b) believes them to be “holders and creators of knowledge outside of the dominant, Euro-American epistemology” (Delgado Bernal, 2002, p. 107). Critical research recognizes the significance of story and storytelling by marginalized persons and positions the meanings they build from their life experiences within social, historical, and political contexts (Berry & Bowers Cook, 2018). Utilizing a critical epistemology helped me to recognize and challenge dominant (white, Euro-centric) ideologies, situate the students’ lived experiences within current societal and educational structures, and raise critical consciousness with the ultimate purpose of being social-justice and practice-oriented (Jones et al., 2014).

**Basic Interpretive Interview Study**

Because this study is situated within a constructivist paradigm and seeks to understand the lived experiences of the participants, I chose to employ a basic, interpretive interview study methodology (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), a basic interpretive study is (a) grounded in the belief that knowledge is being continually constructed as people engage in and make meaning of their life experiences; and (b) seeks to investigate: “how people interpret their experiences; how they construct their worlds; and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (p. 24). A basic interpretive interview study aligned well with my goal to understand the experiences and mean-making of members of a specific population of undergraduate students who are attending four-year universities and who hold a number of marginalized identities including being first-generation college students with high-financial need, students of color from refugee backgrounds, and who have a family history of agricultural labor. More specifically, an interpretive interview methodology allowed for a better understanding of
their pre-college and college experiences using the theoretical lenses of cultural capital wealth (Yosso, 2005), non-dominant social capital (Museus & Mueller, 2018; Stanton-Salazar, 1997) and critical race theory in relation to refugee-background student experiences (Museus, 2014; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Roy & Roxas, 2011; Tandon, 2016).

Methods

The following section will describe the research methods I used to conduct the study, beginning with a description of how I selected research settings. Next, I will discuss sampling methods and the strategies I used for identifying and selecting students to participate in the study. Finally, I will describe the data collection procedures I utilized and how I addressed matters of positionality, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations.

Selection of Settings. To choose relevant settings for the study, I searched for four-year universities that have active CAMP projects, as these federally-funded projects actively recruit and support students from temporary, seasonal, and migratory agricultural labor backgrounds during their freshman year of college (Office of Migrant Education, 2018). My specific goal was to find CAMP projects with racial and ethnic heterogeneity among their student populations in order to center the experiences of refugee-background students from agricultural labor backgrounds who were progressing in their undergraduate studies. As described in the introduction and literature review chapters, the vast majority of the existing CAMP projects across the country serve student populations that are overwhelmingly, if not wholly Latinx; however, a small number of projects are now also serving students from refugee backgrounds, as their families are increasingly recruited to work in meat and poultry feedlots, farms, and processing plants. As a CAMP administrator myself and a member of a national professional organization for Migrant Education personnel, I knew of several projects in the region that had
the potential for serving students from refugee backgrounds. To find other four-year university sites that also served the specific student demographic I was seeking, I began outreach to other CAMP administrators across the country by phone and email. My site selection criteria included existing CAMP projects situated in four-year universities that had served students of color from refugee backgrounds. Six CAMP administrators replied to my outreach, representing sites from regions across the U.S., including the Mountain West, the Great Plains, the Northeast, and the South. Of those six CAMP projects who responded, I ultimately was able to include eight refugee-background students from four different universities.

**Selection of Participants.** In describing my process for selecting research participants, I intentionally avoid the term “sampling” as it “implies the purpose of representing a population” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 88). This study’s purpose is neither representativeness nor generalizability, but rather the deep exploration of pre-college and college experiences among students of color from refugee and agricultural labor backgrounds as they relate to cultural wealth and social capital, with the ultimate goal of building “knowledge to increase sensitivity to a population and create better student-focused practice and policy” (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011, p. 152). For this reason, purposive selection of participants was appropriate, as it allowed me to better represent CAMP demographic heterogeneity (Maxwell, 2013) at four-year universities, as well as explore information-rich cases who had the “greatest potential for generating insight” (Jones et al., 2014, p. 107) about social and cultural capital outside of the Euro-white normative. Purposive selection is described by Jones et. al. (2014) as deliberately seeking and selecting participants who have the potential to provide rich information and who have the context and experience related to one’s phenomenon of interest. The criteria for participant selection included students who (a) identified as a first-generation college student of color from a refugee background; (b) were a
current or former CAMP student with a family history of seasonal, temporary, or migratory agricultural work; and (c) were currently attending a four-year public university. As previously noted, I was interested specifically in the experiences of CAMP students outside of the Latinx demographic, as their cultural, linguistic, and ethnic diversity reflects a small, but growing Migrant Education population that currently come from African, Nepalese, Southeast Asian, and Burmese descents.

To gain access to students who met the specified criteria for this study, I asked project directors from the federal CAMP projects to serve as gate keepers and key informants (Jones, 2014). The directors identified current and former CAMP students at their institutions who met my intended selection criteria, agreed to provide introductions via email, and if students agreed to participate, reserved rooms at their institutions for in-person or videoconference interviews to take place. Students who were interested in participating in the study responded to the email introductions and provided their contact information for reviewing informed consent and scheduling interviews. Initial conversations with the CAMP directors at the selected four-year university sites indicated that I would have a potential pool of 13 students who met the target criteria. Of those 13 CAMP students who were contacted about the study, 8 agreed to participate and engaged in two interviews over the course of a month. Across the sample, the demographic profile included four males and four females, three current first-year students who were enrolled in their first semester of college and five former CAMP students. Seven students were first-generation immigrants to the U.S. and one was second-generation, representing a total of five countries of origin. Again, pseudonyms are used to protect the students’ confidentiality. Table 1 provides a brief demographic overview of the current and former CAMP students who participated in the study.
Table 1

**Demographic Profile of Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Years in College</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Years in U.S.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Huy</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gina</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Nepali Bhutanese</td>
<td>.5</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imay</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Nepali Bhutanese</td>
<td>.5</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paw</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Karen Burmese</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aung</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Karen Burmese</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christina</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Chin Burmese</td>
<td>.5</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Congolese</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mai Bao</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Hmong</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Interview Protocol.** To engage in the exploration of the CAMP students’ pre-college and college experiences, I conducted two semi-structured interviews to encourage narrative storytelling from each participant (Berry & Bowers Cook, 2018; Jones et al., 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Schultze & Avital, 2011). The semi-structured interview protocol included two separate interviews with each participant that were conducted in-person, by phone, or via video conferencing. The first interview included open-ended questions designed to learn more about (a) the students’ cultural, familial, and community backgrounds; and (b) their pre-college experiences to include their college aspirations, preparations, family supports, and sources of social capital. The second interview included follow-up questions from the first meeting, followed by additional open-ended questions on their more recent experiences as college undergraduates at their respective universities. The second interview explored students’ sense of
belonging on their campuses, challenges that they had faced, and the ways that they described their backgrounds (cultural capital) and connections with others (social capital) as tools for navigating their undergraduate experiences.

Qualitative method scholars encourage engaging in a pilot study prior to conducting a full study in order to test out data collection procedures, refine interview protocols, and modify conceptual frameworks based on what one learns from pilot study participants’ story telling (Maxwell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yazan, 2015). To this end, I conducted a pilot study with three students who had participated in a CAMP first-year program at one of the proposed campus sites, combining all research questions into one interview. From this experience, I learned that it was challenging to explore the students’ lived experiences and perspectives adequately in one interview session, and therefore extended the data collection procedures to include two interviews with each participant. This allowed more time and space to generate rich accounts of the students’ experiences in order to reach beyond superficial layers and generate shared meaning and understanding (Schultze & Avital, 2011).

Schultze and Avital’s (2011) exploration of what constitutes rich description is particularly useful for framing this study’s interview process. They argued that rather than eliciting facts, the goal of a qualitative interview is to engage in “an exchange of views between two people” (p. 2) with the purpose of construct meaning using “socially-constructed accounts that people give as they make sense of their world” (p. 5). In preparing for my role as the interviewer, I followed their guidance and sought to be an active listener who asked participants to describe their lived experiences and their personal involvement in actual events in order to avoid “abstractions and generalities” (Schultze & Avital, 2011, p. 5). Using guidance from other scholars in qualitative methods as well (Castillo-Montoya, 2016; Jacob & Furgerson, 2012; Jones
et al., 2014), I developed an interview protocol to include: beginning and ending scripts, a limited number of pre-established open ended questions that would allow participants flexibility in responding, and then more specific, pointed questions that were aligned with my research questions and invited participants to describe their familial and cultural backgrounds and important relationships in relation to their pre-college and college experiences. The interview protocol is included as an appendix.

Data Analysis

Maxwell (2013) encourages qualitative researchers to begin the data analysis process by reviewing all data before beginning the analysis process. With each CAMP student’s informed consent, I recorded and transcribed every interview. Prior to engaging in the transcription process, I listened to the audio recording of each interview soon after completion and began making notes of ideas and themes that emerged. Maxwell writes that this process of listening to recordings and making notes and memos, prior to transcription, allows the researcher to begin to develop “tentative ideas about categories and relationships” (2013, p. 105).

After listening to the audio recording and making preliminary notes after each interview, I listened again while making edits to each transcription to ensure they accurately reflected the audio files. Once I believed the transcriptions to be as accurate as possible, I began an open coding process (Gibbs, 2007). The initial open coding process involved describing the what, who, and when that was relayed by the participants during their interviews, coding in small sections of one to three sentences each. This open coding process as described by Gibbs (2007) helped me stay as true to the data as possible, while minimizing imposed interpretations based on pre-existing theory. The open coding process resulted in over 100 codes across the 16 interviews, so following the guidance of Rubin and Rubin (2012), I next engaged in the process
of grouping and organizing the codes hierarchically, moving from less inclusive categories to more inclusive ones. This process of organizing codes hierarchically is similar to what Jones et al. (2014) describe as axial coding. With axial coding (Jones et al., 2014) I was able to find commonalities and differences between the open codes and generate more general thematic categories that were reflected across the interviews with each CAMP student participant.

Because the intention of this study is to explore the experiences and sense-making of the student participants with an asset-based framework, it is important to note that I approached the data analysis process through the lens of cultural and familial assets and strengths, as well as social capital outside of the dominant, white-Euro cultural norm. This theoretical framework of considering non-dominant sources of cultural capital (Yosso, 2005) and social capital (Stanton-Salazar, 1997) involved using an *a priori* approach (Jones et al., 2014) that assumed the CAMP student participants possessed and utilized cultural and social capitals to access and be successful in their undergraduate studies. However, I also strived to maintain a balance between the *a priori* approach and remaining open to what emerged in the data by consciously attempting to limit what Jones et al. describe as “preconceived notions about what one expects to find” (2014, p. 165). I provide more descriptions of my strategies for achieving trustworthiness later in this methods chapter.

**Positionality of the Researcher**

Because bias can never be completely eliminated in qualitative research, it should be considered, reflected upon, and communicated in research findings (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2013). It is important to acknowledge my positionality within the research process that may have influenced my approach to the research topic, my interactions with the research participants, the ways that they communicated their experiences and mean-making to me, and the lenses I used to
analyze and share the research findings. First, as the researcher, I also hold a position of power as a CAMP project director and advisor for some of the participants from one of the university sites. My professional role and experience in higher education provide me (a) a strong history with the student population I seek to understand; and (b) social capital through my professional relationships with other key gatekeepers and advising relationships with some of the students. However, I am also aware that social desirability bias and differential power structures may have affected how participants engaged in telling their stories.

Even more important is acknowledging that some of my privileged identities as a white, college-educated, middle-class person born in the United States make me an outsider in this study, as well as a member of multiple dominant groups. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) caution that “participants in studies of marginalized groups (by race, gender, class, sexual orientation) are often suspicious of those who are members of the dominant culture doing research on people of oppressed groups. They often worry about what the researcher’s agenda is and how they will be portrayed as participants” (p. 64). Denzin and Lincoln (2008) further argue that the historical nature of qualitative research “serves as a metaphor for colonial knowledge and power” because as a scientific process, “research provides the foundation for reports about and representations of the other….the dark-skinned other to the White world” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 4).

While Denzin and Lincoln (2008) were speaking specifically about research conducted with indigenous populations, I found their ideas, as well as the writings of Jones et. al. (2014) and Merriam and Tisdell (2016) to be profoundly relevant to my research with refugee-background students of color from families who have labored in agriculture. Using Patton’s (2015) description of how to engage as an empathically neutral researcher, I strove to be open and non-judgmental while continuously reflecting and making notes on my own biases,
privileges, power, and positionality. I also endeavored to be as true to the participants’ mean-
making as I could. The final two sections of this chapter provide an overview of the strategies I
used to establish trustworthiness and minimize potential harm to participants.

**Trustworthiness**

This study was grounded in what Pascale describes (as cited in Jones et al., 2014) as a
constructivist paradigm where meaning and knowledge are subjective and conditional to person,
time, and place. Therefore, in place of the quantitative terms of validity and reliability, I engaged
in strategies to establish trustworthiness. Trustworthiness does not “imply the idea of any
‘objective truth’ to which an account can be compared” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 122), but
alternatively establishes quality and credibility through specific strategies commonly used by
qualitative researchers (Creswell, 2013). I used the following three recommended strategies
(Creswell, 2013; Jones et al., 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016): (a) clarifying my bias and
positionality as a researcher as described in the prior positionality section, (b) obtaining rich,
thick description, and (c) the inclusion and discussion of discrepant data.

Creswell (2013) writes that obtaining rich, thick description requires providing detailed
accounts of the participants, the setting, and their verbal responses. In this study, verbatim
transcripts of all interviews allowed me to return to the data multiple times – in the initial
listening and note-taking, in re-listening to the interview recordings in their entirety, and in the
coding process. I also incorporated numerous direct quotes from each CAMP student participant
to provide “a clear connection between what is presented as data and what is offered as
interpretations of the data” (Jones et al., 2014, p. 169).

Finally, Maxwell (2013) writes that including and analyzing negative cases or discrepant
data is an important component of meeting quality and credibility standards in qualitative
research. By deliberately searching for and including CAMP student stories that reflected experiences and viewpoints that were different from the majority, I was able to better understand and present the complexities of familial and cultural backgrounds as they relate to the theories of social and cultural capitals. Furthermore, the inclusion of discrepant data helped me to “combat the investigator’s natural tendency to seek confirmation of preliminary or emerging findings” (Morrow, 2005, p. 256).

Combined, these three strategies—exploring and articulating my own biases and reflexivity, providing rich, thick interview descriptions, and presenting discrepant data—increased the likelihood of interpreting the CAMP student participant stories credibly and were important steps to establishing trustworthiness to the research findings.

**Ethical Considerations and Trauma-Informed Research**

In this study, asking participants to be both courageous and vulnerable in telling their stories could result in them experiencing an “intrusion on their psychological space” (Jones et al., 2014, p. 186). Although the interview questions were focused primarily on strengths and assets related to their college journeys, there was a possibility that participants would feel their privacy had been invaded, be embarrassed or uncomfortable with certain questions, or may “tell things they had never intended to reveal” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 262). Using Patton’s (2015) detailed ethical issues checklist for qualitative researchers as a guide, I took a number of steps to carry out this study in an ethical manner.

First, I explained the purpose of the research in an accurate, understandable way that eliminated jargon. Prospective participants received detailed information about the voluntary nature of participation, protections of confidentiality, and the risks associated with participation through an IRB-approved consent form. When scheduling interviews, I introduced myself and
the general topic of my study and informed participants of their right to ask questions about the study at any time. Signed written consent forms were required to participate in the study, and students were informed in person and in writing that they could withdraw from the study at any point.

To maintain confidentiality, all participants had the opportunity to choose a pseudonym to be used in the study results. Two of the eight students chose their own pseudonym. I chose the other pseudonyms with an effort to find names that were culturally relevant. All participant interviews were conducted in a confidential space, and interview recordings and notes were secured in a locked file cabinet and/or a password-protected electronic file. All information, data and forms related to the study were accessible only to me, the researcher.

In addition to the general safeguards and considerations relevant to all qualitative research endeavors, exploring the lived experiences of students who may have come to the U.S. as refugees required additional sensitivity, as their lived experiences included alienation, persecution and forced migration due to intolerance, war, or other human factors (Zetter, 1988). Experiencing unsafe environments in their countries of origin or temporary refugee communities, and/or trauma related to the resettlement process in the U.S. are common experiences (Griffin, 2018). I adhered to the following recommendations released by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2015) for trauma-informed interviewing: (a) demonstrate respect towards the individual, build rapport through giving enough time for the interview, and explain what confidentiality means; (b) support control, choice, and autonomy by explaining that participants have the right to not answer any question and may end the interview at any time; (c) ensure that the interview space is comfortable and confidential; and (d) if the participant becomes upset, attend to their immediate
needs and do not probe for more information about a traumatic experience they may have shared.

To reiterate, the focus of this study is specifically focused on sources of cultural, familial, and social capital as told through students’ stories of their pre-college and college experiences; however, I recognize that the CAMP students in this study came from refugee-backgrounds with personal histories that most likely included trauma. I chose not to more deeply explore any traumatic experiences that the students may have shared with me as that was not the focus of this dissertation research. Furthermore, I followed the guidelines for ethical research provided by other scholars in the field (Griffin, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015; Seedat et al., 2004) which included: ongoing communication about informed consent and voluntary participation, maintaining confidentiality in data collection, storage and dissemination, and sensitivity to any negative reactions that may have occurred during the student interviews.

**Summary**

The purpose of this chapter was to provide a methodological guide for the exploration of the pre-college and college experiences of refugee-background students with a family history of agricultural labor in the U.S. In this chapter, I presented my research design, including the purpose, research questions, and the epistemologies of constructivism and critical research that situated the research. I also described the methodology as a basic, interpretive interview study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) that included a series of two separate interviews with each participant and a three-pronged approach to trustworthiness. Finally, I provided information about proposed site and participant selection, data analysis procedures, and important ethical considerations and procedures for engaging in research with refugee-background college students who hold multiple marginalized identities.
Chapter IV: CAMP Student Narratives

The results of this study will be divided between two chapters. Chapter Four will introduce each refugee-background CAMP student participant and provide a brief narrative account of how they remembered, thought about, and described their pre-college and college transitional experiences. Chapter Five will then provide a cross-comparison of their narratives, explore emerging themes, and connect their stories to my research questions. The students’ accounts are provided in no particular order. Pseudonyms for the students’ names and their universities are also used to protect their confidentiality.

Huy

Huy is a former CAMP first year participant, currently a junior studying chemical engineering at a large public university in the Midwest. Vietnamese-American, Huy immigrated from Vietnam to a small Midwestern meatpacking town seven years ago when he was fourteen years old, along with his father and two older siblings. Huy and his family waited for over ten years before receiving approval to immigrate to the U.S. Once approved, they chose to move to a town where Huy’s father and older brother could go to work immediately in the meatpacking plant, and where they already had family members who had come to the U.S. before them. Although they had come seeking a better life, the meatpacking plant where his father and brother worked offered little opportunity for upward mobility. “It’s a really low income, I’ll say. And then like most immigrants, we just establish our life here, living in a trailer. Seeing those kinds of poverty in my life, I definitely wanted to get a better education. That’s the only way that you can change your life, there’s no other way”.

Huy’s formal education began in Vietnam when he was nine years old. Two years older than many of his classroom peers, Huy started school late in Vietnam because his mother had left
the family and his father struggled to care for the children by himself. His paternal grandmother stepped in, caring for Huy and enrolling him in school. He described his grandmother as the family member who had the biggest impact on his educational goals. “My grandma’s the person that took care of me. She told me, ‘Oh, you should go to school. One day, you gonna be something great’.” Huy recalled that he struggled in Vietnamese school at first, especially with being separated from his older sister. “I used to cry all the time.” But eventually, Huy adjusted to the new routine, started enjoying the process of learning, and became a classroom leader. For the next seven years, Huy balanced school in Vietnam with helping his grandmother take care of their home. “When I was little, we were a really poor family. We don’t have a lot of money, so we raised our own food.” Huy’s job was to feed the family’s few farm animals before biking to school each day. After school, he returned to care for the animals again and tried to complete his homework before dark as their family could not afford electricity at night.

When Huy’s family was approved to come to the U.S., they decided that his grandmother was too old and frail to make the move and so she stayed behind. A year after Huy arrived in the U.S., his grandmother died. Huy described being very grateful for his time with her and motivated by her sacrifices. “Her whole life was dedicated to her kids and grandchildren. She was 80 and she was still selling stuff at the market just to get the money for us to go to school.” After arriving in the U.S., Huy enrolled in middle school in the rural Midwest and remembered only one other Vietnamese student who could help him understand what was happening around him. While he described his first year in the U.S. as very challenging, he also attributed the lack of a Vietnamese community in his new Midwestern home as the reason he was able to learn English so quickly, stating “I think it’s better to have less people who speak the same language as me so I can learn English faster and adapt faster.” As Huy began learning English in middle
school, he also took on much of the responsibility in the family for making appointments, paying bills, and translating for his father. Three years after arriving in the U.S., Huy not only completed the ESOL program, but also began taking honors and advanced placement coursework at his high school.

The summer between Huy’s junior and senior year in high school, he was selected to participate in a Migrant Education summer pre-college program at the university where he is now pursuing his undergraduate degree. Huy attributes his school’s Migrant Education Program and the summer pre-college program with helping him learn how to prepare, stating, “They provided a lot of support for kids who came from immigrants and English was their second language. Their office was supporting. I always heard about college, but I actually applied to college and got connected through the migrant program.” The summer pre-college program for migrant students also motivated him by seeing that college was possible, recalling, “I already have a mindset, ‘oh, education is the way to change my life, but how do I get to that point? How do I actually do it, you know? And then I go and see this beautiful campus and it kind of encouraged me, ‘Oh, that’s going to be your new life’. So that kind of encouraged me to apply and then try harder.”

Huy was able to use these migrant education experiences and supports, combined with encouragement from his AP biology teacher, to prepare for, apply, and be accepted to his first college choice. His father did not discourage Huy from pursuing college, but he was worried about how Huy was going to pay for it, “because if you came from a low income background, like imagine all the kids from a meatpacking plant family, they would never think, ‘Oh, this is possible’. You know, it’s really hard because of the money.” Huy chose to attend the most expensive public university in his state, but he has been able to afford it so far through federal
financial aid, multiple scholarships, and working while in school.

Huy said he rarely consults with his father about his college decisions. His father often worked night and weekend shifts and wasn’t very involved in Huy’s education, even in high school. Huy reflected, “Most of the time I make decisions myself based on experience I have or what benefits me and my family.” Huy believed that his experiences navigating a new country, language, and educational system – not only for himself but also for his family – also helped him learn how to access the supports necessary to be successful in college, stating, “Because you kind of build up the maturity for yourself and you think differently compared to other college students. And that kind of helped me solve problems in college….because a lot of people can just call their mom and then their mom has helped them. But for me, even when I call my dad, he would never know what to do. So maybe it kind of helped me know who to call, who to ask for help.”

During his first year of college, Huy pointed to his CAMP advisors as a significant sources of support who provided a springboard to additional campus resources like TRIO Student Support Services, a multicultural scholarship program, and a highly selective engineering fellowship program for undergraduates. As Huy described his college experiences, he often reflected on the intersections of his racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and first-generation identities. Consistently, he described feeling different from his peers because of his low-income background – from his high school honors course classmates, to his current engineering fellowship program, and also with other Vietnamese and Asian students on his campus. When asked about his connections with other Vietnamese students on campus, Huy reflected,

I think we are from the same background, but the experience we have is different. Some of the people here can be international, born in Vietnam or live in Vietnam their whole...
life. Or the people who were born here, which is kind of like an American…and I’m like that person in the middle that wasn’t sure which group I belong to…The people who have lived here a long time, their parents maybe already are well established, compared to my dad who’s working at a factory or plant. So that kind of economic status makes me feel like I don’t belong to them. But I think it’s good to hang out with them because you still have connection to your background, like where you’re from.

Although Huy talked about being aware of socioeconomic differences, he also described the importance that the Vietnamese, Asian American, and Asian Engineering organizations have had for him, stating, “I think I was able to find my people…which kind of makes me feel more engaged because I see more people like me.”

Huy also described a sense of belonging, motivation, and purpose within campus programs like CAMP and TRIO that serve first-generation, high financial need students like himself. He has helped other students from similar backgrounds through becoming a peer tutor, a residential mentor during a summer pre-college TRIO program, and through his current position as a residential assistant in one of the halls on campus. “Participating as a TRIO tutor and seeing people who have a more disadvantaged background and were able to achieve something that people who have more privileged backgrounds. I saw people who are capable of doing it, so why am I not doing it too?” In describing his role as a residential assistant in campus housing, Huy talked about the ways that he has been able to use his experiences overcoming challenges to help other first-generation college students, including connecting them to TRIO, helping them find scholarships, and providing academic mentoring.

Huy is now in his third year of undergraduate studies and intends to graduate with his degree in chemical engineering next spring. The degree program has been very rigorous, and
Huy has questioned his academic and career path along the way. Currently, he is gravitating toward engineering management and is considering getting a master’s in business administration. Ultimately, he hopes that his degree will provide a pathway to a better life for himself and his family.

I think after I make money I will probably take care of my dad and just make sure that my family was doing well. I think everything happened for a reason. Like I met my advisor and the CAMP recruiter, it was destiny to happen to me that way. Being in the migrant pre-college program, it was really helpful, kind of guided me through all that process. And I appreciate that I was in CAMP because it helped me open to a lot of opportunities.

**Gina**

Gina is a first year CAMP student, studying mechanical engineering at a large public university in the Midwest. Like several other participants in the study, Gina’s family lives in a diverse, urban city neighborhood approximately 45 minutes away from the campus where she currently lives and studies. When Gina was 9 years old, she came with her parents to the U.S. as a refugee from Nepal. Gina’s family had lived in the neighboring country of Bhutan for several generations, but in the early 1990’s they were forced to flee due to religious and ethnic persecution against Hindu Nepali-speaking Bhutanese. Gina recounted how her mother and father’s families scattered across the globe. While many of her mother’s family members fled to India, most of her father’s family lived in Nepal refugee camps for over 18 years before being permanently resettled in the United States. Gina was born in the refugee camp and considers herself Nepali; however, she said that her parents often describe themselves as Bhutanese. Gina and her parents eventually moved to the Midwest city where her family still lives because her
father found work in the area trimming trees. It was this agricultural work that made Gina eligible for Migrant Education services as a child, and for CAMP as a college freshman. Gina did not recall her father’s work trimming trees when she was younger, but she did remember helping him harvest vegetables on a small community farm after school.

When asked to describe some of her earliest memories in the U.S., Gina reflected on the initial challenges she faced learning English in school. Although she had gone to school in Nepal before relocating, she had no English instruction there. “All I knew was how to say ‘hi’ and ‘will you help me’.” On her first day in a fourth-grade classroom, Gina clearly remembers not understanding what the teacher nor her classmates were saying, not understanding what to do, and asking for help from her teacher multiple times. Worried that she was being bothersome, Gina stopped asking questions and remembers how that felt.

It used to feel so long. And then right outside of my classroom, there’s this big church and in the front you could see the clock ticking. I used to just go to the window and stare at it and think, when is it going to be four? When is it going to be four? It was rough. I remember thinking, ‘Oh, God, I need this clock to move faster’…I always felt like I didn’t belong there because I didn’t know anything.

Gina became more comfortable with English over time and recalled feeling a sense of accomplishment when she moved from the ESL classroom to a regular English class in middle school. “From there, I was like, ‘Oh, I’m also one of them. I’m not that person who was taken away to a separate classroom’.” Being accepted into her school district’s international baccalaureate magnet high school gave Gina another boost of confidence. “After that, my energy level boosted up and I started working even harder. I thought, if I can get here from where I started, I can do even better now…getting in was really big. It was very big for me.”
Inspired by an aunt who had been a science teacher in Nepal, Gina said that she had always planned to go to college and that her parents were encouraging. In high school, she described how connections with a number of teachers, advisors, and educational programs helped her prepare academically for college. She recounted how a high school math teacher gave her an application to join a STEM program that met on Saturdays when he recognized Gina’s academic strengths in mathematics. “I’m so thankful that he actually came to me and gave me that application. Otherwise I wouldn’t have so many other opportunities that I got through that.” During her time with the STEM program, she met a high school counselor who helped her enroll in dual credit courses through the local community college. Gina had learned that many of the nearby colleges and universities did not accept IB credit, so she moved to a high school that would allow her to take college level courses, especially college level math. She also participated in a federal TRIO Upward Bound summer program between her junior and senior years of high school.

In addition to the opportunities she learned about from key teachers, advisors and educational programs, Gina described talking with peers about different colleges and majors while she was in high school – especially peers who were also taking dual-enrollment college classes. From her peers, Gina learned about bioengineering and decided that this could be an interesting way to work in healthcare but not be a physician. “I did my research and decided I was interested in prosthetics.” When it came time for Gina to apply to colleges, she applied to an out of state private school and two in-state public universities. She was seriously considering a school that was three hours away from her home, “But then my parents kind of played a little role, saying ‘that’s too far…we want you close’.” Going to college closer to home has allowed Gina to go home on the weekends to volunteer as a teaching assistant for the same Saturday
STEM program that she participated in as a high school student. She is also able to visit her parents and help them with making appointments and taking care of various bills and paperwork.

Like many of the other students who were interviewed for this study, Gina described taking on these types of translation and navigation responsibilities for her parents at a young age. In addition to making appointments and taking care of paperwork, Gina remembered a specific incident when at age 12, she made air travel reservations for her mother. “I used to be really scared…this is such a big thing and they trust me…What if I made a simple mistake that would cost her thousands of dollars?” She remembered that her heart pounded all day; but now as a young adult, she feels very confident helping her parents navigate different processes. “I used to feel [scared] but now I don’t feel anything. I’ve been doing it, so I know I can do it.”

When asked about her parents’ involvement in Gina’s education, she said that language and culture barriers kept her parents from helping her with homework or coming to school events. But once Gina felt more comfortable speaking English and understanding the U.S. school system herself, she began inviting her parents to her high school functions. She also reflected on the importance her parents placed on Gina getting a college education. “I think my parents were the main reason that motivates me…ever since I can remember, they have always encouraged me to go to school and get a degree.” Both of Gina’s parents had access to some formal education in Bhutan and Nepal, and Gina thought that those educational experiences reinforced their belief in the value of a college education.

Gina also credited her early experiences helping her family navigate different U.S. systems in her youth with success navigating different college systems now.

In engineering, I know nothing, right? Which is just like the day I came from Nepal. I knew nothing but I started navigating myself, going to places and asking for help.
Whenever I don’t understand, I always reach out for help. That kind of motivates me because I see where I was and where I am now.

This confidence navigating new spaces has helped Gina connect with various student programs and develop friendships on campus. During her first semester at the university, Gina spent most of her time outside of class studying at the library or the engineering building on campus. A self-described introvert, Gina was initially lonely and homesick; but also said that participating in group projects in her engineering classes helped her begin to connect with other students. As a CAMP first year student, Gina was also connected to other support programs on campus, including an early move-in summer bridge program and academic supports through a TRIO STEM program. Now in her second semester at the university, Gina has not only joined several study groups, but has also started learning how to dance the tango through an on-campus club, and is planning to join an alternative spring break trip to participate in a week-long community service project.

These connections through student programming, student support offices, and peer groups have each helped Gina develop a sense of belonging on campus. When asked, she could not identify a campus space where she felt uncomfortable or like she did not belong. She also described the school of engineering as a diverse setting and was especially happy to have met several international students from Nepal on campus. Back home, she also described an ongoing connection with the Hindu Nepali community through her parents. Her father now has a second job as a Hindu priest on the weekends, and so her parents’ home is often a hub for many refugees from Nepal. Gina hopes that she can be a role model and mentor for other young Nepali women in her community who want to go to college. “Maybe they can look up to me and be like, ‘Oh, if she can do it and she’s from the same community as me, maybe I can do it too’.”
Imay

Imay is a current CAMP student beginning his second semester studying computer engineering at a large, public university in the Midwest. Like Gina, Imay is also Bhutanese Nepali and lived the first eleven years of his life in a Nepali refugee camp. At eleven, he was permanently relocated in the U.S. with his parents and two younger siblings. Imay attended some middle school and all of high school in a diverse urban neighborhood of a Midwestern city approximately forty-five minutes from where he is now attending college. He lives on campus but still commutes to his home community every weekend in order to work at a large retail home goods store. Like all of the current and former CAMP students who participated in this study, Imay is a first-generation college student with high financial need, a person of color, and a former English language learner. During our interviews, Imay described his family and cultural background, his transition to the U.S., his experiences within the U.S. educational system, and the ways that these experiences and different people throughout his life have influenced his educational journey.

Imay was born in a Nepal refugee camp to parents who had escaped from Bhutan about ten years earlier. The oldest of three siblings, he was also close to his paternal grandparents, two uncles, and their families. Although he spoke relatively little about his life in the refugee camp, Imay did share clear memories of when his family was approved to be permanently relocated to the U.S., even remembering his exact address, “Sector B, Section B, Hut number 192. We had to go check the notices every day. There was a little paper posted on an announcement board at the hospital…with all the hut numbers that got selected for interviews and to go through the process of filling out the [relocation] application.” When Imay’s immediate family was approved along with his paternal uncles and grandparents, Imay said his father initially did not want to move to
the U.S. He believed this was because his father had a steady job as a manual laborer in Nepal and was afraid that his lack of English skills would make life difficult in a new country. “But my mom, she thought we could have something more than what they had then. So she wanted us to get over here and did everything in her power to get us here.” A year after Imay’s uncles and grandparents moved to the U.S., Imay said his father finally agreed to also move his immediate family.

Once in the U.S., Imay described how his family moved several times looking for available work that did not require English proficiency and would also allow them to be near either extended family or other refugees from Nepal. While his mother found work in hotel housekeeping, Imay said his father was frustrated with the lack of work in the first two U.S. communities where they lived, both in Idaho and Pennsylvania. After several years, they decided to move again, following other family members to the Midwest. There, his father initially found work planting crops in the fields; but because the work was seasonal and inconsistent, his father decided to apply to work at a meatpacking plant nearby. Imay remembered helping his father complete the employment application, even though he only had a small understanding of English himself. Imay said he often helped his parents navigate U.S. systems from an early age. “I learned [English] quick because I was forced to implement it…like with the housing officer or welfare, I had to speak, I had to try to get my words out and communicate.” He said that while his sister was older than him, she was expected to help the family with cooking, cleaning, and home care while as a male, Imay was expected to “step up for the family…and help my dad with the outside work, like applications and translating.” He believed that these responsibilities helped him not only learn English quickly as a teenager, but also how to live independently now that he is in his first year in college.
Imay shared that because he knew very little English when he first arrived in the U.S., he struggled in school initially. But he also shared that family expectations and his own desire to learn helped him to improve quickly.

So when I went to school, I wasn't just going to school for myself. I was also going because I had to take care of my family and I had to be able to understand what people were saying, you know. I had to be accurate and as precise as I could be. To do that I had to do good at everything else in school. I guess that that was my way of contributing to the family. Because you know, I couldn't do anything else about it.

Imay reflected that it was not always easy to help his family, especially his father, with navigating different procedures in the U.S. He described how his father was often frustrated and quick to anger, both at home and in public. Imay said that over time he became uncomfortable with his father’s angry outbursts and when translating would, “just paraphrase things in my own way to basically get the [needed] results.” Imay also said that these experiences influenced his desire to continue doing well in school because “It became clear to me that the more knowledge I had, the more understanding I had, the better person I was going to be.”

Imay said that one of the things that radically changed his life was when he started attending the international baccalaureate magnet high school in his district and that it was the Migrant Education Program (MEP) that helped him get there. He remembered that the MEP advocate gave him information about the magnet school and helped him apply, “and if it wasn’t for him, I wouldn’t be where I am today. I really believe that.” Once enrolled in the IB magnet school, Imay described how he was then mentored by a high school physics instructor who encouraged Imay to join the chess club. “So those were the only things I enjoyed doing…playing chess and going to physics class.” The physics teacher also helped connect Imay with mental
health supports outside of school – supports that Imay believed helped him stay in school, graduate, and move to a healthier home situation with one of his uncles.

Although Imay was no longer living with his parents, their expectations that he performs well in school still had an impact. “They always encouraged higher education. They always said, ‘You have to do better than us. We don’t want you working manual labor jobs. We want you to have an office job’.” Because of Imay’s standardized test scores and high school grades, he was awarded a significant renewable scholarship at his current university. This combined with federal aid, a CAMP freshman scholarship, and weekend employment have made college financially possible. Imay enjoys his new situation living on campus and is getting to know other students from a variety of backgrounds. In the engineering school, he is also surrounded by students and faculty from all over the world, and this has helped him to feel comfortable on campus. “Because the faculty members are mostly immigrants or people from different countries…it’s really diverse, especially in engineering. So I guess the international students and faculty members have been really helpful in transitioning to college and just feeling better. A little bit like home.” While Imay described his university as having a reputation for having a lot of privileged “snobby” students, he also said that most of his experiences with his college student peers have been positive.

Now in his second semester of college, Imay’s primary goal is to earn high enough grades to keep his scholarships next year. He hopes to reduce the hours he works on the weekends to be able to spend more time studying. Eventually, he hopes that earning an engineering degree will allow him to have a better life than his parents. “They wanted me to have more than enough, and that’s the whole reason we came to the United States…for me to have a better life. So having the best outcome possible would be saying, ‘Hey look, I got that office job
you always imagined’.” After graduating, Imay plans to help others who have come from similar backgrounds. “I feel like that at one point there were people who helped me and I want to be one of those people in someone’s life. I don’t want someone like me, in their childhood, to feel like they have to be stuck.”

Paw

Eight years ago, Paw was twelve years old when she moved with her family from a Thailand refugee camp to the United States. Six years earlier, Paw and her family had been forced to leave their home country of Burma to escape the ethnic persecution and violence against their people, the Karen. Now a sophomore pursuing an associate’s degree at a public university in the American South, Paw hopes to be able to use her education to create a better life for herself, her family, and her community. “Who knew as a child who never had a home, that I would go to college in the most famous country….who knew I would go to college. At this moment, that’s my most accomplishment I have made so far, for my parents and me.” Paw was a freshman participant in a federal CAMP project last year, and credits her educational successes in part to the supports she received from CAMP during her first year in college, as well as the encouragement and support she received from key middle school and high school teachers along the way. Combined with her parents’ encouragement and her own determination, Paw is close to completing an associate’s degree in social work this year and intends to pursue a bachelor’s degree in human services next.

Paw reflected on a number of challenges she has faced since arriving in the U.S. as a 12-year old, starting with adapting to a new country and language. “Words that had nothing to do with your language…the way you had to dress, the way you sleep, the way you eat. Everything changed.” Paw also described her early impressions of the relative abundance in the U.S.
compared to her life in the refugee camp and questioned the disparities she had seen. “How could the universe be so unfair to some people who had nothing? And then just people who had everything that they needed?” Paw spoke a number of times about how her parents viewed education as the path to a better life in the U.S. and the expectations they had of her in relation to college. Paw’s parents both work the second evening shift at a nearby poultry processing plant, but Paw said that she knew little about the nature of their work, “because my mom never actually wanted us to learn about it because she’d say, ‘you don’t need to know how the work is, but you need to get your education so you don’t have to be in the plant’.”

When asked about how her parents supported her college aspirations, Paw said that they impressed upon her that “education is the key to everything” but that they did not have the experience to help her prepare for a college education. Paw’s mother was never able to access formal schooling and her father had the equivalent of a middle school education in Southeast Asia. She reflected, “I mean in my family, there was no one who went to college who could tell me what path, you know what I mean? Like there was no path that was laid out for me. I was the one who had to do every little thing, just to walk through this path.” While her parents could not help Paw understand the path to and through college, she shared that they supported her in other ways - through encouragement, high expectations and family closeness, and also materially by encouraging her to live at home and not work so that she could focus on her studies.

Outside of her family, Paw also pointed to a number of teachers, advisors, and educational programs that helped her learn English, encouraged her, expressed belief in her abilities, and also provided the supports she needed to go to college and progress toward a degree. During her first years in the U.S., a middle school ESOL teacher connected her with an after-school program to strengthen her English proficiency and was the first person to encourage
Paw to think about college. When her family moved to a new town, a teacher at Paw’s new high school connected her with their after-school program that provided homework tutoring and pre-college supports. “I learned how to start my résumé, and FAFSA, and how to apply for college.” Paw described how she still stays in contact with that high school teacher, “We are always in contact whenever I need something. I talked to her yesterday, and she said ‘You made it! I knew you would make it’.”

Although Paw said there were other colleges closer to her home, she decided to attend her current university because of the supports CAMP could provide. As a first-year college student, Paw attended a weekly meeting with her CAMP peers and met with a program advisor frequently. It was through her CAMP meetings that Paw learned about social work as a major and career. In her description of CAMP, Paw said, “They were there anytime you need to talk, you had someone…they were on the line for you just whenever you needed them.” She also lived in CAMP-sponsored housing her first year of college, but her experience living on campus was mixed. She had more time for study and getting to know her roommates but being an hour’s drive from her family was very difficult and she often felt alone. “You want to talk to your family, but there was no one. Sometimes I would stay at the campus library until seven or eight p.m. because I didn’t want to come home, you know, it will be empty.” As a sophomore, Paw knows that she could reach out to CAMP personnel if she had questions, but has not had much contact with them since finishing the first-year program. She also decided to move back home and commute an hour each way during her second college year in order to be closer to her family and save on living expenses.

Living at home has allowed Paw to have her family around her, help take care of her younger siblings while her parents work evenings, and stay connected to a Karen church in her
hometown. “It’s the only time, the only day of the week that I will speak my actual language sometimes.” Paw feels like maintaining her Karen culture is important, saying, “I need to share my good experiences or good culture with others so the world could be better…that’s who I am. You got to remember where you came from, like your beginning.” Paw believes she is the only Karen student attending her university this year. When asked what that is like for her, Paw responded, “I guess I’m just used to it…I kind of get used to being alone. Sometimes I do wish that there were some people that I could bump into and say, ‘Oh hey, we speak the same language!’.”

In spite of the challenges of commuting and sometimes feeling isolated on campus, Paw is determined to continue her studies. “That’s why I’m so like, proud of myself, even at my lowest time in college when I’m so stressed out, I just have to remember that seven years ago people told me that I will not make it over here. And that’s how I picked up myself again, to continue my work.” She explained that her motivation comes from knowing that with a degree she will be able to help her family have access to a better life, to fulfill her parents’ dreams, and to be able to help others as a social worker. “It’s now my responsibility to take it up and continue with all of these opportunities that I have got, to have a better position for my family….It is really hard…but I made it this far.”

Aung

Aung never thought about going to college until he met with a CAMP recruiter during his senior year in high school. Now Aung is in his fifth year of undergraduate studies at a small public university in the Mountain West, getting closer to his goal of earning an accounting degree. The child of seasonal farmworkers, Aung was 14 years old when he and his family came to the U.S. from Thailand with refugee status. “Family of ten because I have six brothers and one
sister, and our parents. When we came to the United States in 2010, they just call us family of
ten.” Like Paw, Aung is also Karen, one of the largest ethnic minority groups that has been
forced to leave Burma and live in refugee camps in neighboring countries. Aung and his family
lived in a Thailand refugee camp for seven years before being approved to move to the U.S.
They were settled in a suburb of a large metropolitan area in the Mountain West to be near
family who had come before them; but within two years they moved to a farming community
farther west so that Aung’s father could find work in fruit orchards. Aung also worked alongside
his father in the orchards for three summers while in high school. “I remember it was pretty hot,
dry…it would really dry my face out. We were picking peaches, apples, cherries, and other
fruit.” Aung remembers working six, sometimes seven days a week with his father, leaving early
in the morning to get to the farm, and returning late in the evening. “I actually don’t do it
anymore because I don’t want to go back to it. It is hard work.”

When asked about significant memories from his early school experiences in the U.S.,
Aung remembered feeling too shy to try to speak or interact with his classmates. “That time I
feel really sad…it’s kind of scary for me, shaking in every class in the day.” Although he had
one Karen peer in an older grade that helped translate for Aung sometimes, Aung remembers
feeling like a robot, “doing nothing...because I wasn’t understanding what they were asking me
to do at all.” Aung’s ESL class was his favorite place, as there were only a handful of students
there and he felt comfortable participating. Eventually, as Aung became more comfortable in his
new environment, he tried out for soccer and ran track for his high school. But Aung was not
thinking about college then, “I don’t even think about it at all. When I was in my senior year, I
don’t even have any plans after I graduate. I was just going to go to work.” When the CAMP
recruiter came to visit the students in his school’s Migrant Education Program, Aung remembers
feeling scared about what he perceived to be such a big step. The university where the CAMP program was located was almost four hours away from his family, and no one from his family had ever gone to college. But, with the CAMP recruiter’s encouragement and a classroom aide’s help completing the applications for college admissions, CAMP, and federal financial aid, Aung was accepted and decided to go.

Aung also had a friend who had started at the same university the year before, so he was encouraged that he would not be completely alone. Additionally, although his parents did not know how to help Aung navigate the path to college, he said they were supportive of his decision. “They just asked me to try my best and never give up. My mom told me that something you start, just finish it. And that’s why I’m here for like five years. I don’t have a mind that I want to quit. I don’t want to quit at all.” During his first year in college, Aung received financial and academic supports from CAMP on his campus. Since then, he has also joined the federal TRIO SSS program, works part time for the university’s foundation office, and is regularly involved in a local church community.

Aung said that his biggest challenge in college so far has been the challenging nature of his coursework, and there have been times when he wanted to quit. “Sometimes I need help because the difficulty of the homework causes me problems.” But Aung recalled multiple instances when he was able to reach out and get the support he needed to continue from CAMP, TRIO, and some of his professors. “It’s always good to reach out…and it helps me feel better…they say, ‘you’re almost done, you can do it, and we’ll try to help you if you need a tutor’.” Aung also described how CAMP, TRIO, and a campus multicultural office have been welcoming spaces. Nevertheless, Aung believes he is the only Karen student on the campus currently and that brings its own set of challenges. “I don’t get to talk in my language, so I talk to
people in English…only English everywhere I go…in class, with any friends.” His younger brother came to the university a year after Aung but decided to leave after one year to join the military. His one other Karen friend on campus graduated from college last year.

When reflecting on what he valued most about being Karen, Aung said that in his culture, people love to visit each other and are very welcoming. “Even though sometimes we don’t know each other, we smile and give a good day to each other. It’s kind of hard to smile at strangers because you worry about are they gonna smile back at you? Or are they just going to put an angry face on?” But Aung did not want to talk about any places on campus where he felt out of place or unwelcomed, responding “If I have, I probably won’t want to remember that. I don’t keep that feeling in my heart. I just let go of it so I can stay on my path.”

After five years of college, Aung thinks he has three more semesters to finish with his bachelor’s degree in accounting. He pointed to his parents’ sacrifices and hard work as key motivators for him to keep going. “My parents work hard in the fields, and they worked hard when they were young and tell us about their experiences. So that’s how we learn. If our parents could do it, we can do it. They have to go through harder things than us.” Aung hopes that with a degree, he will be able to work in a comfortable office doing something he enjoys. For now, his mother’s counsel to “never give up” and his own desire to have a better life have helped him persevere.

Christina

Christina is a first year CAMP student enrolled in pre-nursing coursework at a large public university in the Midwest. Christina is Chin Burmese and moved to the U.S. with her family and two younger brothers from a Malaysian refugee camp in 2013. Twelve years old when she arrived in the U.S., Christina reflected on how different her life is now, compared to
her previous life in Myanmar (Burma) and Malaysia. “To think we were [living like] that, and to be here in the U.S. with younger generations like me going to a university like this…is a big blessing.” As members of the Chin community living in Burma, Christina and her family were in constant danger of violence from the Burmese government and army. Her father escaped to Malaysia first, to find work and save money to bring the rest of the family. In the meantime, Christina, her mother and younger siblings moved several times within Myanmar to try and find safety. When Christina was nine years old, they were able to move in with one of her grandmothers while waiting to escape to Malaysia. Christina said that her grandmother’s care and religious instruction were very important memories during that time. “She was a really big part of my connection with God. She was the one who was reading the Bible to us and preaching to us.” Christina shared that these early Bible studies with her grandmother provided the foundation for her religious beliefs now, and that these beliefs and her Chin church community have been instrumental in helping her meet life’s challenges.

Although Christina and her family were able to escape the violence perpetrated against the Chin in Burma, she described how her life in a Malaysian refugee camp was also very dangerous. “There were a lot of cases of people being kidnapped, people being raped and being sexually assaulted. That was like, one of my biggest fears I had in Malaysia. I could never go outside and feel safe.” After two years in the refugee camp, Christina and her family were approved to resettle in the U.S. Like many resettled refugees, they were moved to a community where they already had family ties and where her parents could find work that did not require English language proficiency. For her father, this work was in a meatpacking plant in the Midwest. “There are a lot of Chin people who work there, and they said it’s really hard…really physical and not a really safe environment.” Her father no longer works in meatpacking because
of a hand injury. Currently, both of Christina’s parents are working manual labor jobs at a large warehouse.

While her parents started working, Christina began attending middle school in an urban Midwest district, beginning with ESL classes. She remembered her sixth grade ESL teacher, in particular, as someone who was “really loving and welcoming, and taught me a lot of things” through picture books, group learning, games, and birthday celebrations. Christina’s transition to the U.S. was also helped by other Chin youth who were attending her neighborhood school and church. “When I first started, I mainly hung out with Chin communities because I didn’t speak English that well.” When Christina began feeling more comfortable expressing herself in English, she described interacting with students from a variety of diverse backgrounds, recalling, “I honestly felt better in some type of way when I would hang out with different races because there’s always something new to learn, and they are…I guess more open minded and welcoming to a lot of things.” She did not remember having any white friends in middle school and high school, saying that there were few white students in her schools and neighborhoods growing up.

Christina described herself as outgoing and active in sports in high school, joining volleyball and soccer. “When I play sports, my true self and personality comes out, I am this really fun, bright, energetic person…and through that, I met a lot of people, helping me make more friends than I would normally.” In addition to high school sports, Christina became involved in student government, leadership groups, her church youth group, the TRIO Talent Search pre-college program in her school district, and her high school’s ROTC program. While she said that each of these communities helped Christina connect with different people and opportunities, she provided more detail specifically about her head ROTC instructor.

He was a really special mentor for me because he wrote me a lot of recommendation
letters. He helped me apply for a lot of scholarships. And he would also network me with a lot of the people that he knew in the Marines, a lot of other branches, and people in the school district. Whenever I was with him, he introduced me to people. He just speaks really highly of me. And even though I’m not like ‘all that’ he makes it like I am really that.

Christina said that she had considered joining a branch of the U.S. military reserves, but that she did not want to give up on her college dreams. The summer between her freshman and sophomore year in high school, she participated in a summer residential pre-college program for Migrant Education students at the university where she currently attends. From that experience and other times visiting the same university as a high school student, Christina chose her current campus because “it just feels like home and I just loved the environment and campus life.”

Christina described her parents as always supportive, but that they often could not understand her experiences in the U.S. school system. “They weren’t that involved, but to be honest I don’t blame them because they don’t have time and they can’t speak English.” She said that they wanted her to focus on her studies and worried that she was spending too much time on sporting activities, “but sports was the thing that motivated me. So, I kept on telling them…and they ended up accepting.” She also believed that her experience was similar to a lot of her Chin friends whose parents were not that involved in school but encouraged their children to pursue an education. When asked about lessons or values she learned from her family that has helped her along her education path, Christina responded, “My parents always taught me to be kind and just be grateful and know where you come from because that’s going to set you on the right foot and right path.” Although her parents are not able to help Christina financially with college nor how to navigate the specifics of pursuing a college education, Christina described how they continue
to provide support by reminding her to not give up. “They always compare their lives to the life that we’re living now. They always remind me of how far we have come and the things they did for us.”

When asked to describe her current support system now that she is in her first year of college studies, Christina talked about her parents, a group of friends from her home community, and several student support programs on her college campus. She also has significant scholarship aid from CAMP and a large foundation in her home community. In addition to financial supports, the CAMP program also helped connect Christina with several other support programs, including TRIO SSS, undergraduate research, and a summer bridge program that allowed her to move in earlier than the rest of the campus and become adjusted to her new surroundings. She described how adjusting to college life has had its challenges, starting with living in a predominantly white community for the first time in her life. “What’s the word I’m looking for? Culture shock. Coming here, I already knew about the population. I was aware of it, but also I was still kind of shook.” She pointed to “programs for underrepresented groups” that helped her not feel alone. But even within those programs, she has found that they are “diverse, but not that diverse.” Although she described enjoying meeting new people from different backgrounds in college, she also expressed gratitude that her family, friends back home, and church community are less than an hour away. “I get to go back home on the weekends. I get tired of being with the same people all the time, so it’s great to bounce back [home] like that.”

In college, other first year challenges have included time management and the academic rigor of her STEM coursework. Although she described knowing that college would be more difficult than high school, Christina said that during the first semester she did not know how to manage her time wisely and sometimes spent time with friends when she should have been
studying. “I had a breakdown in front of my friends…and they told me that if it’s too hard, I shouldn’t feel pressure to keep pushing.” Initially Christina wanted to study pre-med, but now she has decided to pursue nursing because it will still allow her to help others within the healthcare field. She pointed to her CAMP advisor, her family, her friends back home, and a weekly prayer group as key supports in her decision making. Ultimately, Christina hopes to finish her nursing degree, help take care of her parents, and continue to be involved in her church community. “You know in the movies where they start out really small, just from nothing…to become something and give back to the community? I want to help people that are in need, people with big dreams who have no resources. Plant that seed.”

David

David was born in Congo-Kinshasa in the Democratic Republic of the Congo but lived much of his childhood with his family in a Rwandan refugee camp to escape civil war violence in his home country. When David was 11, his family was approved to come to the U.S. with refugee status, and he, his parents, and three sisters moved to Dallas, Texas. There, David’s mother began working in a produce processing plant to help support the family, while his father explored opportunities to be a pastor for African communities in the area. Now in his second year at a public university in the mountain West, David learned about CAMP during his new student orientation. Looking for scholarship opportunities, David remembered filling out an interest card at the CAMP table when he saw bottled waters there, “honestly, I signed the paper just so I could get the bottle”. When the CAMP representative started talking to David about CAMP and Migrant Education eligibility, David’s recalled, “I wasn’t even thinking about myself. I just thought maybe it was like a Hispanic thing because the people who would go to the table were mostly Hispanic.” But the CAMP director started talking to David about the work his
parents did and determined that he was most likely eligible for CAMP because of his mother’s work in agriculture. David applied and was accepted to CAMP, successfully completed his first year in college, and now participates in a number of other campus support programs as a sophomore.

David did not spend a lot of time talking about his life before coming to the U.S., except to say that his family moved back and forth between Congo-Kinshasa and Rwandan refugee camps more than once, that his father left the family for a while to study in Kenya to become a pastor, and that his mother worked on a farm to help provide for the family. A middle child with three sisters, David recalled with pride that he did very well in school in Rwanda, “I was always in the top five. I even was first one time, and in the third grade I was in the second place two times”. But David also described struggling academically during his first years in the U.S., “I realized my school and my grades went way low because everything was in English and I didn’t know what to do. So, my middle school was not good. I was just doing what I can, but it was just bad.” David attributed improving his grades in his U.S. classes to joining an after-school homework club, practicing and developing his English skills, and to meeting his parents’ expectations to do well in school.

When asked to describe his first experiences thinking about college, David replied, “It’s just something that was always expected of me. It’s not just my parents, it’s my community. They expect their kids to graduate high school and then go to college… I just never even thought of any other options other than college. It’s not just me, my sisters, it’s all like that.” At the same time, David reflected on being worried that he would not be able to get into a university because his grades were not “smart” enough, “this was the most stressful stuff I could think of… I was really afraid of disappointing my parents.” While David said that many of his peers were going
to the local community college and his parents wanted him to also stay close to home, David wanted to go to a four-year university in another state. After applying to several, David decided to attend the new student orientation at his current university, not realizing that this was more than just a campus visit but the time when he would commit to attending and enroll in classes. “When I realized I was doing that [registering for classes], I didn’t want to go back looking for a better college. I realized that that’s where I wanted to be.”

Although David’s parents had high expectations for him, they did not know how to help him navigate the path to college in the U.S. David believed that they trusted him to navigate college on his own, in part because he was experienced navigating other U.S. systems for his family and his father’s church community members, including applying for loans, completing important paperwork, and translating. David described learning English faster than others in the family, and therefore took on navigational responsibilities.

I would take [my parents and other refugee families] to apply for food stamps, or jobs, or that kind of stuff. Even with school, whenever they have anything like troubles with other kids, they will call me. Even right now, they still call me, email me. I’m the one who helps them communicate.

David also spoke frequently about the importance he placed on being responsible for himself financially, recalling, “I guess I wanted to be way more independent. I mean I have always been independent in a way, but still…when I got here, my parents wanted to pay for the rent. But being independent, I didn’t want them to pay for that stuff.” During the summer after graduating from high school, David went to work with his mother at the produce processing plant in order to earn money for college. He described the working conditions at the plant, saying,
It’s really cold and they stand a lot…It’s a fast-paced kind of job, so if you miss something the line is going to stop and there’s a lot of pressure on you. There’s a lot of chemicals going around. My mom wears three pants and two jackets because it’s a really cold place. It’s not a good environment to be for a long time, not good for anybody’s health.

During his first year of college paying out-of-state tuition, David continued to work one full-time and one part-time job. This put a significant strain on David’s ability to keep up with his coursework, and he remembered missing assignments and tests, and needing to withdraw from a class. “I realized that I was too busy because I didn’t have enough money…so I decided to start applying to scholarships, just any sort of scholarships.” By the end of the first year, David applied for and received in-state tuition rates, more scholarships, grants, and financial aid, and was able to drop his full-time job and keep only his on-campus work-study position. His ability to get through that first year and learn how to manage his time outside of class is one of the accomplishments David is most proud of.

As David talked about his experiences in college, it became clear that the CAMP office during his first year and his campus work-study job in a student services office during his sophomore year have both been key places where he felt comfortable and welcomed. The student services office where he currently works is a hub for multiple programs like CAMP, TRIO, and others that serve first-generation, low-income, and other historically underserved student populations. When he is not working, David will also spend time there between classes doing his homework and connecting with other students. “As a person who works at school, for me it’s somewhere that I actually enjoy being. Right now, I want to stay at school because it’s comfortable. There are people that I know, people I work with.” Working for these student
support offices also has given David frequent access to institutional supports when he needs them.

I like working here…I like the advisors, working with them. It gives me the chance to talk to them anytime. And then there’s also peer tutors around there. So if I’m doing my homework while working and there is something I don’t know, I can talk to them. I like getting to actually talk to more people, getting to know and communicate with people. Actually, I think the best decision I made here truly, is having the work study. That got me connected to so many programs and without it I don’t even know how my school work would be going right now.

Currently pursuing a degree in aviation management, David shared that he initially thought about studying to become a pilot but thought that the program was too expensive. He also realized that many of his peers already had some experience with flying airplanes, especially in one of his first aviation fundamental courses. “I actually realized that everyone had been doing hours for flying…so they started maybe 17, maybe 16. They’d done it even before they came to school.” Needing the course for his management track, David reached out to a former CAMP student who had taken the class the semester prior and could help him better understand the content. Although David described being able to accomplish many things on his own, “I would say I do 60% of all my stuff by myself because that’s how I’ve always been”; he also shared that he was not afraid of asking questions and described different times of reaching out to CAMP, TRIO, tutoring supports, and professors during their office hours. “Every time I need something, I have people around me.”

While David is in college several states away, his family has experienced some financial struggles in Texas. David learned this from one of his sisters and tried to send some money home
to help out; but his parents protested and returned what he had sent. David shared that his parents have worked very hard, paycheck to paycheck, and that this gives him the courage to also work hard in his college studies, “so that I can be able to help them when I actually finish.” His response to the final question about his hopes after college was as follows,

I think the biggest thing that I want to achieve with the education is to be able to have a safety that I’ve never had…not just for me, for my family. And my grandparents in Africa, my uncles, nieces and nephews. I want to be able to have a sense of safety, not just for me, but for my community too.

MaiBao

MaiBao is a Hmong-American student who participated in a CAMP project during her first year of college at a large public university in the Midwest. Now a sophomore, MaiBao is preparing to move to her institution’s medical campus, as she was just recently accepted into a bachelor’s level nursing program. In some ways, MaiBao’s life experiences have been slightly different from other students in the study. First, her parents came from Laos to the U.S. as refugees after the Vietnam War, but before MaiBao was born. Therefore, while her family came to the U.S. as refugees, all of MaiBao’s experiences, including her educational experiences, have been in the United States. Hmong is her first language and the language she speaks at home with her parents, but MaiBao began learning English in elementary school and is fully bilingual. Additionally, she knows very little about the work her father did in meatpacking when she was younger, the work that made her eligible to be served by CAMP.

However, in other ways, she is quite similar to the other current and former CAMP students who participated in this study. First, like all of the students, MaiBao is an ethnic and racial minority attending a predominantly-white campus. She also has high financial need and
relies on federal financial aid and scholarships to pay for college. In addition, she is a first-generation college student, as neither of her parents have a college degree. As MaiBao reflected on her educational experiences before and during college, she talked about a number of factors that she believed helped her along the way. First, her parents, especially her mother, held high expectations for MaiBao to pursue a college degree that would allow her to do well in life and help her family and community in ways that they could not. “My mom said that it was really hard for her at school. So that’s why she keeps pushing us to do really well.” Second, MaiBao said that she had excelled in school from an early age, was recognized as being academically gifted, and was invited to attend a magnet high school that offered an international baccalaureate program. From there, she connected with a number of additional supportive pre-college programs, including TRIO Talent Search, a free Saturday program that provided STEM enrichment, and a community foundation program that has since provided significant scholarship funding for her undergraduate studies.

In addition to her own academic strengths and the supports she received from a variety of programs growing up, MaiBao also credits her academic successes to her family’s encouragement and high expectations. Her parents came to the U.S. when they were teenagers, after their own parents’ deaths during the war and following siblings who had come before them. After several moves within the U.S. to be near extended family, her parents eventually settled in a diverse, urban city in the Midwest, about 45 minutes from where MaiBao is now attending college. A middle child between an older brother and three younger sisters, MaiBao also has many aunts, uncles, and cousins who live in the same city and who she sees quite often. MaiBao remembered seeking advice from some of her cousins who were older than her and who had already started college since her parents did not know how to help her navigate college processes.
and decisions. When asked how her parents were involved in her education, MaiBao said that her father worked a lot, but that her mother always attended her school events. “Even though she didn’t know English, she would go to conferences and then I would partially translate for her; but we were really bad at translating so my mom would just try to listen for herself.” She also encouraged MaiBao to play the violin in her school’s orchestra, drove her to and from music practice, and came to her concerts. “Even though she didn’t understand what was going on, she would sit and just wait for us to be done. That’s how my mom participated a lot.”

Now that MaiBao is in college, she said her mother has continued to be involved in her education, especially in MaiBao’s decisions about which major to pursue. “My mom really wanted me to be premed or go into pharmacy…premed because it was a good title and they make a lot of money.” But after MaiBao attended a health professions exploratory program this past summer, she decided to pursue nursing instead. “My parents are a little bit more accepting now. They don’t really mind anymore because they know that I want to take it a little bit further…be a nurse practitioner.” Being a first-generation college student has made it difficult for MaiBao to talk to her parents about some of her college experiences. “My parents, we don’t really talk that much about college, in general. They don’t really understand some of the things that go on….they listen, but then they don’t really understand. It’s really hard for them.”

Although her parents are limited in their ability to understand MaiBao’s experiences as a college student, she does look to them for support and encouragement. “Whenever it’s really hard, I generally tell my mom…and she would say, ‘you can do it. If other people can do it, you could do it too.” Later, MaiBao reflected, “for me, family is a big thing. We provide for each other and we spend a lot of time together.”
Going to school relatively close to her home has allowed MaiBao to go home on the weekends and be with her family and her Hmong church community. There, she is able to speak her first language with others and know that she belongs. On her college campus, MaiBao said that achieving this sense of belonging was more complicated because, “here, there’s not a lot of Hmong people, but there are a lot of Asian people. So sometimes I feel like, how do I say this? Like you’re in it, but out of it at the same time.” When asked about a time when she has felt comfortable on campus, MaiBao talked about experiences in her Spanish class. “We’re all trying to learn the language and culture and it feels like you’re on the same level. I feel like I’m a little bit more integrated because we’re there to help each other.” This theme of helping each other was a thread throughout MaiBao’s stories, from her choice of a helping major to her experiences in Spanish class to her motivations for completing a college degree that reflected her family’s values. “I think my parents are proud that I am in college and they’re really looking forward to me being able to finish…I think they really want to see me do something that not only helps myself, but helps others…doing all this work isn’t just for yourself. It is to help my family too.”

Chapter V: Cross-Comparisons and Emerging Themes

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I introduced the reader to each refugee-background CAMP student who participated in this study by taking excerpts from their interviews to describe their backgrounds and relay how they remembered, thought about, and made sense of their family backgrounds, pre-college paths, and early college experiences. In this chapter, I will use the broader stories they shared with me, including some stories not incorporated into the introductory narratives, to provide cross-comparisons and highlight emerging themes that relate to my research questions.
Pre-College Experiences

Much of Chapter IV was focused on the CAMP students’ family histories and pre-college experiences, as this time in their lives laid the foundation for their transition to college and early experiences at their respective universities. I will now explore several themes that relate to my first research question,

1) How do refugee-background undergraduate students with a family history in agricultural labor describe and make sense of their families, cultural backgrounds, and key relationships as they relate to their experiences in college preparation, choice and enrollment?

The first set of themes relate to their histories as refugee-background students with familial histories in agricultural labor to include the following: (a) family survival stories; (b) stories of overcoming challenges related to adapting to the U.S.; (c) varying levels of identification with their parents’ agricultural labor; and (d) recollections of learning English and developing skills as a family navigator.

With the exception of Mai Bao who is second generation in the U.S., born in Colorado to parents who had immigrated as refugees, the rest of the CAMP student participants came to the U.S. during their early to middle childhoods. All of the students began by sharing stories about their family backgrounds, including their lives prior to coming to the U.S. The initial open-ended interview prompt designed to elicit these early memories was, “Imagine you wanted to write a story about your family’s background. How would you begin?” Because this study was primarily interested in approaching their experiences from a strengths-based perspective, this interview question allowed students to choose the extent to which they shared stories about hardships in their home countries or in refugee camps.
Family Survival Stories. Some of the early memories shared by students included surviving danger and violence, extended life in refugee camps, family separations, and poverty. Many also described how family members, including grandparents and other extended family members, were central to their survival. Gina and Imay, both of Bhutanese descent, were born in Nepali refugee camps and described how their families had lived there for almost twenty years before being approved for permanent relocation in the U.S. Although they had not personally experienced the violence in Bhutan, they shared how their parents, aunts and uncles, and grandparents told stories of persecution against the Bhutanese Nepali as well as how their families survived by fleeing to nearby countries.

Several other students also described the importance of interdependence among extended family members in surviving separation and loss that accompanied their forced movements and eventual permanent placements as refugees. David, Christina, and Huy were all separated from at least one parent for extended periods of time while their families tried to find ways to escape or survive. Christina shared being separated from her father for several years because he fled Burma first, seeking refugee status in Malaysia. “He left when I was really young. He moved to Malaysia so he could work and save some money so we could go to him.” Christina shared that while waiting in Burma, her grandmother took care of her and provided her with religious teachings and a spiritual foundation. “During the process, I met one of my grandmas who took care of us…she was a really big part of my connection with God.”

Grandmothers were also sources of strength and comfort for Bhutanese Nepali American student Imay and for Vietnamese American student Huy. For example, Huy spoke at length about how his grandmother raised him in Vietnam after his mother left the family and his father struggled with addiction. “My grandma was a mother figure for me, the person who took care of
me. At 80, she was still able to walk a mile to go to the local market. She would sell vegetables that we grew on our own, and then sell them in the market and use that money to buy food.” Huy remembered helping his grandmother and described her work ethic as inspirational. “Seeing that she worked so hard for us, it motivated me to want to get that education and want to change that life.”

This theme of family sacrifice and survival was often discussed by the CAMP students in this study; not only as important pieces of their histories and identities, but also as sources of motivation for seeking a better life through education. Paw shared how her parents and other Karen families talk about the importance of “remembering were you came from, your beginning.”

They [Karen parents] are very supportive when it comes to education. They will encourage you, they will always say to you, ‘Know that this [U.S] is now your country… maybe there’s some other people who stayed behind, are going through what you went through. There are civil wars going on, a lot of kids are starving. This is probably past you, but there are a lot more generations going through what you went through.’ It kind of motivates me.

As previously noted, this study did not delve deeply into the CAMP students’ stories of life in refugee camps or of hardships experienced prior to coming to the U.S. However, even with the limited amount that students shared about those experiences, some of the themes that began emerging included overcoming significant traumas as a family and the importance of extended family, including some who were left behind. Many also made a connection between their family histories and the belief that education could be a pathway to a better life.
**Transitioning to the U.S.** The students’ memories of their transitions to the U.S. were also important pieces of their family stories and personal histories. Themes that emerged from these stories included surprise at the abundance in the U.S., the importance of extended family in adjusting, and the ways that faith-based communities and other community-based organizations helped them make a successful transition.

Huy, David, and Paw each remembered being surprised at the disparities in living conditions between their home countries and refugee camps and the U.S. For example, Huy shared,

> When I was in Vietnam, people always talk about the U.S. like it’s the better world, like the heavenly world that people want to get into. When I first came here, I was amazed by things like hot water, having a toilet inside, and exhaust fans in the bathroom. And then the kitchen was inside. We didn’t have those kinds of things in Vietnam.

David and Paw also recalled feeling amazed by the relative abundance in the U.S., from the size of the supermarkets and variety and amount of available foods to how many people drove cars. Paw remembered being amazed that “people had everything they needed” compared to the poverty she had experienced in the refugee camp.

Students also shared stories about some of the family members and communities that welcomed them and helped them adjust to their new life in the U.S. Christina, Huy, and Imay each talked about initially settling in communities where they already had family members who had come to the U.S. before them. MaiBao reflected that this was also the case for her family. After her grandparents died in Laos during the Vietnam War, her mother and father followed older relatives to the U.S. “For the Hmong people, if they are going to move somewhere, a lot of times their brothers and sisters move with them.” Like several of the other refugee-background
CAMP students in this study, MaiBoa’s parents moved several times within the U.S., each time moving to find work and also be near other family members.

In addition to extended family, the CAMP students also remembered that community agencies and faith-based groups helped them settle into their new U.S. homes. Christina recalled the importance of a small but present Chin faith-based community in the area. “They were the ones who took care of us and got us connected to all these charity groups and support groups that were helping the Chin community.” Faith-based communities were also very important to David and Gina as neither had extended family where they were initially placed.

In addition to receiving supports, David and Gina’s fathers also began developing new supportive networks for others by building faith-based communities that could worship in their home languages. David’s father, who had trained to be a pastor in Kenya, began developing a church in the Dallas area for immigrants from different African countries. “There were people here who spoke my language but didn’t speak English. Going to an English church, they weren’t really getting much so my dad decided to open his own church.” Similarly, Gina’s father began serving as a Hindu priest, resulting in her parents’ home becoming a central gathering place for other Hindu Nepali people in the surrounding community.

Across all the students’ stories of their transitions to the U.S., extended family and faith-based communities were often described as key sources of support. Most described either being initially placed in U.S. communities where they already had existing extended family members or moving within the U.S. to remain close to extended family. Many of the CAMP students also described how faith-based communities had welcomed them to the U.S., helped them access important resources, and became early sources of belonging in a new country.
Connections to Family Labor in Agriculture. In addition to the common experience of having a family history as refugees, the other commonality that connected the students in this study was their family history in seasonal, temporary, or migratory agricultural labor in the U.S. This agricultural labor made them eligible to be served by CAMP during their first year in college. While most of the students’ families were currently working or had worked in meatpacking or poultry processing, other family labor included harvesting crops, trimming trees, and picking orchard fruits. Only two of the students had firsthand knowledge of their parents’ agricultural work because they also worked alongside their parents during the summer. David joined his mother for a summer sorting and cleaning produce to save money for his move to college and remembered the work as physically demanding and miserably cold. At the time of the interview, he was trying to help his mother find a new job. “She called me a few weeks ago to [help her] look for a job cause it's depressing there.” Aung, who worked alongside his father harvesting fruit for several summers, described their long days in the orchards as exhausting, hot, and dry. “He [Aung’s father] is still working there…but I don’t want to go back to it. It is really hard work.”

However, while these two students had first-hand experience with the poor working conditions their parents endured, the students whose parents worked in meatpacking or poultry processing had limited knowledge of their parents’ work environments. Imay and Paw believed that their parents wanted to shield them from the harsh realities of their labor in the processing plants. Imay reflected, “They don’t talk about it because they wouldn’t, you know? You don’t want your kids thinking about your work.” Similarly, Paw said, “My mom never actually wanted us to learn about [the poultry processing job] because she’s like, ‘You don’t need to know about that. You need to know about your education…you need to know that.’”
Each CAMP student’s involvement with and understanding of their familial history in agricultural labor reflected a variety of perspectives and experiences. The agricultural work itself varied from meat and poultry processing, to working in the fields, to picking fruit in the orchards. For Mai Bao and Gina, their parents’ agricultural work happened much earlier in their lives and they had few to no memories of it. Christina’s father left the meatpacking plant because of a hand injury, but now works in a large warehouse setting with her mother. The rest of the CAMP students had at least one family member who continues to work in either the processing plants, fields, or orchards. While only Aung and David had firsthand knowledge of this work, the others described how their parents’ long work days, evening shifts, and weekend work often limited their family time together and also limited their parents’ abilities to be involved in their U.S. educational experiences. I now shift to themes that emerged from describing the CAMP students’ memories navigating school in the U.S. as English language learners while their parents worked in agriculture and other manual labor jobs to support the family.

**Successfully Learning English.** When asked to share some of their earliest memories in U.S. schools, most of the CAMP students remembered their experiences learning English. Although Mai Bao was born in the U.S., she began learning English when she started elementary school and only spoke her family’s Hmong language at home. Each of the other CAMP students in the study began school in the U.S. either in the later elementary school grades (Gina and Aung) or in middle school (David, Christina, Paw, Imay, and Huy). Many described vivid memories of their initial experiences in a U.S. classroom, especially being overwhelmed by neither understanding what their classmates and teachers were saying nor how to interact with them. For example, David remembered always being in the top of his class in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, but initially struggled to do as well in the middle school classrooms in
the U.S. “When I came to the U.S., my school just went way low…my grades went way low because everything was in English and I didn’t know what to do. I was just doing what I can, but it was just bad.”

However, an asset-based theme also emerged from the CAMP students’ stories learning English. Several described their ESL classrooms as positive, welcoming spaces where they experienced some of their first instances of belonging in the U.S. For example, Aung recalled, “There were like two or three students in that special English class. So, I love it. I just remember that's the only class that I liked to participate in, enjoy.” For Gina, successfully completing her ESL coursework gave her a sense of accomplishment and belonging.

When I truly felt like I belong here, it was the first year of my middle school cause before that I would always be put into ESL. In middle school, I was put into regular English classes. From there I was like, Oh, I'm also one of them. I'm not that person who was taken away to a separate classroom. That's how I felt.

Others also described a sense of accomplishment when they were able to transition out of ESL classes and into mainstream classes. David and Huy attributed their progress, in part, to their participation in after school and summer school programming. David recalled that joining an after-school homework club in high school was especially helpful.

The second semester of freshman year in high school, I started getting into the clubs. Not school clubs, really; but after school there were these programs that were there for homework and stuff. I would go there, and I saw my grades starting to improve. Right from then, I realized that the only reason my grades went bad in middle school was only because the language, I guess.
Huy also shared that attending summer school through his district’s Migrant Education Program helped him to strengthen his English proficiency. After two consecutive years of summer school, Huy transitioned into regular coursework and recalled his move out of ESL with pride. “It was a big transition for me. Coming from a background where I was learning English, [a person] who has English as a second language, and then to go to honors courses and an AP course.”

Being an English language learner meant being an outsider for some, but having memories of a welcoming, transitional space for others. Students shared memories of stress and vulnerability, but also memories of accomplishment as they became more comfortable in English and more confident interacting with others in their new U.S. communities. With growing confidence in English, many of the students also remembered taking on more responsibilities for interactions between their families and their new communities.

**Roles as Family Navigators.** Many of the CAMP students shared how from a young age they were able to help their families and other community members as translators and navigators while learning English. For example, Imay, Christina, and Huy each believed that taking on the role of family translator/navigator helped them practice their English and learn to communicate more quickly. Imay said, “My aunt spoke a little bit, but the paperwork…I was the one who had to write it for them. I helped my dad with the outside work, like applications, translating, and all that. That’s when my English improved the most.” Christina reflected a similar experience. “I would have to go to appointments with my family members, my relatives, and some people from my church because we didn’t have a lot of translators available. I also got a lot of practice [communicating in English] from that too.” Huy shared, “I barely speak a little, but I have to go translate for [family members]. But I learned English from that too because I couldn’t be afraid
of repeating myself or to ask them to repeat what they say. This kind of helped me to learn [English] at the same time helping my family.” Gina also remembered that she began learning English more quickly than her parents, and that they often relied on her to help with translations, understanding forms and processes in English.

Becoming comfortable communicating in English and taking on the role of family navigator at an early age were common experiences described by many of the CAMP students in the study. A theme of interdependence and mutual support among family members began to emerge across their stories. Parents were laboring in processing plants, fields and orchards while their children were beginning their educational journeys in the U.S. The next section explores themes that emerged from recollections of their pre-college academic experiences, including their family’s involvements, key relationships outside of their families, and the academic enrichment programs that helped them prepare to attend a four-year university.

**Family Involvement in Education, Pre-College.** All of the CAMP students were self-described as first-generation college going, meaning neither of their parents had a four-year degree. While David’s father had attended divinity school prior to moving to the U.S., none of the other students’ parents had any college education in the U.S. or elsewhere. Moreover, only Mai Bao’s parents had attended a U.S. high school. Several of the students described how this lack of experience with U.S. educational systems combined with limited English proficiencies and conflicting work schedules prevented their parents from being actively involved in their pre-college educational experiences. Nonetheless, most students described how their parents had high expectations and emphasized the importance of doing well in school.

Parental expectations were described as key educational motivators for many. David shared, “It’s just something that was always expected of me…not just my parents but the
community around my parents too…It’s not that I was forced or anything. I just never even thought of any other options other than college.” But David also said that he was not able to go to his parents for help with navigating college preparations. “Honestly, I went through all that stuff by myself.” Vietnamese American CAMP student Huy also recalled being on his own through much of his high school years in the U.S. because of his father’s evening work schedule at the meatpacking plant. “I barely saw my dad. I only saw him on the weekend. Also, I think with my dad not knowing English, he could not even go to parent conferences or understand anything that related to what I was doing in school most of the time.”

The four female students, Christina, Gina, MaiBao, and Paw, each said that their parents’ consistent messaging was that an education was the key to “everything”; but that their parents were also limited in their ability to help them in school. Christina shared,

They were always really supportive of the decisions I make. But my parents didn’t really know what was going on with me, school wise. They weren’t that involved, but to be honest, I don’t blame them because they don’t have time for that, and they can’t speak English. So my parents were really supportive, but not in a way that they were physically there.

MaiBao shared that despite their own lack of access to higher education, her parents also had high expectations of her. “I always knew that I wanted to continue my education because it was very important to my family. My parents would say, ‘you have to do good in school, it will help you to get more opportunities and make more money and be able to provide for your family’.”

Consistently, each CAMP student in the study shared similar stories about their family’s involvement in their education before college. While their parents were not able to provide
homework assistance nor guide their children on how to prepare for and apply to college, most were described as significant sources of high expectations, encouragement, and motivation. The next section transitions to how the CAMP students in this study connected with others outside of their family to prepare for college. These people were able to not only provide encouragement, but also provide material assistance with the specific steps to progress in their education and prepare for college.

**Key Relationships in High School.** All of the students identified at least one key person outside of their family who helped them develop academically and prepare for pursuing a college degree while in high school. They also described the ways these key people provided encouragement, academic supports, and connections to resources. Some students discussed institutional agents such as counselors, teachers, Migrant Education advocates, and program advisors; while others talked about the importance of particular peer relationships.

For example, Huy described his advanced placement (AP) biology teacher as a “top-notch teacher” who influenced his pursuit of a STEM field in college. “She was just really good, in terms of encouraging students, telling me ‘Oh you should try…you should do your best to achieve your goal’.” An IB school college coordinator helped MaiBao and Christina navigate the steps to college by encouraging them, having high expectations, and providing frequent college admissions and scholarship applications supports. MaiBao remembered her saying, “This is your future. So, I want you to put your time into this.”

Christina said that the college coordinator was actually just one of many people that helped her prepare for college. She reflected, “I had a lot of supports from a lot of the organizations that I was involved in” including her TRIO counselor and volunteer mentors from a corporate mentoring program in her high school. Christina also spoke at length about one of
her ROTC instructors, how he connected her to other students, wrote letters of recommendation for her, and provided encouragement and mentorship.

Imay’s Migrant Education advocate was instrumental in connecting him to the same IB magnet high school that Mai Bao and Christina attended. Imay said this advocate was the first person to identify him as a candidate for the elite school and helped him with each application step. Imay described this as “one of the things that radically changed everything in my life. I never even heard of the magnet school. And like me, I was a straight A student throughout middle school and I never even heard of it.” He believed that had it not been for this advocate, he would never have applied and been accepted into the magnet school that emphasized college preparations.

Paw said that her middle school ESOL teacher was the first person outside of her family to encourage her to go to college. Later, a different high school teacher [Mrs. P.] was even more instrumental in helping Paw with the specific pre-college steps. She connected Paw to an after-school enrichment program, and when it was time, helped Paw apply for college admissions and for financial aid. Paw said that Mrs. P. remains an important source of encouragement and support even now. “We are always in contact whenever I need something. I talked to her yesterday and she said, ‘Yes! You made it! I knew you would make it’.”

In addition to the importance of institutional agents during her pre-college education, Gina also talked about how certain classroom peers influenced her. While in high school, Gina was able to take dual enrollment courses at the local community college and accrue college credits. In her community college classes, Gina recalled how she befriended many other high school students like her who were academically driven. “So, they used to motivate me because all of my friends were upper level and college was the only option. So for me, it was easy.”
The importance of key relationships outside of their families was described by all of the CAMP students in relation to their academic paths. Whether those relationships were with institutional agents like teachers, Migrant Education personnel or counselors, or with peers who were also college-bound, most remembered the ways that these persons connected them to resources, communicated belief in their abilities to succeed in school and attend college, and provided necessary college information and/or application supports.

**Pre-College Educational Programs.** In addition to receiving supports from specific people outside of their families, all of the CAMP students in this study described being connected to at least one academic enrichment program or extracurricular activity during high school and most believed that those involvements helped them prepare for college. The following table provides an overview of the pre-college programs described by each CAMP student.

**Table 2**

*Pre-College Enrichment Programs and Extracurricular Involvements*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Pre-College Involvements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Huy</td>
<td>Honors and Advanced Placement Courses, Migrant Summer Leadership Academy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gina</td>
<td>Dual Enrollment Courses, IB Magnet School, Saturday STEM Program, TRIO Upward Bound Math and Science, Foundation Scholarship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imay</td>
<td>Migrant Program, IB Magnet School, Foundation Scholarship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paw</td>
<td>Migrant Program, After School Programming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aung</td>
<td>Migrant Program, Soccer</td>
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The educational programs described by students included college preparatory academic enrichment, Migrant Education programming, other federal pre-college programs, and either school-based or community-based academic enrichment. Each of these students described how being in these programs helped them not only reinforce their aspirations for attending college, but also prepared them academically and connected them to other supportive resources. For example, Imay reflected that going to the IB high school “radically changed my life.”

Several of the CAMP students who attended high school in the same urban district also discussed the impact of participating in multiple pre-college programs, including a Saturday STEM program and federal TRIO Talent Search or TRIO Upward Bound Math and Science programs. Gina reflected that being a part of these programs connected her to even more opportunities to learn about STEM careers and prepare for college. Similarly, both MaiBao and Christina said that being in multiple academic enrichment programs meant that they had numerous resources for academic supports, connections to scholarship opportunities, and guidance completing college and scholarship applications. Similar to Gina’s recounting, MaiBao also remembered being surrounded by peers who were college-bound and having the opportunity to meet current college students from similar backgrounds through her academic enrichment programs.

Huy and Christina participated in a pre-college summer residential program hosted by their state’s Migrant Education Program (MEP). Huy, who attended a smaller rural high school
with fewer local academic enrichment opportunities, described how participating in an MEP summer program helped him to learn the tangible steps to prepare for college. “Before I have the idea of going to college, but after going to [summer migrant program], I found out, ‘Oh, I have mentors that can help me apply for FAFSA or go to school for free. Because of [summer migrant program], I realized everything I could be capable of doing.’”

Conversely, David said that he knew from an early age that he wanted to go to college; but that he completed most of the steps by himself.

Honestly I went through all that stuff by myself, except the only thing that I guess my high school counselor kind of helped me. She made sure that I was actually applying for college. She told me to go and look and see if I can find scholarships. But applying for college, everything, I did all that by myself. The FAFSA stuff...it was all me.

Aung also described few programmatic supports on his path to college. In fact, Aung shared that he was not even considering college until a CAMP recruiter came to his high school and encouraged him to apply.

I don't even think about it [college] at all. And when I was in senior year, I don't even have any plans after I graduate, I was just going to go into work. A CAMP recruiter came to our school and they talk to migrants, students like me cause I was interested at that time…I'm nervous but with a recruiter encouragement, I tried to just apply for it and I got accepted [to CAMP].

Through these CAMP students’ stories of their family histories and pre-college experiences, one can see that they attributed their successful paths to college to a combination of factors. These included their own aspirations to have a better life for themselves and their families through continued education, their parents’ and communities’ expectations that they
utilize the educational opportunities afforded them, access to educational enrichment programming, and the support of key people outside of their families, including college-bound peers and institutional agents such as teachers, counselors, ROTC leaders, and Migrant Education advocates. In addition to the encouragement, academic supports, and navigational assistance they received, each of these CAMP students also accessed a number of financial supports that made the four-year university option affordable. The final section of themes related to the first research question will explore how the students talked about affordability and college choice.

**College Choice Factors: CAMP, Reputation, and Proximity.** As the CAMP students shared stories about their transitions to college, many also talked about the factors that contributed to which college they eventually chose to attend and how despite coming from lower income backgrounds, they were able to afford to go to college. The college choice factors discussed by students included the existence of a CAMP project and available programs of study, strong reputations of their chosen schools, and for some, proximity to home.

For five of the eight participants, CAMP played a significant role in their college choice. Paw shared that she chose her college because it was the only one in the region that had a CAMP project. Aung was not considering college at all until a CAMP recruiter came to his high school and encouraged him to apply. Huy and Elizabeth both had prior experience with their chosen schools because they had attended a Migrant Education pre-college summer program there, and then were recruited by the same university’s CAMP project as high school seniors. Imay shared that he was vacillating on whether or not to attend college at all during his senior year; but with the support and encouragement of his CAMP recruiter and the office of financial aid, was able to access additional scholarships that made college affordable. In contrast, the other three students
(MaiBao, Gina, and David) learned about and applied to CAMP only after they had already committed to attend their chosen schools.

Strong reputations of their chosen schools and available programs of study were also described as important factors by some of the CAMP students. David chose to leave his home state of Texas and attend a college in the Mountain West because of the reputation of the school’s aviation program. “Honestly, I wasn’t looking for the right school, I was looking for the right program. I talked to some people and they said that this school’s aviation program was the best, so applied and got in here. That’s why I’m here.” Huy, MaiBao, Gina, and Christina were all initially thinking of pursuing a pre-medical school route in college and chose their current colleges in part because of the school’s reputation for strong STEM and pre-med programs of study. Gina shared, “Ever since I knew about college, I knew [her chosen school]. It was always there for me.”

Gina also elected her current university because her parents wanted her to be closer to home. In retrospect, it was interesting to note that although parental influence and proximity to home were not discussed more frequently by the young women in the study, they did each choose to attend college closer to home. While Paw lived at home and commuted, the other three female students attended college within 45 minutes of their homes and talked about frequently going home to help their parents on the weekends. Conversely, of the four male CAMP students, only Imay attended college within an hour of his family and described having little contact with them because of a difficult relationship with his father. The other three males (David, Huy, and Aung) each moved relatively far from their homes to go to college. David moved across several states, while Huy and Aung were each attending college over four hours from their home communities. Proximity to home seemed to be of more importance to the female CAMP students.
than the males in this study, based on their college choices and their descriptions of interacting with family members while in college.

**College Choice Factor: Affordability.** The financial resources that made the CAMP students’ college attendance viable was another important element in their choices to attend four-year universities. All of the students in this study were considered to have high financial need, as this is one of the eligibility criteria for participation in CAMP. While CAMP projects typically offer a modest first-year scholarship and/or monthly living stipend to help offset college costs, this financial support combined with a full Pell Grant award still does not cover the full costs of attendance at many four-year universities. Within the context of this financial reality, the CAMP students talked about the various strategies they used outside of the Pell Grant and CAMP monies to afford their chosen schools without burdening their families. These strategies included applying for and receiving additional scholarships, working while in school, and for one student, commuting from home to reduce living costs.

Scholarships outside of CAMP were important sources of funding for most of the students in this study. Half of the students discussed benefitting from a non-profit foundation program in their school district that provided a significant renewable scholarship to attend one of 17 colleges and universities in their region. Five students also received an institutional scholarship that was both need-based and merit-based and bridged the gap between the Pell Grant and the cost of tuition and fees. These five chose to attend the most expensive public university in their state, in part because they had the financial aid package (including multiple scholarships) to support their decision. Nevertheless, even with these types of financial supports, all the male CAMP students and one of the females (Christina) also worked while in college to help pay for living expenses.
Paw said that she was able to afford college without working her first year because she lived in CAMP-subsidized housing. After her CAMP benefits ended at the end of her freshman year, Paw moved back home and commuted an hour each way to her university. Gina lived in relatively inexpensive on-campus housing that had scholarship subsidies, and both she and MaiBao had substantial enough financial aid packages that they could get by without working during their first year in college.

Despite coming from lower income backgrounds, all of the CAMP students in the study described being able to afford to attend a four-year university by accessing a variety of resources including federal financial aid, multiple scholarships, and for some, working while in school. They shared that while their families did not help them access and apply for college funding sources and were limited in their abilities to help financially with the costs of college, their families did offer support where they could. This included offering help with housing costs, inviting their college students to live at home for free, and paying for some of the smaller expenses when they could.

In the first section of this chapter, I provided cross-comparisons of eight CAMP students’ descriptions of their pre-college experiences, including their family histories, their early educational experiences in the U.S., and how different people and programs have helped them prepare to pursue a college education. As all of these students come from lower income backgrounds, I also compared the ways that each described paying for the cost of attendance at their chosen four-year universities. The next section of this chapter will shift to themes that emerged in relation to my second research question about the challenges they faced during their transition to college.
Challenges Faced in College

In the second interview with each refugee-background CAMP student, I began with open-ended questions to explore the difficulties they had faced as a college student thus far. Of the eight students included in the study, three had just completed their first semester of college (Christina, Gina, and Imay), three were in their second year (David, MaiBao, and Paw), Huy was in his third year, and Aung was in his fifth. The research question that guided this exploration was as follows:

2) What challenges do refugee-background CAMP students describe in relation to their experiences pursuing a degree at four-year universities?

As the current and former CAMP students reflected on the challenges they had faced as undergraduates thus far, their shared experiences fell into five major themes: financial concerns, meeting academic rigor, family challenges, navigating college as first-generation, low-income students, and finding a sense of belonging as an ethnic and linguistic minority student of color.

Financial Challenges: Working While in School. As noted earlier in the section on college affordability, the refugee-background CAMP students in this study utilized multiple strategies to be able to afford to attend a four-year university. CAMP’s first-year, partial tuition scholarship helped pay a portion of the costs, and all had access to federal Pell grants; however, these combined sources of funding could not cover the full costs of attendance. All four male CAMP students described working while in college, sometimes multiple jobs simultaneously. All described difficulties maintaining their academics from working too many hours while in school, but also described their employment as a source of pride. For example, Huy had combined jobs as a peer tutor, undergraduate teaching assistant, and a residential assistant to pay for his college expenses; but in his third undergraduate year, Huy was awarded a prestigious
engineering fellowship and was able to drop two of the three jobs. When asked to talk about a significant accomplishment, Huy pointed to his success in being able to pay for college on his own and described himself as a “hard worker that came from a background that had nothing and then worked my way up to the point where I am today.”

David also discussed working at both a full-time off-campus job and a part-time on-campus job to pay the out-of-state tuition during the first year at his university. “I had to work both jobs…and go to class full time. But that was way too much, so I started applying for scholarships and applied for in-state tuition my second semester.” Once David received in-state tuition and some additional need-based scholarships and grants, he was able to drop the full-time job and only work at the on-campus job to pay for his living expenses. Like Huy, being financially independent was important to David as he worried about burdening his parents. “My parents actually don’t want me to go to work. They said they want to pay for the housing, which is really something…them saying that, knowing the kind of jobs that they’re doing right now. I can’t let them because I know that they have way too many kids to support.”

Like David and Huy, Imay also talked about the challenges of working too many hours while trying to do well in college. Commuting to his hometown every weekend to work almost full-time at a large home goods store, Imay said that this sometimes made it difficult to find the time to study and take advantage of out-of-class supports. “I’m thinking about quitting because sometimes it does hinder with school events…I didn’t attend a single practice exam last semester”. Imay shared that he did not do as well as he would have hoped the first semester in college and thought that reducing his hours at work might help him do better in the future. Aung worked less than the other males in the study, putting in a few hours per week in his university’s foundation office helping with mailings. He said he limited his work hours because he also
worried that working more would hurt his ability to complete his homework out of class.

While all the male CAMP students described working at least one job while in college, of the females, only Christina had paid employment. Like Aung, she worked a few hours per week on campus and used that income to pay for personal expenses. Interestingly, the other female CAMP students - MaiBao, Paw, and Gina - each shared that their parents did not want them to work so that they could concentrate on their studies.

**Adjusting to College-Level Academic Rigor.** Like many undergraduates, especially those in their first year of college, several of the CAMP students talked about initially struggling to learn how to study for rigorous coursework and manage their time effectively outside of class. Aung, who was studying accounting, said that homework difficulty was one of the biggest challenges he continually faced, especially when he was at home in the evenings and could not access a tutor. David described struggling his first year in college and coming close to dropping at least one class. “Time management was the most difficult thing I had to face.” Similarly, Christina described struggling with STEM course rigor and time management during her first semester of college. “I already knew college was going to be such a big difference from high school, but the classes were challenging, and I feel like I wasn’t prepared.” Christina said she realized at the end of the first semester that she was spending too much social time with friends and was trying to change her daily schedule to set aside more time for study outside of class. Imay also said that he was concerned about his first semester college GPA and wanted to improve his grades during the second semester in order to retain his scholarships. He attributed some of his struggles to his new freedoms away from family.

I knew I wasn’t ready for the first semester at all… Growing up, I didn’t really have time to do the things I wanted to do. I was always under pressure that I have to do these things
with the family. All my life, I just keep doing things [for the family]. And now that I have this free time and I have the freedom to do whatever I want. Because now, I don’t have the responsibility of family, right?

Huy, who was a third-year chemical engineering student, talked about the pressures associated with his major and lacking a mentor who could help guide him toward internship and post-graduation opportunities. “I have chosen this path [chemical engineering] but I’m not sure what my future will look like. That makes me feel stressed sometimes because I study so hard for it, suffer for it every day; but in the end, I don’t know what the future looks like.” Regardless of the type of academic challenge, whether it was the common growing pains of learning how to manage one’s time or meet rigorous academic expectations, the CAMP students had additional pressures to earn good grades in order to keep their scholarships and financial aid. For them, there was no family economic safety net if they were to lose their eligibility for funding.

**Family Pressures and Strained Relationships.** Although family was described as a source of strength and support for most, several of the students also described various challenges related to their family relationships and expectations. Imay and Huy both described having strained relationships with their fathers. Imay spoke at length about the resentment he felt towards his father, and that their strained relationship meant that he had minimal contact with his mother and younger siblings. Huy also described a distant relationship with his father and said that he often stayed busy in college as a strategy for coping with family issues that he had no control over. Neither of these two students described being able to go to their immediate family for emotional support nor encouragement during college in the ways that the other refugee-background CAMP students did.

Several other students described different types of family stressors, especially related to
family pressures to excel academically and to choose what their families deemed to be lucrative or prestigious majors. MaiBao said that her mother expected her to pursue a medical path because “it’s a good title, they make a lot of money, and they have a lot of reputation.” When MaiBao chose nursing instead of pre-med, she said that her family eventually approved her decision only because she planned to pursue a graduate degree. Similarly, Paw shared that she also was expected to go into a medical field. “It’s always been nursing, nursing…but the courses, the sciences, they were not for me.” Paw changed her major to social welfare because she felt it was another field where she could help others who had come from similar backgrounds. Paw shared that her perseverance in college was due in part to her sense of duty to her family. “Somehow I managed. I wanted to go to college…to succeed, and then give to my parents.” Imay also talked about having a sense of responsibility for doing well in college and giving back to his family.

Even when I was a kid, the goal was help my family…My family grew up very poor, especially when we moved here [to the U.S.]. So making a lot of money after going through college, it’s kind of what they wanted as well…that’s kind of the whole reason we came to the United States, for me to have a better life.

Although all the CAMP students described ways that their families communicated high expectations of them as college students, they also shared the limitations their families had in providing navigational assistance. The next section describes some of the challenges CAMP students shared in relation to their first-generation status.

**First-Generation Obstacles.** As first-generation college students, many of the CAMP students described having to navigate college without the assistance of family members who had postsecondary experience. Paw shared, “My parents always push me, remind me that education
is everything…you need to succeed. Because my mom never went to school, my dad never
graduated from middle school…I mean in my family, there was no one who went to college who
could tell me what path. Like there was no path laid out for me.” MaiBao shared a similar
description. “My parents, we don’t really talk that much about college in general. Our parents
don’t really understand some of the things that go on in college. They listen, but they don’t really
understand.”

Huy and David also shared stories about specific challenges related to being first-
generation college students from modest income backgrounds. David talked about having the
realization that many of his classmates in his first aviation class in college had prior experience
flying airplanes. Worried that he was behind his peers in experience and that the program would
take too long for him to complete, David switched majors to pursue the business aspects of
aviation. Huy also talked about having difficulty choosing a major. “I think being a first-
generation college student made it really hard to choose what you like to do [your major]
because a lot of people have some sort of family background…engineers or doctors or things like
that.” Like Gina and Christina, Huy initially pursued a pre-med track, but decided to switch to
chemical engineering so that he could get a good paying job with a bachelor’s level degree. Huy
described feeling pressure to make a good living sooner and help provide for his father; but he
also shared that he was not particularly happy with his major choice. Furthermore, even though
he was in a prestigious engineering fellowship program, Huy talked about still feeling out of
place because as a first-generation student, he lacked the same family connections as his peers. “I
never went to a career fair, which I was supposed to do my first year. And a lot of students in the
school, their parents are engineers, or something related to engineering.”

Huy was the most vocal about the salience of his identity as a first-generation college
student, perhaps because he had participated in multiple support programs that target historically underserved populations. Not only did Huy receive many supports as a first-generation college student, he also contributed as a peer mentor, peer tutor, and residential assistant in programs that served other first-generation students and received professional development surrounding the unique needs of students who hold that identity. None of the other CAMP students in the study verbalized “first-generation” as an identity they held specifically; but some did share the challenge of not being able to go to their parents for assistance understanding and navigating the college experience. In addition to first generation challenges, many also talked about their identities as ethnic minority students of color and the extent to which they felt like they belonged on their campuses.

**Seeking to Belong on Campus.** With the exception of Huy who described having a Vietnamese American student community on his campus, all of the CAMP students in this study described being either a) the only student from their particular ethnic background or b) one of just a handful of students on their campus. When asked if they could tell a story about a time when they felt welcomed on campus versus a time when they felt like they were an outsider, the CAMP students shared a variety of experiences.

Huy said that there were other Vietnamese students on his campus, but that he still experienced times when he felt different from others. “There have been some times when I felt like I don’t belong here. Like at my orientation, I was the only Asian person in there, and that was intimidating because everything you say, people look at you differently.” Huy also shared feeling different from other Vietnamese students on campus because of his first-generation, low-income status. “I think even though we are from the same background, the experiences we have are different.” He said that the international Vietnamese students and 2nd generation Vietnamese
American students were more likely to come from wealthier backgrounds than him. “That kind of economic status makes me feel like I don’t belong to them.” Nevertheless, Huy continued to stay active in various Asian student organizations on campus and had even initiated a new Asian student engineering organization. “I think it’s good to hang out with [other Vietnamese students] because you still have a connection to your background, like where you’re from.”

MaiBao said that she had tried going to meetings hosted by an Asian student organization at her university; but that there were few Hmong people represented. “Sometimes [other Asian students] know what Hmong is, but some don’t…they would try to speak in Vietnamese to me.” Sharing that she feels both “in it and out of it” within the Asian student community on her campus, MaiBao said “sometimes I feel a little out of place because we don’t speak the same language and we don’t really have the same customs.”

Aung and Paw, both of whom are part of the Karen ethnic group of Burma, shared that they were the only Burmese students on their respective university campuses. Although Aung described having friends in college, he also said that he was not able to communicate in his first language with anyone on campus. “I don’t get to talk in my language…only English everywhere I go.” Paw said that she has often felt alone on her campus. Although there were a couple of other Karen students in CAMP during her first year of college, she was the only one still attending her university as a sophomore. “Right now, I’m the only Karen…I guess I’m used to it…I kind of get used to being alone. Sometimes I do wish that there were some people I could talk to in my language.” Between these feelings of loneliness and the expense of living on campus, Paw decided to move home and commute to college after her first year so that she could save money and spend time with her family and church community in the evenings and on weekends.
When Imay responded to questions of belonging on campus, he talked about the ways that he pre-emptively protected himself from potential racism.

I try to avoid people that I feel have biased views toward things. Like if I know someone is going to be racist, I’d rather not deal with it unless I have to. Whenever I’m interacting with new people, specifically white…depending on where they’re from, that makes a big difference…I just try to avoid people that aren’t from either mutual friends or aren’t associated with the university… I just try to keep my circle small enough.

Gina, who is also originally from Nepal, said that she could not really think of a time when she felt like she did not belong on her campus. Both Imay and Gina were taking classes in their university’s engineering school, and both believed that their engineering faculty and peers were more racially and ethnically diverse than a lot of the other schools and departments on their campuses. Imay said that this helped him feel more at home. Gina shared that connections to other international Nepalese students also helped her feel more comfortable.

David was the only student who talked about his place specifically in CAMP as someone who had a different ethnic/racial background from the rest. He recalled that when he first inquired into CAMP, he thought it was a program for Hispanics; but quickly learned that program eligibility was about one’s family’s work history, not race or ethnicity. Talking about the diversity of CAMP on his university campus, David mused, “There’s a student from Nepal now, and one from somewhere in Asia. There are a lot of Hispanics, but there’s also more from everywhere. There is even someone who was born here. So, it’s not really for Hispanics, but for everyone I guess.”

Despite the challenges that the CAMP students identified in relation to their experiences in college as first-generation, low-income, and linguistic minority students of color, all were
continuing to move forward toward earning their degrees. The final section of this chapter will summarize and compare the ways that the students talked about the sources of support and community they developed while in college, and how they believed these resources helped them meet some of the challenges they had experienced thus far.

**Capitals Utilized to Meet Challenges in College**

In addition to being interested in the ways that refugee-background CAMP students think about and describe their histories, families and communities, and key educational personnel and programs as they relate to their pre-college experiences, I also wanted to know how once in college, CAMP students described maintaining some of those environmental assets and/or built new ones. The final research question that guided this part of my research inquiry was as follows:

3) How do refugee-background CAMP students continue to develop and utilize social capital and unique sources of community cultural wealth to meet challenges and progress toward their goals of college degree attainment?

The supports they identified and described included programmatic supports from CAMP and other key college-level support programs, encouraging and knowledgeable institutional agents, peer communities both on and off campus, and familial and cultural strengths.

**CAMP and Other Key College-Level Programs.** CAMP was identified by all the students as a program that helped them transition successfully through their first year of college. In addition to CAMP’s financial awards, students talked about CAMP as a place where they connected with other students, received advising, mentoring and academic supports, and learned about other opportunities on campus. During his first semester in college, David said that he spent most of his out-of-class time in the CAMP office, doing his homework and getting to know
other students. “Honestly, I was in the CAMP office more than my advisor. She was like, ‘David, you are in CAMP more than I am, and I work here!’ Cause every time I’d finish a class, I didn’t know anyone here; so I would just go there, put in all my study hours there.” Paw said that she chose to attend her current university because of the supports CAMP offered. In addition to living in CAMP-sponsored housing her first year, she also appreciated the information she learned through her weekly CAMP student group meetings. Through those meetings and through program advising, Paw said she learned strategies for succeeding in college and choosing a major. “Any time you need to talk, you had someone…they were on the line for you whenever you needed them.” Aung echoed Paw’s sentiments regarding CAMP advising. “It’s always good to reach out…it helps me feel better…they help me with a lot of stuff.”

Several students also described the way that CAMP connected them to more opportunities, including early move-in bridge programs designed to help students get a head start navigating their new university environments. MaiBao’s CAMP advisor also connected her to a summer health careers enrichment program in a neighboring state. She said that the summer program was instrumental in her decision to pursue a nursing degree. “It was a really good experience, it helped me understand more about what I wanted to do and what kind of steps [to take].”

Others were able to use their CAMP connections to access campus work study positions, summer internships, and other summer jobs. Huy, and David shared that through their participation in CAMP, they learned about TRIO job opportunities that allowed them to work with and for other students who came from similar socioeconomic and first-generation backgrounds. Huy tutored for his university’s TRIO program for college undergraduates and served as a residential assistant for a pre-college TRIO Upward Bound one summer. David
began working in his campus’s office that houses CAMP, TRIO and other programs for first-
generation, low-income, and underrepresented minority students. David said the office was his
home on campus because not only did he get to know other students from similar backgrounds,
but also benefitted from access to advisors, free tutoring, and opportunities to learn
administrative skills.

I like working there because I get to use things like Word or Excel – things I’m going to
be using in my field. I like working with the advisors, it gives me the chance to talk to
them anytime I can. And then there’s also peer tutors around, so if I’m doing homework
and there is something that I don’t know, I can talk to them. I like getting to actually talk
to more people, getting to know and communicate with people. Actually, I think the best
decision I made here, truly at [University], is having the work study. That got me
connected to so many programs and without it, I don’t even know how my schoolwork
would be going right now.

In addition to CAMP and TRIO, several students also said that their academic
departments offered supportive programs that helped them either feel welcomed and/or provided
academic supports. Imay, in his effort to improve his GPA from his first semester, said that he
was signing up for physics and math study groups in his engineering school. Gina and Huy were
in their engineering school’s multicultural scholars’ program and said that they received
engineering-specific mentoring and advising there. Aung also identified his school’s
multicultural office as a place where he felt welcomed on campus and said, “Sometimes it’s like
a home” because the office offered food and an inviting space to hang out.

When asked what made CAMP a welcoming space, specifically, David replied, “It’s not
just the space [that’s comfortable], it’s the people. It’s just the way they would talk to us, they
were always there. So, it was a really good experience.” Furthermore, in describing the ways that CAMP and other campus programs supported their success, most students spoke about specific college personnel and the ways that they provided mentoring and support. The next section will compare how students described these institutional agents and the support they provided.

**Significant Institutional Agents in College.** CAMP advisors were often described by students as significant parts of their support systems during college. They were described as not only providing important college-related information, but also encouragement when it was needed the most. Paw said her CAMP advisor helped her explore new majors when she was struggling with STEM coursework. “I was in my first semester of college and I’m trying to navigate everything. I just kind of felt lost. But my CAMP advisor, I feel like he really encouraged me, he said, ‘No, we can find a way if this does not work out’.” Huy, who said he was struggling with health issues and academic pressures, described feeling burnt out on his engineering studies. In addition to the emotional support he received from some of his peers, Huy said that his CAMP advisor also provided ongoing encouragement. “I think everything happened for a reason. Like I met [the CAMP staff]. It was destiny.”

TRIO advisors were also identified as significant persons in CAMP students’ college lives. Aung recalled wanting to quit college at one point because he was struggling to choose a major and doubted that he would ever graduate. He said that his TRIO advisor helped him through that rough time, saying “You’re almost done and you can do it. We’ll try to help you if you need a tutor or anything like that.” David also said that he had TRIO advisors available to him if he ever needed anything. He recalled one instance when a TRIO advisor coached him on how to talk to a professor in a class where he was struggling to do well. David remembered that the meeting with the professor actually went better than he expected and resulted in him
connecting to other students in the class who could help him better understand the course content.

Gina shared that in addition to her CAMP advisor, her engineering diversity program advisor was another important source of support. Imay, also an engineering student, said that he felt welcomed in the engineering building because the school had so many immigrant-background and international students and faculty of color. “Because the faculty members are mostly foreigners and immigrants from different countries…it’s very diverse.” He mused that seeing engineering faculty of color probably “forced people to reconsider their position” and said that for him, seeing diverse faculty and students made the engineering school feel more like home.

The personnel within CAMP and other programs designed to serve students from historically marginalized backgrounds were often identified as significant members of each student’s supportive network on campus. In addition to CAMP, TRIO, and diversity programs, CAMP students also frequently talked about their search for peer communities that fostered a sense of belonging. The next section will explore and compare CAMP students’ peer communities, both on and off campus.

**Important Peer Communities.** When asked to think about their lives now that they are in college, and to describe who made up their support circles or times when they felt particularly welcomed or comfortable, all of the CAMP students in the study included relationships with their peers both on and off-campus. Some spoke about enjoying the opportunity to interact with people on campus who were from backgrounds different than their own. For example, Imay talked about feeling comfortable living on campus in a scholarship residence hall. “It’s actually really cool to make connections with people from different backgrounds and different majors.
Most of them are white, non-Asian, but still they can connect to me on some levels. So that’s pretty cool.” Christina, a self-described extrovert, also said that although she was “shocked” by the lack of diversity on her campus, she had used her college experience to “learn more about other people’s culture and how they live.” At the same time, both Imay and Christina also shared how important it was for them to maintain friendships with peers who came from similar backgrounds and could relate to their life experiences.

The importance of connections with peers who held similar identities – either through new friendships or the maintenance of old ones – was a common theme throughout all the stories that the CAMP students shared. For some, like Christina, David, and Huy, participation in programs like TRIO and CAMP that served first-generation college students helped them connect with others who perhaps did not hold their same racial and ethnic identities, but who shared similar experiences as the first in their families to go to college. Huy shared that being so closely connected to these programs provided a sense of hope by “seeing people from disadvantaged backgrounds being able to achieve something that people who have more privilege do.” Similarly, David shared the importance of befriending other CAMP students during his first year of college. “I guess I was just so ready to talk to them, to get connected to them.” His connections with other CAMP students not only helped David socially, but also academically. He recalled that when he struggled with his first aviation fundamentals course, he was able to reach out to a CAMP peer who had taken the class previously, “and she helped me with some basics. That really helped me.”

In addition to connecting with other college students who held similar first-generation identities or had family histories in agricultural labor, some CAMP students also described the importance of having friendships with campus peers who were from the same racial, ethnic, or
linguistic backgrounds. For Huy, despite having perceived socioeconomic differences with many of the other Asian students on his campus, he still gravitated toward their student organizations. “Now I’m in charge of the society for Asian scientists and engineers…it makes me feel more engaged because I see more people like me.” Gina also described connecting with a handful of international students from Nepal who were studying on her campus. “They have really helped me a lot with not getting homesick. It’s nice to just be able to speak Nepali to someone here.”

While Huy and Gina were able to find and connect with students on their campuses who spoke their same first language, most of the other CAMP students in the study had to look outside of their universities to find connections with people from their same cultural backgrounds. Imay shared that his Nepali cousin was his “go-to” if he ever needed anything. Although his cousin attended a different college, they worked together at a home-goods store on the weekends and had maintained an important friendship. “We’re from the same culture, same background, around the same age and understand each other and our family values. Whenever we need something, we call each other up.”

Similarly, MaiBao also looked to cousins and aunts from her Hmong extended family to provide counsel and support when she was considering a major change from pre-med to nursing. Christina also shared that she had maintained friendships with other Chin people from her home community while in college, especially those who attended her home church. Finally, as the only Karen student on her campus, Paw said that although it was “cool and fun” to spend time with her CAMP peers, she also described often feeling isolated. Moving home and commuting to college allowed her to not only spend more time with family, but also stay connected to peers in her Karen church community.

Markedly, almost all the CAMP students discussed having connections to a faith-based
community that was often comprised of persons who held their same racial, cultural, or linguistic identities. Furthermore, students’ descriptions of their faith-based communities were often intertwined with their descriptions of their familial and cultural backgrounds. While key institutional programs and personnel were described as important aides in navigating college, the CAMP students also shared how their familial, religious, and cultural backgrounds provided a necessary foundation for their aspirations and motivations. The next section will explore how the CAMP students described these cultural and familial backgrounds as strengths and assets in their college endeavors.

**Faith and Faith-Based Communities.** Faith-based communities were described as important sources of support, connection, and sense of purpose for many of the CAMP students in this study. One of the reasons Paw moved back home an hour away from her university was so that she could be more involved in her Karen church community. She said that she spent every Sunday in all-day worship services either in church or at home with her family. Sunday was “the only day of the week that I speak my actual language.” MaiBao also shared that her connection to the Hmong community in her hometown was mostly through her Christian church.

Gina’s father and David’s father were both religious leaders in their home communities. Because of their fathers’ roles, Gina and David said that their family homes were often hubs for their ethnic communities. Gina shared, “My house is always busy with people, especially on the weekends. People coming in and out all the time.” While Gina said that during her first year in college she had not had as much time to connect with her Hindu community, she still leaned on her faith in times of difficulty. “Faith in God helps me get through situations. If I’m really overwhelmed, I just listen to Hanuman Chalisa [a Hindu devotional hymn]. Whenever I feel like, ‘Oh, I can’t do this’ I just listen to the song and it helps me get through it.”
David’s father is a Christian pastor that provides church services for African immigrants in Texas. “There’s a lot of people not specifically from Congo, but who speak the same language or just have the same stuff, same music, same culture. So, they all come together, whether it’s the church events, weddings…they are together almost all of the time.” While David did not have a similar African community at his university several states away, he described staying connected to his father’s congregation by continuing to help the church with translations, paperwork, and creating flyers for events.

Christina also spoke about the importance of her Christian faith and her Chin church community in her hometown. When asked to describe how her Chin culture influenced her outlook, Christina referred to her religious upbringing. “We’re really religious. We give all the glory and thanks to God for leading us to this amazing country…To be here in the U.S. and for our younger generations like me, going to a university is a big blessing.” Christina also shared that she had recently joined an international house of prayer. “That’s how I get my answers and support – through that group and from praying and my family and my friends back home.”

Almost all the CAMP students in the study were involved in a faith-based community while in college, and most attended religious services that were offered in their first languages. Faith and religion were often described as integral parts of their cultural upbringing and sources of strength and community. The students also often referred to their families as conduits for their cultural beliefs and norms, as well as important sources of strength and belonging. The next section will provide a brief overview of some of the other familial and cultural strengths that CAMP students identified during their time in college.

**Familial and Cultural Strengths.** In addition to faith and religious communities, CAMP students identified other familial and cultural strengths including being multilingual, interacting
with others respectfully, and being generous and welcoming. Paw said that she was learning to view her bilingualism as a strength. “That’s what people always tell me and I guess that’s the best thing about being a refugee…that you are able to read and write at least two languages and able to communicate in both.” Paw also felt that preserving and sharing her Karen language and culture was very important. “I need to share my good experiences and good culture with others so the world could be better.” Aung similarly spoke about the welcoming nature of his Karen culture. “Karen people love guests, love for people to come and visit. So I always like it when my friend some to my place and hang out. That’s the thing I like about Karen people. Even though sometimes we don’t know each other, we smile and give a good day to each other.”

Both Paw and David also talked about respect being an important cultural value, especially toward elders and educators. David thought that his ability to interact with others respectfully came from the role he played as a pastor’s son. “I guess I’m expected to act in a different way. My family taught me how to talk to people and manage situations when people are angry. I know how to talk to them, calm them down.” David then shared a story about how this skill was helpful during a specific time when he needed to talk to a college professor. Although David felt that the professor spoke disrespectfully to his students, he said, “I don’t want to show him that I don’t respect him or the decisions he makes when he’s talking to me…I try to show him a better way that we can communicate, in a way that doesn’t offend.”

While most of the CAMP students recognized multiple assets inherent in their cultural and familial backgrounds, Imay expressed ambivalence about his connection to Nepali culture because of his estrangement from his father. “There aren’t really many things that I’m going to miss about Nepalese culture, so I don’t regret it at all…those are some of the things I had to negate to develop my own future for myself.” Imay said that in his family, men do not express
their emotions. Terming it “toxic masculinity”, Imay said the message he received as a Nepalese man was “don’t talk about your feelings, don’t show your emotions, just do manly kinds of things.” However, although Imay was separated from his father and immediate family, he did continue to have a relationship with a Nepali uncle and male cousin. In fact, after he separated from his immediate family, Imay’s uncle invited him to stay whenever he needed to. Imay said, “It’s nice to have a family around when my family fell apart.”

Some of the most prominent themes that emerged across all the students’ narratives were stories of mutual supports and interdependence, especially among family members. Paw described how important her family was to her while in college. “At home, I have someone to ask, ‘how was school?’ or ‘oh, you’re back!’ It helps me feel like I’m not in a hole.” The next section explores these themes surrounding collectivism and interdependence as an asset-based cultural norm that was expressed through family relationships, cultural communities, and within the CAMP students’ university communities.

**Collectivist Orientations.** Collectivism as a cultural orientation was a common thread in most of the CAMP students’ stories. This was illustrated not only in their descriptions of their family backgrounds and early childhood experiences, but also in their motivations for earning a college degree, their interactions with others while in college, and their hopes for the future, post-graduation. Paw shared that she chose social welfare as a degree program because “One of my main purposes is to help others. I know there are so many people out there that still need help.” She shared that her other primary motivation for persisting in college was “for me to succeed, then give back to my parents.” MaiBao also shared that her parents encouraged her to pursue a helping field. “My parents have taught us to be very caring towards others.” She said that she witnessed her parents putting the welfare of others before their own many times, by
opening up their home to others in the Hmong community who needed a place to stay and providing monetary support to family members who were struggling, including sending money and care packages to family still in Laos and Thailand. For MaiBao, this provided motivation for her to do her best in college. “Because I see how hard my dad works, I want to be able to help him, to relieve some stress and to be able to help provide for them [her parents] too.”

For Imay, the cultural value of collective responsibility was present throughout his early life, so when he became estranged from his immediate family, he also described losing motivation during his first semester in college. “I was always focused on education because of my parents, you know?” Imay shared that he struggled to be internally motivated during his first year but believed that getting a college education would help him not only have a better life economically, but also make him a better person through increased knowledge and understanding. Even though he harbored angry feelings toward his father, Imay was still partially motivated to continue his education so that he could fulfill his duty to his parents. “So I would have accomplished their goals and then after that I could focus on what I want to do. I’m trying to accomplish what they came here for, regardless of the differences I have with them. Because they did bring me here to have a better life than them.”

A collectivist orientation was also reflected in the ways that many of the students described their interactions with others outside of their families while in college. For example, two Saturdays each month, Gina was volunteering as a mentor for high school students who were participating in the same pre-college STEM program she had completed. She was also preparing to participate in an alternative spring break program in Detroit where she would volunteer with other college students in an urban neighborhood similar to hers. In addition, connecting with others through group study and group projects helped Gina overcome her initial homesickness in
college. She described the benefits of having a small group of friends who met regularly to study. “So we don’t struggle alone, we just do everything together…we’re study buddies.”

MaiBao also said that she felt most comfortable in college classes where she could work collaboratively with others. One example she gave was in her Spanish class because it was a place where she felt comfortable and like she “fit in…not because of race but because we’re all on the same level, all trying to learn the language and culture…I feel like I’m a little bit more integrated into the group because we’re there to help each other. I like collaborative things because I like making connections with people.”

Huy’s collectivist orientation was reflected in his gravitation toward roles on campus where he could interact with and help other students who held first-generation, low-income, or underrepresented minority identities. In addition to his roles as a TRIO mentor and tutor, Huy said that he also hoped to use his job as a housing residential assistant to provide guidance and support to other first-generation students, connecting them to TRIO and other resources, as well as developing successful learning strategies. Another example of Huy’s orientation toward collectivism was demonstrated in his final project choice for his engineering fellowship program. Although the focus of the fellowship program was on entrepreneurialism in engineering, Huy felt he needed to identify a project that had meaning for him. After much thought, he decided to pilot a STEM mentoring program between current STEM majors and high school student communities who held marginalized identities and lived in rural, underserved areas.

A collectivist orientation was reflected in each of the CAMP students’ stories in a variety of ways. First, many shared that the wellbeing of their families and communities were equally, if not more important to the decisions students made in terms of where they went to college, how they paid for college, and the majors that they chose. Second, David and all the female students
described how they continued to provide navigational and translation supports to their families while in college. Third, several students described how working collaboratively with others in their classes was preferable to working alone – and that they enjoyed both giving and receiving academic help from their peers. Finally, many talked about choosing to work or volunteer in positions that allowed them to give back to others, especially persons who held similar marginalized identities.

**Gender Role Differences.** While staying connected to one’s family and culture while in college was a common theme among the CAMP students in this study, it was most prevalent in the stories told by the female students. The four female CAMP students either lived at home and commuted (Paw) or chose a university that was within a 45-minute drive from their families. The three female students who attended a university close to their home communities (Christina, MaiBao, and Gina) described going home frequently on the weekends to help their families. MaiBao reflected, “For me, family is a big thing…we provide for each other and spend a lot of time together, in general.” Paw shared a similar sentiment, saying “I think everybody needs their family around them.” Now living at home, Paw helped take care of her siblings when her parents were at work in the poultry processing plant. “I cook their meals when they [her siblings] are hungry, wash them up before they go to sleep, put them to bed, help them with their homework, make sure they get up on time for school.”

All the female CAMP students also described more frequent instances of serving as family navigators while in college than the male students – helping with translating, making appointments, and completing paperwork for their families. For example, Gina shared, “Whenever I go back, or even if I don’t, they’ll call me and say, ‘Please can you let us know what’s going on?’” Gina said it was hard for her parents to manage without her, “So they’ll call
and say, ‘Hey, we need your help’.” Paw also shared, “Many times I do translate the documents and help make phone calls for appointments and stuff”. None of the CAMP females described their continued roles as family navigators and helpers as hardships, but rather just as normal expectations of mutual support among family members. Paw described both giving and receiving help in her family. “I live in a family of seven and we live in a two-bedroom house. It’s really crowded, but at the same time, they are the people I call whenever I need it, you know?”

The male CAMP students in the study also talked about the importance of family and their desire to help their families economically once they had earned their degrees and had professional jobs. However, they did not describe providing the same level of ongoing supports to their families while in college as the females in the study did. For one, all four male CAMP students in this study either chose to attend a university that was significantly farther away from their families (Aung, David, and Huy), or if close by, had limited contact with immediate family members (Imay). David shared that he continued to help his family with paperwork and translations from a distance (over the phone and through email). “Even right now, they still call me, email me and I’m the one who helps them communicate.” However, Huy, Imay, and Aung did not discuss the ways that they continued to help their families while in college.

Additionally, when asked about things they were particularly proud of or aspired to, the males were more likely to talk about their ability to be independent. For example, both David and Huy expressed pride in their abilities to pay for college on their own, without their parents’ financial help. David shared, “I guess I want to be way more independent, which is something I’ve wanted for a long time. I mean, I have always been independent in a way.” Huy similarly shared that going to college was his own decision; but that his family was proud that he was there and that he was able to pay for college through scholarships, grants, and part-time work.
While the female CAMP students were more likely to share stories about continuing to serve as family navigators while in college, almost all of the students – male and female alike – shared how they believed that their experiences navigating and translating for their families from a young age helped to prepare them for also navigating college as first-generation students.

**Experienced Navigators.** Several of the CAMP students described how they believed their early experiences helping their families adjust to living in the U.S. were instrumental in helping them feel comfortable also adjusting to and navigating college. For example, Paw shared the following:

> It really does help now I’m in college. I feel like it has helped me get used to how to navigate the process [of applying for financial aid, internships or jobs]. If I need help, I could talk to whoever and learn how things work. Honestly, making appointments used to be my biggest struggle. My English is not that good. I’m trying to improve, but it’s really hard for people to understand me over the phone. But now, I am used to having to make phone calls.

Huy expressed similar thoughts when he reflected that “taking responsibility, literally the leadership role in the family” as a child and teenager was helping him now in college. “Taking charge of the bills, appointments, translating, problem solving in the family…that’s kind of helped me carry that to college. You kind of build up the maturity in yourself and you think differently compared to other college students. That’s helped me solve problems in college too.”

Gina also believed that overcoming the challenges associated with immigrating to the U.S. as a refugee and adjusting to the education system as a child and teenager was helping her in college.

> I feel like now wherever I go, since I have past experiences, I’m able to make changes or
get comfortable with situations a lot faster. In engineering, I know nothing, right? It’s just like the day I came from Nepal and knew nothing. I started navigating myself through going to places and asking for help. Whenever I don’t understand, I always reach out for help.

David’s story also reflected his belief that taking on a leadership role by translating for his family helped him to develop into a responsible young adult.

I think having to go into a world where I had to translate for my parents with things that I wasn’t supposed to know about as a young kid, I guess. It gave me a sense of responsibility…especially coming here by myself. I had to be someone who is responsible to actually know when to study, when to go hang out with friends, when to choose not to do something.

None of the CAMP students described resenting their roles as family navigators, neither in the past nor during their current lives as college students. This role seemed to be part of a much larger cultural orientation toward collectivism and mutual support between family and community members. Gina said that this was one of the things she valued most about her Nepali background. “I see the bond that we [Nepali people] share as a community because most American culture, it’s just like individualism, and then we’re more like we’re doing this for our community, this is for our family rather than I’m doing this for myself. I really value that. I really love that about my [Nepali] community. Whoever is in need, we all go and help them out.”

**Gratitude and Duty.** As previously noted, the CAMP students in this study often viewed their abilities to translate and navigate systems for themselves and their families as assets. When asked to think about other ways their culture and family experiences have helped them be successful in college, two other themes also emerged that were related to a collectivist
orientation: (a) gratitude for their parents’ sacrifices and resulting educational opportunities; and
(b) a sense of responsibility or duty for taking advantage of those opportunities to benefit their
families and communities. Huy reflected, “I think coming from a different background, it kind of
helps you think about problems with a different perspective. I came from a low-income
background and experienced all that difficulty. I learned to appreciate things that are around me,
like appreciate opportunities better…snatch that opportunity rather than just waiting for people to
give it to you.”

Paw also spoke often about being grateful for the opportunities she had in the U.S. while
at the same time being sad that others from her Karen community were still suffering.
“Sometimes I’m grateful that my parents and I are here; there are so many that missed [coming
to] this country.” Paw also talked about the importance of duty to her family. “My dad will
always say, ‘I was born in the jungle just like you, but I brought you to this country and now
you’re in college’. I think they [parents] will say their duty is fulfilled…my parents have made a
lot of efforts to help me, now it’s my responsibility to continue with all of these opportunities
that I have got, to have a better position for my family.”

Imay similarly reflected on the sacrifices his mother had made and how that motivated
him to earn a college degree. “My mom put herself through a lot just to get us here [to the U.S.],
and I really appreciate it. I don’t want to waste that.” MaiBao shared that gratitude and duty to
the family were important cultural values among Hmong people. “Hmong families do tend to try
and help their kids finish school…maybe that’s cultural…they want you to give back to them. So
doing all this work isn’t just for yourself, it is to help my family too.”

Perseverance and Hard Work. Each of the students talked about some of the challenges
they had faced in college, ranging from homesickness and financial hurdles to meeting academic
rigor of college level coursework and finding a sense of belonging on predominantly-white campuses. When asked to identify how their upbringing helped them meet those challenges, many pointed to learning how to persevere and having a strong work ethic. Even Imay, who expressed ambivalence about his cultural background and family history said, “I dislike a lot of things about my parents, but the one thing that I can never hate is their capacity to work hard and their resilience, to just keep on going.” Imay said that he was able to use these values as assets in school and work. “The best thing right now is that I’m still here in college.” In the work setting, Imay was also proud that he had followed his parents’ example and earned jobs with increasing responsibilities and pay, from fast food to cashiering to his current higher paying job in retail. “Essentially, I’m just moving up the chain, you know. So I’m hoping to just repeat that.”

David also said that his parents modeled both perseverance and a strong work ethic, and their example gave him the courage to do the same. “The first semester I missed a lot of things [assignments]. I even had to withdraw from one of my classes.” But David said that with the support of programs like CAMP, his parents’ encouragement, and his own will to persevere, he was able to develop the time management and study skills to rebound. “I’m actually proud of myself”. Huy also described a strong work ethic, with three different jobs at one point to be able to afford college without taking out debt. He also believed that keeping himself busy helped him get through difficulties. “I work and keep myself busy in order for me to not think about negative things, like facing family challenges.” Huy was also the only student who talked about the pressures he felt surrounding the model minority stereotypes associated with being an Asian American student. “You always heard about the stereotype that you have to be smart. It reminds me that, oh, I’m Asian. I have to do well in school. It’s like that stigma kind of helps…it kinds of puts in the back of your mind, Oh, you have to try hard because of who you are to them.”
Several students shared that their parents reinforced the values of perseverance and hard work through both word and action. Aung remembered his parents’ words of advice, “Try your best and never give up. That’s why I’ve been here for five years. I don’t have a mind that I want to quit.” MaiBao similarly reflected on lessons she had learned from her parents around perseverance and diligence in school. “Don’t give up, value education, and have high expectations for myself. They taught me to work hard.”

**Aspirations for the Future**

At the end of each CAMP student’s interview, I asked them about their hopes for the future after college. Their responses included having a better, more economically stable life for themselves, having a professional career, taking care of their families, and giving back to their communities. For example, Huy, a junior in chemical engineering, said that he hopes to be able to explore and try different types of careers and help his family. “I’m really adventurous…I’m going to try and get an engineering job and then go for a management position. I think after I make money, I will probably take care of my dad.”

Second year student MaiBao had recently been admitted into her university’s nursing program and was preparing to move to the medical school campus to continue her studies next year. Hoping to eventually become a master’s level nurse practitioner or physician’s assistant, MaiBao said that her goal was to “have a stable salary, be able to provide for my family and maybe start my own family.” Paw said that after graduating with a human resources degree, “I want to make my parents proud and have a better life…and also to share whatever I have with others who need help.”

The three first-year CAMP students, Gina, Christina and Imay, had just finished their first semesters at their universities but were already thinking about their futures after college as well.
Imay and Christina both believed that they had grown a lot as students during their first semester and hoped to utilize stronger study and time-management skills moving forward. Imay expressed excitement about his physics and computer programming courses and looked forward to the career opportunities he anticipated after earning a computer engineering degree. In addition to fulfilling his parents’ dreams and earning a good income, Imay hoped to give back to his engineering school’s diversity program. “If I have time, I want to go volunteer because at one point there were people who helped me and I want to be one of those people in someone’s life. Just kind of pay it forward, pay it back.”

Christina had recently decided to switch from pre-med to pre-nursing and hoped that she would be able to find opportunities to volunteer in a health care setting over the summer. After graduating from college with a nursing degree, Christina envisioned being involved in her church, being near her parents and taking care of them, and giving back to her community. “I want to be like [my CAMP advisors], helping people with big dreams.” Finally, Gina had recently started exploring graduate school as a possible path. She planned to apply for her university’s TRIO McNair Scholars Program whose goal is to diversify graduate level research and academia with more persons from first-generation, low-income, and underrepresented minority backgrounds. After earning her undergraduate degree in mechanical engineering, Gina hoped to earn a Ph.D. in bioengineering, travel around the world, and be an inspiration and mentor to other refugees from Nepal.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided a description of cross-case analyses and emerging themes from five former and three current CAMP students’ stories about their family histories, pre-college paths, challenges in college, and capitals maintained and newly gained while in college. The
early experiences they shared included stories of overcoming significant challenges in refugee camps and their countries of origin, as well as some of their first memories related to immigrating to the U.S. with their families. While the process of learning English was difficult and overwhelming at first, many of the students described also remembering feelings of success and accomplishment as they transitioned to mainstream classes and began enrolling in academically rigorous coursework that helped prepare them for college. As they began feeling more comfortable communicating in English, most also used this new linguistic skill to help their parents navigate appointments, paperwork, and other U.S. systems – a skill that some continue to use to help themselves and their families currently, while in college.

While all the CAMP students in the study said that their parents were limited in their ability to help them prepare for and succeed in college through financial and academic assistance, they described the important ways that their families were instrumental in their educational paths. These included holding high expectations, providing encouragement and belief in their students’ abilities to succeed, and instilling cultural values of gratitude, hard work, perseverance, and interdependence.

Outside of their families, CAMP students also pointed to a number of educational programs, key institutional agents, and peer communities that connected them to resources, provided academic supports, and instilled a sense of belonging in high school and in college. The supportive programs described included those specifically designed to serve first-generation, low-income students, students of color, and students from migratory agricultural labor backgrounds, namely programs like the Migrant Education Program, federally funded TRIO programs, CAMP, and region- and institute-specific college access programs. Within these programs, students described connecting with specific personnel who believed in their abilities to
succeed academically and provided encouragement and material supports. Peers who held similar identities as the CAMP students were also important sources of information, connection and belonging. On campus, these peer communities included other first-generation, high financial need students from CAMP and TRIO as well as students from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds.

One key finding was that apart from Vietnamese American student Huy, the CAMP students in this study were either the only student on their university’s campus from their specific ethnic/racial/linguistic backgrounds or were one of just a few. As students who had immigrated to the U.S. as refugees more recently, they described being some of the first from their communities to attend a four-year university. To stay connected to their racial and ethnic communities while in college, many described the importance of staying active in a faith-based community that held services in their first language and provided a sense of belonging. Finally, as the students told stories about their families, their college experiences and their aspirations for the future, recurring themes included the desire to achieve a more economically stable life not only for themselves, but also for their families and communities. They often expressed gratitude for the access to educational opportunities they had, recognized the sacrifices their parents had made and continue to make, and used a collectivist orientation in describing their hopes for the future that included providing for their families and giving back to others from similar backgrounds.

**Chapter VI: Discussion**

**Introduction**

Using both asset-based and systems-based theoretical frameworks (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Stanton-Salazar, 1997; Teater, 214; Yosso, 2005) and a qualitative interview methodology
(Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), I sought to explore the stories and perspectives of eight refugee-background CAMP students who are attending four-year universities and making progress toward earning their college degrees. In the previous chapter, I described findings that emerged from conducting a cross-case analysis of the five former and three current CAMP students’ descriptions of their family histories, pre-college paths, challenges experienced in college, and capitals maintained and newly gained to meet those challenges. In this final chapter I will discuss the significance of these findings, their connections to prior research, and their contributions to new understandings of the educational experiences of refugee-background college students with a familial history of agricultural labor. I will begin with a discussion of refugee-background CAMP students as a distinct population. I will then discuss findings on the systemic challenges that refugee-background CAMP students may face in their pursuit of a college degree; but more importantly, the sources of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) and social capital (Stanton-Salazar, 1997) that serve as assets in meeting those challenges. Finally, I will discuss implications of these findings and how they may inform higher education policy, practice, and future research.

**Refugee-Background CAMP Students as a Distinct Population**

Relatively small, but growing bodies of research literature exist on two separate populations of college students relevant to this study: students who have participated in CAMP (B. Araujo, 2011; Cranston-Gingras et al., 2004; Mendez & Bauman, 2018; Ramirez, 2012; Willison & Jang, 2009; Zalaquett et al., 2007) and refugee-background college students (Capps et al., 2015; Museus, 2013; Museus et al., 2016; Museus & Mueller, 2018; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Tandon, 2016; Uy et al., 2019). However, after completing an extensive literature search, I conclude that the current study may be the first to explore the pre-college and college
experiences of students who hold both of these identities. This study has the potential to contribute to a new understanding of the distinct experiences of refugee-background students with a familial history of agricultural labor who are eligible to receive CAMP services during their first year of college.

CAMP students whose families have labored in meat and poultry processing may not tie their identities to their families’ agricultural labor as closely as students who have traveled with their families to sow and harvest crops. In fact, findings show that parents who work in meat and poultry processing industries may attempt to shield their children from the harsh nature of their work. As Bhutanese Nepali CAMP student Imay mused, “They don’t talk about it because they wouldn’t, you know? You don’t want your kids thinking about your work.” Additionally, prevailing narratives about Migrant Education and CAMP center the experiences of students from Latinx backgrounds whose families migrate to work in the fields, reflecting their majority status within agricultural labor in the U.S. (Araujo, 2011; Garza et al., 2004; Graff et al., 2013; Gutierrez, 2016; McHatton et al., 2006, 2006; Mendez & Bauman, 2018; Nuñez, 2009; Ramirez, 2012; Zalaquett et al., 2007; Zarate et al., 2017).

For these reasons, findings suggest that refugee-background students may: (a) not be aware of the structural barriers to educational achievement that are associated with their parents’ agricultural labor and refugee experiences, nor (b) hold salient the identity of “migrant” under the U.S. Department of Education definition (Migrant Education, 2005). If their families’ labor has been primarily in meatpacking or poultry processing, their eligibility for Migrant Education services comes from the temporary rather than migratory nature of this work, thus the label of migrant may seem incongruous with their life experiences. However, findings from this dissertation have shown that significant systemic barriers exist for refugee-background students
whose families have worked in meatpacking. Some of these challenges have been emphasized in prior research on student populations who share similar marginalized identities, including refugee-background students, other children of agricultural laborers, immigrant students of color, English language learners, and first-generation, high financial need students (Capps et al., 2015; Cranston-Gingras et al., 2004; Delgado & Becker Herbst, 2018; Kanno & Cromley, 2013; Morales & Hanson, 2005; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Ramos-Sánchez & Nichols, 2007; Shaw & Barbuti, 2010; Tandon, 2016).

This study has illuminated some of the significant challenges that refugee-background CAMP students may experience, including trauma and loss, inequitable access to formal education, adaptation stressors upon relocating to the U.S., and pressures associated with the role of language broker for the family (Tse & McQuillan, 1996). Findings further suggest that once refugee-background CAMP students are in college, other systemic barriers emerge related to first-generation college student status, having high financial need, adjusting to academic rigor, and a lack of representation on four-year campuses that affects sense of belonging.

However, findings from this study also show that when refugee-background students are identified and supported by Migrant Education, CAMP, and other supportive educational programs and personnel, they are able to develop new sources of social capital (Stanton-Salazar, 1997) and combine them with existing sources of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) to successfully access college and pursue a postsecondary degree at the university level. These findings help to better understand how despite numerous systemic barriers, a growing number of refugee-background students in the U.S. are learning English, progressing through their high school curricula, accessing postsecondary education, and making effective progress toward earning a college degree (Boyer, 2019; Center for Educational Opportunity Programs, 2020; P.
Cohen, 2017; Eaton, 2013; Stull & Ng, 2016; Swanson, 2013; World Herald Editorial, 2018). The next section will discuss how refugee-background CAMP students are able to develop and utilize multiple sources of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) to meet systemic barriers to educational achievement.

**Cultural Capitals Gained from Overcoming Trauma and Loss**

Findings show that refugee-background CAMP students and their families may face significant life traumas and adversities prior to coming to the U.S., including violence and persecution in their home countries, forced relocations, family separation and loss, extreme poverty, and dangerous refugee camp conditions. Although this study did not pursue an in-depth exploration of CAMP students’ experiences prior to coming to the U.S., what the students shared about this particular time in their lives aligns with prior research on the suffering that refugee families often endure (Barron et al., 2007; Benson et al., 2012; Brown, 2001; Bureau of African Affairs, 2020; Cultural Orientation Resource Center, 2014; Fremstad et al., 2020; Tandon, 2016; Trieu & Vang, 2015). However, study results also show refugee-background CAMP students are able to use their families’ and communities’ past traumatic experiences to: (a) develop aspirational capital (Yosso, 2005) that impacts motivations for seeking a better life through postsecondary education, and (b) develop resistant capital (Yosso, 2005) to build capacity to overcome new systemic barriers that present themselves in college.

Family and community histories of resilience, perseverance, and growing confidence in a better future were important aspects of the refugee-background CAMP students’ identities and key to their motivations in college. Similar to prior research findings on familial sources of college motivations among Central American refugee college students (Suarez-Orozco, 1989) and Cambodian and Hmong American college students (Kiang, 1996; Kwan, 2019), the refugee-
background CAMP students in this study also described using familial capitals (Yosso, 2005) through: (a) a deep sense of duty to family members who had endured many years of hardship and sacrifice, and (b) a strong desire to give back to their family and community by earning a college education and gaining more economic stability. These sentiments were clearly expressed by Paw when she reflected, “It’s now my responsibility to continue with all of these opportunities…to have a better position for my family.” Paw’s description of her motivation for college is also a strong example of what Kwan (2019) classifies as affective capital among refugee-background students:

Refugee students can tap into affective capital generated from not only familial first-hand experiences of war trauma and displacement, but also cultural trauma experienced by a collective group. Affective capital is the ability to access affects of awe, inspiration, motivation, and gratitude given community struggles with war, violence, and displacement. It inspires refugee children to both seek greater educational aspirations and remain resilient as they navigate the challenges of postsecondary education (p. 39).

These sources of cultural capitals (Yosso, 2005; Kwan, 2019) may also be viewed through the broader conceptual lens of post-traumatic growth. Tedeschi & Calhoun (1996) describe post-traumatic growth as the way in which trauma survivors are able to make meaning of painful experiences through increased spirituality, a renewed sense of purpose, connections to others, and a heightened sense of optimism. Results from the current study suggest that linguistically similar faith-based communities may be integral to some refugee-background CAMP students’ processes of post-traumatic growth while in college. These findings add to scholarship on how refugee-background students their personal, familial, and community histories to develop and utilize cultural capitals to survive systemic oppression (Kiang, 1996;
Kwan, 2019; Shapiro & MacDonald, 2017; Suarez-Orozco, 1989; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996; Yosso, 2005). More importantly, findings from this study place these capitals within the context of pre-college and college experiences, demonstrating how refugee-background CAMP students use their histories to develop self-efficacy and agency in educational pursuits.

**Cultural Capitals Used to Address Inequitable Access to Education**

Findings from the current study also indicate that refugee-background CAMP students are not only likely to have parents with low access to formal education, but also have experienced limited access and/or constant disruption to formal education themselves. Prior research has shown these educational barriers are common for both migratory fieldworkers (Cranston-Gingras et al., 2004; Cranston-Gingras & Anderson, 1990; Garza et al., 2004; Hiott et al., 2008; McHatton et al., 2006; National Commission on Migrant Education, 1992; Zarate et al., 2017) and for persecuted refugee communities forced to leave their homes (Barron et al., 2007; Cultural Orientation Resource Center, 2014; Museus, 2014a; Ramsay & Baker, 2019; Tandon, 2016; Trieu & Vang, 2015; Tuliao et al., 2017; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2016; Uy et al., 2019).

Results further suggest that inadequate access to formal education and English instruction among parents of refugee-background CAMP students may in turn limit both their employment opportunities in the U.S. and their comfort levels engaging in K-12 and postsecondary educational systems. Findings show that these barriers to parental involvement may be exacerbated by the long hours and physical demands of agricultural labor and other manual labor jobs that serve to separate parents from their children’s educational experiences. These findings also support prior research on systemic barriers to educational outcomes related to parental education levels, agricultural employment, and linguistic diversity (Branz-Spall et al., 2003;
Results also suggest that with first-generation, high financial need status, refugee-background CAMP students are likely to navigate college without their parents’ guidance, have limited understanding of the costs of attendance associated with in-state and out-of-state college choices, feel limited in their abilities to discuss their classes and major choices with their families, and lack familial or community access to opportunities such as internships that other students seemingly have through their college-educated parents’ connections. Furthermore, refugee-background CAMP students are likely to have high financial need that necessitates full responsibility for paying for their college educations through federal financial aid, scholarships, and working. These findings align with prior research on the first-generation college experiences of both migrant and refugee-background college students (McHatton et al., 2006; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Ramsay & Baker, 2019; Uy et al., 2019).

These findings about the challenging aspects of being a first-generation, low-income college student are important. First, seven of the eight students in the current study are considered Asian American, a racial category that is often perceived within higher education as a “model minority” that does not belong in college access/support programs for marginalized students (Museus, 2014a; Ngo & Lee, 2007). Prior research has demonstrated that aggregating all students with Asian origins in higher education research, discourse, and institutional data has masked disparities in educational access and outcomes, especially for Asian American students from refugee backgrounds (Museus, 2014). As a college access and support program, CAMP has the ability to recognize and conduct outreach to eligible refugee-background students whose
families work in agriculture, include this population in their recruitment practices, and support their transition to college during the first year.

**Navigational and Linguistic Capitals.** Results suggest that despite adaptation stressors related to moving to a new country, refugee-background CAMP students may use their access to formal English instruction to serve as linguistic and cultural negotiators between their parents and the English-speaking world around them. Defined as language brokers in prior research (Tse & McQuillan, 1996), children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds act as “linguistic intermediators” (p. 2) and translate, interpret, and mediate for their parents and extended family to “contribute to their own and their family’s survival” (Morales & Hanson, 2005, p. 473). The current study findings suggest that language brokering responsibilities are associated with challenges and strengths. Similar to prior research findings on the potential negative effects related to the phenomenon (Cohen et al., 1999; Morales & Hanson, 2005), refugee-background CAMP students in this study remembered experiencing high levels of stress and feelings of inadequacy as they took on adult-level responsibilities of language brokering as children.

**Benefits of Language Brokering to College Navigation.** While results demonstrate that refugee-background youth may experience stress and anxiety related to adapting to a new country and culture while also beginning the process of learning English, the voices of the eight CAMP students represented in this study suggest that refugee-background students also encounter positive outcomes from their adaptive experiences, particularly related to their roles as language and cultural brokers for their families and communities. The CAMP students who discussed language brokering as a normal family responsibility also believed that these experiences helped them to develop problem-solving skills, navigational skills, and help-seeking
behaviors that have been specifically beneficial to them in the postsecondary context. These findings support prior research on the positive outcomes of serving as a language broker, including enhanced feelings of importance, self-confidence, and self-worth (Tse & McQuillan, 1996; Valdés et al., 2003); the development of strong interpersonal skills, independence, problem-solving and maturity (Tse & McQuillan, 1996); and the encouragement of both “heritage-culture retention” and “receiving-culture acquisition” (Weisskirch et al., 2011, p. 43). Moreover, findings from the current study add to language brokering scholarship by describing it as a source of linguistic, familial, and navigational capital (Yoo, 2019; Yosso, 2005) among refugee-background CAMP students and situating those capitals within a postsecondary context.

**Adjusting to Academic Expectations in College**

Once in college, one of the first challenges shared by several CAMP students was the struggle to adjust to the academic expectations of university-level coursework during their first year. Some thought they did not have sufficient academic preparation nor the same prior experiences as some of their classroom peers. Their stories support prior research that has shown that first-generation low-income students, often overrepresented by 1.5 generation immigrant students (Capps et al., 2015), are less likely to have access to many of the resources that prepare them for success in college-level coursework (Bergey et al., 2018; Perna & Kurban, 2013), particularly in STEM majors (Shaw & Barbuti, 2010). Notably, all of the refugee-background CAMP students in the current study initially chose to pursue a STEM major; but three of the eight left their STEM majors within the first year. The five CAMP students who remained in their STEM majors had access to IB, honors, and dual enrollment while in high school, while the three who switched to a non-STEM major did not discuss having these same pre-college opportunities. These findings reinforce prior research on the importance of access to and support
in academic rigor in high school to being academically prepared for college (Bergey et al., 2018; Bragg, 2013; Capps et al., 2015; Perna & Kurban, 2013).

Some of the CAMP students in this study also shared needing to improve their time management skills and abilities to learn course content on their own. Their stories demonstrated a level of self-awareness regarding the need to develop self-regulated learning strategies during their first year of college. Prior research has indicated that all college students benefit from developing self-regulated learning strategies that increase their engagement in college (Astin, 1984; Ramos-Sánchez & Nichols, 2007; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009; Zimmerman, 1990). However, while development of self-regulation skills has been linked to higher self-efficacy in college (Bandura, 1997, as cited by Ramos-Sánchez & Nichols, 2007), first-generation college students may perceive themselves as less capable and confident of performing well academically, especially during their first year of college (Ramos-Sánchez & Nichols, 2007).

Results from the current study also show that while in the process of developing self-regulated learning strategies for college, refugee-background students, especially female students, may continue to have family responsibilities at home such as childcare, domestic responsibilities, and language brokering. Most of the CAMP students described helping their families while in college and saw this as a normal part of their cultural upbringing. However, prior research has suggested that family obligations among refugee-background students might also mean less time to spend on studying and extracurriculars (Ngo & Lee, 2007), time investments that are known to support academic achievement in college (Astin, 1984).

**Collectivism and Optimism.** Results suggest that refugee-background CAMP students are able to utilize family support, optimism, and collectivist values to retain motivation when confronted with adjusting to academic expectations in college. Overwhelmingly, the students in
this study expressed their beliefs that a college degree would help them achieve a better life not just for themselves, but also for their families and communities. Their beliefs were further bolstered by parental expectations and a cultural and familial focus on hope and interdependence. These findings are consistent with Yosso’s (2005) work on cultural community wealth that identified (a) a “culture of possibility” (p. 78) as a key aspect of aspirational capital, and (b) the values of connectedness and mutual support as fundamental aspects of familial capital.

Additionally, results suggest that while refugee-background parents of first-generation college students may be limited in their ability to help their children navigate the academic expectations of college level work, they play a vital role in providing a supportive environment. Specifically, results demonstrate how high expectations for academic performance among refugee-background parents are reinforced by communicating encouragement, a belief in their children’s ability to succeed in school, and interdependence as a source of motivation. These findings are consistent with what has been found in previous research on the familial capitals that immigrant and refugee communities of color use to support academic success (Garza et al., 2004; Kanno & Cromley, 2013; Museus, 2013; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Roy & Roxas, 2011).

Results also show that refugee-background parents and other family members are able to support their children’s college goals through encouraging their children to participate in academic enrichment activities while in high school. As either second generation or 1.5 generation immigrants to the U.S., all of the CAMP students in this study spent a significant portion of their developmental years in the U.S., with six or more years spent in U.S. educational settings. This length of time in the U.S. provided not only the opportunity to become proficient in academic English, but also the opportunity to participate in multiple academic enrichment and college-access programs. Despite multiple family responsibilities, most also shared that their
parents supported their participation in programs such as TRIO, weekend STEM academies, and after-school programming. Furthermore, once in college, all of the students in the current study described continued family encouragement for overcoming obstacles, refusing to give up, and prioritizing their studies.

**Representation and Belonging**

The final significant finding with regards to postsecondary challenges is a lack of representation of refugee-background students enrolled in four-year universities. Findings suggest that this lack of representation has an impact on sense of belonging among different campus communities, especially for students whose families and communities are more recent refugee arrivals to the U.S., i.e. Burmese, Congolese, and Bhutanese Nepali students. These results align with prior research that has shown that refugee-background students who are first-generation, low-income, and linguistically, racially, and culturally diverse are significantly underrepresented at four-year universities (Kanno & Cromley, 2013; Kanno & Varghese, 2010; B. T. Long, 2014; Tandon, 2016; Uy et al., 2019). As the findings from this study suggest, even after accessing the necessary pre-college preparations and financial supports to succeed in a university setting, refugee-background students may not be able to connect with anyone else on their campuses who speak their same first language nor from their same ethnic background. Additionally, findings indicate that even if a refugee-background CAMP student is able to connect with linguistically and culturally similar peers on campus, their statuses as first-generation, high financial need students may present as barriers to developing a sense of belonging. These findings suggest that identity is complex, and the salience of any particular identity is an individualized phenomenon. Huy, a Vietnamese American former CAMP student, frequently described his identity as a first-generation, high financial need student and saw this
identity as impacting his sense of belonging within various Asian American student organizations on his campus. “I think we are from the same background, but the experience we have is different…the [difference in] economic status makes me feel like I don’t belong to them.” As others have written, “Students are dynamic beings, and their identity dimensions sometimes shift over the span of college and are therefore not as clear and static as we often assume they are in higher education” (Harper, 2011, p. 104). This is an important point for higher education professionals to recognize as they seek to provide a welcoming and affirming space for refugee-background students. Refugee-background CAMP students may hold multiple, intersecting marginalized identities, including being a first-generation college student, having high financial need, and being a linguistic, racial, and/or ethnic minority not only on their campuses, but also within the CAMP program.

**Bicultural Orientations as Capital.** Results from the current study suggest that refugee-background CAMP students may be hesitant to acknowledge and share feelings of not belonging on four-year university campuses, as this expression may conflict with cultural values of gratitude. This was reflected in Burmese American student Aung’s response to talking about a place or time when he did not feel welcomed on his university’s campus. “If I have [had that experience], I probably won’t want to remember. I don’t keep that feeling in my heart. I just let go of it so I can stay on my path.” Furthermore, results also suggest that sense of belonging among refugee-background CAMP students may be related to the identities that they experience as most salient at the time. For some, interactions with other first-generation, low-income peers gave students a sense of belonging and shared experience. For others, attempts at connecting with racially-similar students outside of CAMP provided a way to stay linked to a shared history and culture.
Prior research has shown that refugee-background college students report higher rates of overall wellbeing on campus when they are able to connect with others from their cultural communities and have opportunities to learn about and share knowledge related to their cultural backgrounds (Museus et al., 2008; Oh et al., as cited by Yakushko et al., 2008). However, findings from this study suggest that refugee-background college students may not be able to find anyone on their campuses who have a shared linguistic or cultural background. Given this reality of significant underrepresentation on four-year campuses, findings also clearly show that refugee-background CAMP students are strengthened by having continued connections to their families, home communities, and for some, faith-based communities who worship in their first language. These results support Stanton-Salazar’s (1997) argument that bicultural network orientations among students of color result from constantly moving between one’s home culture and college, and help students learn how to successfully navigate multiple worlds. “To thrive, minority children must learn that to attain the highest levels of human functioning, they must remain embedded in familial and communal support systems while they participate in other worlds” (Stanton-Salazar, 1997, p. 33). Findings from the current study reinforce this theory of bicultural network orientations by showing that staying connected to one’s family and home communities provides refugee-background students with resilience, continued reinforcement of collectivist values as motivation in college, and a place to express oneself fully in their first language with persons who share their ethnic identities.

In this discussion section, I have presented significant sources of community cultural wealth shared by the refugee-background CAMP students and how these findings have connected to prior research. These have included familial survival, resilience, hope and encouragement, cultural capitals derived from language broker experience, cultural norms of
interdependence and persistence that are key to educational motivation, and co-ethnic and faith-based communities as important sources of belonging. In a recent study of refugee-background students, Kwan (2019) argued that these aspects of cultural capital within marginalized communities must also be accompanied by institutional sources of social capital that provide for better postsecondary access. “No matter how much community cultural wealth under-resourced communities have, the primary key to improving student retention and increasing student success is institutional investment” (Kwan, 2019, p. 45). The next discussion section will consider how a variety of pre-college and college sources of social capital can combine with sources of community cultural wealth to support the educational goals of refugee-background CAMP students.

**Social Capital Via Educational Programs and Institutional Agents**

As indicated earlier, all of the CAMP students included in this study had spent at least six years in U.S. classrooms prior to starting college, allowing them adequate time to develop their academic English (K. D. Thompson, 2017), enroll in rigorous high school coursework, and participate in a number of academic enrichment and pre-college programs designed to help them prepare for pursuing a college degree. These findings support prior research that has demonstrated that marginalized immigrant-background students are more likely to enroll in college when they have access to both cultural/familial and mainstream social networks, college-access programs, and rigorous coursework while in high school (Kanno & Cromley, 2013). The path-to-college stories told by the CAMP students in the current study align with Stanton-Salazar’s (1997) descriptions of the various forms of institutional support that contribute to academic success for historically underserved populations. The results demonstrate that support, encouragement, navigational assistance, and access to college-specific bureaucratic knowledge
can come from a variety of institutional sources.

**Pre-College Sources of Social Capital.** At the pre-college level, key institutional agents included ESL and content teachers, Migrant Education advocates, TRIO advisors, college and career counselors, and ROTC mentors. In the current study, students described how each of these institutional agents helped them learn how to “decode the system” (Stanton-Salazar, 1997, p. 13) of higher education by providing FAFSA and admissions application supports as well as information about dual-enrollment courses, international baccalaureate programs, and scholarship programs. These are each examples of types of “funds of knowledge” (Stanton-Salazar, 1997, p. 11) that refugee-background students were able to access and benefit from because of the relationships they had developed with various institutional agents.

Results from the current study further demonstrate how refugee-background students with a familial history of agricultural labor are able to develop pre-college social capital from their participation in a variety of educational programs while in high school. These include federally-funded programs such as TRIO Talent Search, TRIO Upward Bound, and GEAR UP, as well as Migrant Education summer and after school programming that focus on college access and preparation. Results indicate that participation in these types of programs, as well as dual enrollment courses and international baccalaureate programs not only provide academic preparation and college knowledge, but also surround students with a college-bound culture and academically-focused peers. Furthermore, these sources of social capital also provide greater access to a number of scholarships and other forms of financial aid that make attending a four-year university possible.

However, while most of the refugee-background students in the current study were able to point to at least one high school agent or program that helped them prepare for college, one
did not. David, a Congolese American student who attended high school in Dallas, said that he
conducted most of his college-related exploration and applications on his own. The scope of this
study did not allow for a deeper exploration of the factors that may have contributed to his
particular experiences; however, prior research has encouraged educators to look beyond
individual factors, and instead explore the level of access that marginalized students have to
high-quality educational programming and supportive, knowledgeable institutional agents (Roy
& Roxas, 2011; Shapiro & MacDonald, 2017). In the case of David from the current study, it is
possible that with better access to pre-college programming and supportive institutional agents in
high school, he might have chosen to participate in a CAMP project within his home state of
Texas and avoided taking on significant debt and multiple jobs to pay for out-of-state tuition
during his first year of college.

In summary, in addition to multiple sources and types of community cultural wealth, the
refugee-background CAMP students in the current study also pointed to social capitals when
describing the pre-college experiences that supported their educational goals. These included
relationships with key institutional agents (teachers, counselors, Migrant advocates, etc.) and
participation in pre-college programs and rigorous coursework that provided access to college
knowledge and surrounded them with like-minded peers who were also college-bound. Results
from this study align with prior research that has shown how pre-college participation in
academic rigor (Kanno & Cromley, 2013), enrichment pre-college programming for first-
generation, low-income students (Maynard et al., 2014), and connections with key institutional
agents (Roy & Roxas, 2011; Shapiro & MacDonald, 2017; Stanton-Salazar, 1997) can help
students with marginalized identities access postsecondary education. The current study adds to
this prior research by exploring the impact of these pre-college supports on the educational
outcomes of refugee-background CAMP students, specifically. I now turn to discussing the college-level social capital and academic support resources that were found to help refugee-background CAMP students persist at four-year universities.

**College-Level Supports**

Results indicate that refugee-background CAMP students are able to draw upon a number of sources of social capital and academic supports in college, combine them with continued and expanding sources of community cultural wealth, and persist at their respective four-year universities. I will begin by discussing how results suggest the importance of college-level academic supports to their success, followed by key sources of social capitals.

**Academic Supports.** Findings from the current study indicate that rigorous pre-college academic experiences are further bolstered by the utilization of a number of free academic supports once refugee-background students are enrolled at the university level. These college-level academic supports include tutoring and academic coaching, peer study groups, and first-year programming that explicitly teach college-level academic skills such as study strategies, time management skills, and tacit knowledge about how to navigate working relationships with instructors. These findings support prior research on the efficacy of federally-funded programs like CAMP (B. Araujo, 2011; Cranston-Gingras et al., 2004; Mendez & Bauman, 2018) and TRIO Student Support Services (Office of Postsecondary Education, 2015) that offer access to such academic and navigational supports to eligible first-generation, low income students from seasonal, temporary, and migratory agricultural backgrounds. Furthermore, findings from the current study expand prior research on these supports, particularly for CAMP and TRIO students from refugee backgrounds.

In addition to the benefits of receiving academic supports and social capitals gained
through participation in programs such as CAMP and TRIO, findings also suggest that the process of learning with peers from similar backgrounds, both in and out of the classroom, may be especially beneficial to refugee-background CAMP students. While only Gina and Huy had access to linguistically and culturally similar campus peers, others in the current study were able to find peer-based academic supports within CAMP, TRIO, and institution-specific diversity programs. The students’ descriptions of peer sources of mutual academic support align with theories of community cultural wealth (Ngo & Lee, 2007; Yosso, 2005) and demonstrate how student communities of color share information and resources, lift each other, and provide mutual aid.

**Social Capitals via College Support Programs.** Results further demonstrate that in addition to providing necessary academic supports, CAMP, TRIO, and other institution-based support programs are important sources of social capitals that facilitate refugee-background student success at four-year universities. For example, results show that CAMP advisors not only provide academic and career advising in a supportive environment, but also facilitate college affordability by connecting students to grant, scholarship, and on-campus employment opportunities. Prior research has found that intensive financial supports such as these have positive effects on retention and degree completion for low-income students (Britt et al., 2017; Mayhew et al., 2016; Oreopoulos & Petronijevic, 2013).

Additionally, results show that similar to institutional agents at the pre-college level, CAMP and TRIO advisors at the college-level can serve as important sources of intensive personal supports through sharing institutional knowledge, providing encouragement, and demonstrating confidence in refugee-background students’ ability to be successful in a four-year university setting. Prior research findings on CAMP students, in particular, have shown this to be
true for Latinx students (B. Araujo, 2011; Cranston-Gingras et al., 2004; Mendez & Bauman, 2018); however, the current study demonstrates that the same types of programmatic and individualized support can be instrumental to refugee-background student success, as well.

**Implications**

Findings from the current study demonstrate that while refugee-background students with familial histories of agricultural labor may face multiple systemic barriers to educational achievement, they are able to confront and overcome those barriers through a combination of internal sources of community cultural wealth and institutional/programmatic sources of social capitals. Educational systems at the policy, institutional, and programmatic levels must better meet the distinct needs of linguistically and culturally diverse refugee-background students. As the U.S. agricultural industry continues to use refugees as labor sources, Migrant Education and federal CAMPs have a particular opportunity to provide supports that can improve educational outcomes for them and for their children. Leaning on the findings from this qualitative study and other scholars who are prominent in the field of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) and social capital (Stanton-Salazar, 1997), I propose a number of recommendations for policy, practice, and future research to increase college access and degree completion for refugee-background CAMP students who have a familial history of agricultural labor.

**Recommendations for Institutional and Programmatic Policy**

From an ecological systems theory perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Teater, 2014), institutions of higher education and college access and support programs such as CAMP are exo-systems that have the ability to influence the educational outcomes of refugee-background students through policy and practice. Findings from the current study support the following recommendations for policy-makers:
• Acknowledge that coming to the U.S. as a refugee is a distinct experience that requires disaggregation in reporting to accurately track and address gaps in educational outcomes within racial groups and avoid the model minority stereotype. For example, disaggregate Asian student data to include the separation of Southeast Asian and South Asian students and Black student data to identify and track refugee-background students from African nations. Institutional leaders are urged to consider how to obtain the data needed for disaggregation. Questions regarding ethnicity and/or first languages in admissions applications may be useful in this regard.

• Explicitly include refugee-background students as eligible for supportive programs designed to improve educational outcomes for historically underserved student populations. This includes programs for underrepresented minorities, linguistically and ethnically diverse students, TRIO programs for first-generation low-income students, and CAMP programs for students with family histories of seasonal, temporary, or migratory agricultural labor.

• Continually work toward developing a culturally engaging campus (Museus, 2014b) that includes: (a) physical spaces, classrooms, and programming that increase the ability of refugee-background students to connect with people from similar backgrounds (Museus et al., 2016; Stebleton et al., 2014); (b) curricular and co-curricular programming that provides opportunities for refugee-background students to both learn and share knowledge about their cultural communities; and (c) ongoing professional development for student affairs professionals, faculty, and administrators that increases knowledge of the distinct experiences of refugee-background college students and informs engaging practice.
• For CAMP programs specifically, explicitly connect with and validate refugee-background students whose families have worked in meat and poultry processing and embed their experiences and cultural backgrounds in outreach and programming. Represent the range of racial and ethnic identities, languages spoken, and types of agricultural labor (including feedlot work, meatpacking, dairies, and poultry processing) that make up the increasingly diverse CAMP student demographic. Reflect this existing diversity in outreach materials, professional development offerings at national and regional conferences, and program evaluation activities. Develop partnerships with refugee-serving organizations to leverage supports and increase college access and success.

Recommendations for Practice

The findings from the current study combined with my experience as a Migrant Education professional within higher education lead me to provide the following recommendations for practice with refugee-background students. I recommend the provision of ongoing professional development within higher education as a whole, and Migrant Education K-12 and CAMP specifically, so that educational leadership and professional staff are more likely to:

• Recognize refugee-background students whose families have labored in meat and poultry processing as communities that have been systematically marginalized in the U.S. and who benefit greatly from the services provided by MEP and CAMP. Understand that although these types of labor are not associated with the same levels of constant mobility and educational interruption as migratory fieldwork, the children of refugee-background meat and poultry processing laborers face many of the same
systemic obstacles to earning a college degree as Latinx students whose families work in the fields.

- Given MEP’s and CAMP’s missions to serve all eligible agricultural laborers and their children, continually explore and better understand the lived experiences of refugee-background students and the impact their past and current experiences may have on their transition to and persistence in college (Ramsay & Baker, 2019). Recognize and make explicit the sources of community cultural wealth and social capital within refugee-background communities that support educational achievement and foster student agency, and help refugee-background students to recognize and utilize their existing sources of capitals in their college pursuits (Goldenberg, 2013; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Shapiro & MacDonald, 2017).

- Collaborate with Migrant Education Programs and pre-college programs to strengthen the social capital web that increases refugee-background students’: (a) belief that college is possible; (b) knowledge of how to be college ready and financial aid options; and (c) enrollment in rigorous coursework while in high school.

- Acknowledge and validate the assets that are derived from experiences of linguistic diversity and language brokering. Help refugee-background CAMP students to see the ways that language brokering not only supports their families, but also provides critical navigational skills for college (Yoo, 2019). Encourage refugee-background students to feel comfortable communicating in their first language, as well as in English. Provide outreach materials and family meetings in multiple languages, appropriate to the refugee-background communities working in agriculture in the program’s target area.
• Provide a space for storytelling (Tandon, 2016; Tuliao et al., 2017) that acknowledges and honors refugee-background CAMP students’ experiences and multilingual, bicultural strengths. Explore the use of digital story telling (Lenette et al., 2015) as a transformational way to create community, increase cross-cultural understanding, and explore strength-based counternarratives that may have a positive impact on self-efficacy in college.

• Conduct holistic explorations of refugee-background CAMP students’ needs and strengths, to include the exploration of family dynamics, impact, and influence. Recognize that refugee-background CAMP students may have ongoing familial responsibilities that must be balanced with their coursework and campus activities.

• Develop and implement CAMP programming that incorporates the cultural norm of interdependence to include group work, volunteer opportunities, mutual help, and peer mentoring programs.

Recommendations for Future Research

It is important to recognize the limitations of the current study and consider how future research could expand what is known about refugee-background students within the context of MEP and CAMP. First, all of the students who participated in the current study were either a 1.5 generation refugee-status immigrant to the U.S., meaning they came to the U.S. as a child and had spent a significant amount of time in U.S. K-12 systems, or a second generation immigrant whose parents had come to the U.S. as refugees, prior to the student’s birth. Findings from the current study suggest that having an extended amount of time in the U.S. was instrumental in gaining the academic preparation to attend a four-year university. Additional research is needed on the educational experiences of refugee-background CAMP students who come to the U.S. at a
later age, who may be placed in ESOL or remedial coursework as a first-year college student, and who attend community colleges.

Furthermore, this study specifically centered the experiences of refugee-background CAMP students who successfully graduated from high school and are now progressing toward earning a college degree at a four-year university. I did not tell the stories of refugee-background MEP students who have dropped out of high school nor those who have not continued on to pursue postsecondary education. Because gaps continue to persist in high school graduation rates and college-going rates for refugee-background students, future studies are needed to use a critical approach to explore the systemic barriers that contribute to these gaps.

Another area of research that merits further investigation surrounds the strategies that Migrant Education Programs and College Assistance Migrant Programs use to stay abreast of changing demographics within seasonal, temporary, and migratory agricultural labor, conduct outreach to eligible refugee-background students and their families, and address their needs and strengths in service delivery. For K-12 and postsecondary programs that are demonstrating successful refugee-background student outcomes, what elements of their outreach and programming have a relationship to those successes? Quantitative studies may be able to supplement the rich stories included in this qualitative interview study and explore a variety of variables that may impact educational outcomes, including gender roles, age of arrival in the U.S., bicultural orientations, and participation in academic enrichment programming at the pre-college level. Furthermore, future research may also be able to explore the extent to which levels of participation in the varying support services provided by CAMP are connected to first to second year retention in college, as well as degree completion rates among refugee-background CAMP students.
Finally, the eight refugee-background CAMP students who participated in this study were incredibly generous in sharing their perceptions of their past and current experiences related to their paths to and through college, and my sense is that our conversations together only scratched the surface of the richness of their lived experiences. Future qualitative researchers are encouraged to think about additional ways to understand their distinct experiences through storytelling projects, focus groups, journaling, and ethnographies.

Conclusion

This dissertation study demonstrated that refugee-background students with a family history in agricultural labor face a number of challenges to accessing and succeeding in college, especially within a four-year university setting. However, the shared stories told by eight refugee-background CAMP students from across the U.S. also demonstrate that educational institutions and college access professionals have the ability to contribute to equitable educational outcomes by recognizing the strengths and capacities refugee-backgrounds students bring to their educational experiences and facilitating access to institutional supports that can help them realize their potential and earn a college degree. Lenette (2016) argued that higher education has a moral obligation to care about refugee-background college students, better understand their unique lived experiences, and provide culturally-relevant supportive services that will increase college access and successful degree completion. I concur with this, as well as her second argument that a clear socioeconomic rationale exists. “Successful higher education outcomes increase refugees’ potential to contribute to a country’s socioeconomic advancement and can thus prevent further marginalization. Providing support to refugees in higher education therefore makes economic sense” (Lenette, 2016, p. 2).
Migrant Education Programs and College Assistance Migrant Programs have the capacity to make a positive impact on the educational trajectories of refugee-background students whose families perform seasonal, temporary, and migratory agricultural labor. As a member of the Migrant Education professional community for the past eighteen years, I argue that the first step must be to recognize refugee-background students and families as marginalized communities that benefit from receiving educational supports to overcome numerous systemic barriers to educational achievement. By incorporating their histories, languages, strengths, and current realities into our professional development, research, and programming, Migrant Education programs at every level will better serve our stated mission of ensuring that all qualifying students have access to a better life for themselves, their families, and their communities through education.
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Journal of Refugee Studies, 1, 1–6.

Appendix A: Human Subjects Approval

Date:     February 7, 2020
TO:       Stacy Mendez, (smendez@ku.edu)
FROM:     Alyssa Haase, IRB Administrator (785-864-7385, irb@ku.edu)
RE:       Approval of Initial Study

The IRB reviewed the submission referenced below on 2/7/2020. Approval expires on 2/6/2023.

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KEY PROCEDURES AND GUIDELINES. Consult our website for additional information.

1. **Approved Consent Form:** You must use the final, watermarked version of the consent form, available under the “Documents” tab, “Final” column, in eCompliance. Participants must be given a copy of the form.

2. **Continuing Review and Study Closure:** Submit a Continuing Review request and required attachments at least 4 weeks in advance of the expiration date. If Continuing Review is not approved before 2/6/2023, the study approval will expire on that date and all human subjects research activities must stop. Please close your study to IRB oversight once your study meets the first 4 milestones, as outlined in the Closing a Study guidance.

3. **Modifications:** Prior to making any significant changes to the project, a Modification request must be submitted and approved.

4. **Add Study Team Member:** Complete a study team modification if you need to add investigators not named in original application. Note that new investigators must take the online tutorial prior to being approved to work on the project.

5. **Data Security:** University data security and handling requirements apply to your project.

6. **Submit a Report of New Information (RNI):** If a subject is injured in the course of the research procedure or there is a breach of participant information, an RNI must be submitted immediately. Potential non-compliance may also be reported through the RNI process.

7. **Consent Records:** When signed consent documents are required, the primary investigator must retain the signed consent documents for at least three years past completion of the research activity.

8. **Study Records** must be kept a minimum of three years after the completion of the research. Funding agencies may have retention requirements that exceed three years.
Appendix B: Participant Recruitment Email Template

Participant Name,

My name is Stacy Mendez and I am a doctoral student studying in the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies Department at the University of Kansas. I am also a College Assistance Migrant Program director at the University of Kansas. I am conducting a study on the experiences of college students who have participated in CAMP and whose families are from a refugee background. You are receiving this email because you potentially meet both of these criteria - have participated in a College Assistance Migrant Program and have family members who have come to the U.S. as refugees.

I am very interested in exploring the strengths that CAMP students from refugee backgrounds utilize to access and succeed in college. In particular, I want to better understand how CAMP students’ families, communities, and other key relationships have helped them prepare for college and successfully progress in their studies.

I am writing to ask if you would participate in this project, and share some of your story with me through two interviews. If you are willing to participate, we will schedule two interviews that will take approximately 1 hour each and will be scheduled at a time/location that is convenient for you. If you live outside of the Kansas City area, we will schedule an interview through Zoom, an online video conferencing program. I would greatly appreciate your assistance in the project.

Please let me know if you have any questions or would be willing to schedule an interview. I can be reached at smendez@ku.edu, 785-864-7027 (office), or 785-979-3283 (mobile).

Thank you for your time and consideration!

Sincerely,
Stacy Mendez, Ed.D. Candidate
Educational Leadership and Policy Studies
University of Kansas
smendez@ku.edu
Appendix C: Informed Consent Statement

Pre-College and College Experiences of CAMP Students

KEY INFORMATION

- This project is studying the pre-college and college experiences of students who have family histories both as refugees to the U.S. and as agricultural laborers.
- Your participation in this research project is completely voluntary.
- Your participation will include two interviews, 1 hour each, for a total of 2 hours.
- You will be asked to do the following procedures:
  - Respond to questions about your family background and educational experiences before college in the first interview.
  - Respond to questions about your college experiences and impact on your family during the second interview.
- There are no risks associated with participating in this research project. You do not have to answer any questions that cause you discomfort.
- This project will contribute to knowledge about college student strengths and the use of culturally responsive strategies in higher education.
- Your alternative to participating in this research study is not to participate.

INTRODUCTION

The Educational Leadership and Policy Studies (ELPS) department at the University of Kansas supports the practice of protection for human subjects participating in research. The following information is provided for you to decide whether you wish to participate in the present study. You may refuse to sign this form and not participate in this study. You should be aware that even if you agree to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time. If you do withdraw from this study, it will not affect your grades, your relationship with the ELPS department, the College Assistance Migrant Program, the researcher, nor any services these departments, programs, or personnel may provide to you.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to better understand the experiences of U.S. college students who have family histories both as refugees and as agricultural laborers. You are being asked to participate in this study because you or a family member has come to the U.S. with refugee/immigrant status and you have participated in a migrant education program (MEP) or College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP) either presently or in the past. You are being asked to participate in two interviews that will explore your experiences as a college student, specifically how family, community, and other important relationships have played a role in your college decisions and experiences.

PROCEDURES
You will be asked to participate in two interviews that will last approximately 60 minutes each. The first interview will include questions about your family history, the communities that have been important to you growing up, and key relationships that helped you prepare for and attend college. The second interview will include questions about your college experiences so far, how attending college has impacted you and your family, and key relationships that are helping you progress in your college education. You are not required to answer the questions. You may pass on any question that makes you feel uncomfortable.

The interviews will be audiotaped to help the researcher capture your experiences and insights in your own words. You have the option to not be audiotaped, or you may also ask to have the taping stopped at any time. The tapes will only be heard by the researcher, for the purpose of this study. The researcher will use an automated speech recognition program to transcribe the audio recordings of your interviews to text, known as transcriptions. All files (audio recordings and text transcriptions) will be transmitted using the highest level of encryption (TLS 1.2 encryption), and will be stored in a secure, password-protected University of Kansas server that is accessible only by the researcher. All files (audio recordings and transcriptions) will be secured by the researcher until 3 years after the completion of the project, and then will be erased / destroyed.

RISKS

Although this study is focused on learning more about personal, family, and community assets and strengths, there is the possibility that you will feel uncomfortable with certain questions. You are not required to answer questions that make you feel uncomfortable. There are no other risks anticipated by participating in this study.

BENEFITS

This study has the potential to contribute to the body of knowledge that professionals in migrant education and other educational equity programs possess to better provide culturally responsive college access and support strategies that recognize and utilize student strengths, backgrounds, and capacities.

PAYMENT TO PARTICIPANTS

As a result of participating in this study, you will receive $20 total in Amazon gift cards: $10 immediately following the completion of the first interview, and $10 immediately following the completion of the second interview. If you withdraw from the study after the first interview, you will receive the first $10 Amazon gift card. The Amazon gift card amounts / access information will be sent to you by email, with links to the Amazon.com website for your use. The researcher may ask for your social security number in order to comply with federal and state tax and accounting regulations.

PARTICIPANT CONFIDENTIALITY

The researcher will preserve the confidentiality of all personally identifiable information about all individual students obtained in accordance with applicable law, including the Federal Social Security Act, the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act and any regulations promulgated
there under. All aspects of the study will be conducted in a manner that do not permit personal identification of you nor any other participants, other than required for research activities undertaken by the researcher.

As such, the researcher will not disclose any such information to any persons except as required by law, and will report results of the study with individual name pseudonyms. All interview recordings and transcripts will be stored on a password secured university server that only the researcher will have access to throughout the dissertation writing phase. After submission and approval of the dissertation, all data will remain secured for 3 years after the completion of the project in case of any follow-up, before being destroyed.

REFUSAL TO SIGN CONSENT AND AUTHORIZATION

You are not required to sign this Consent and Authorization form and you may refuse to do so without affecting your right to any services you are receiving or may receive from the University of Kansas or to participate in any programs or events of the University of Kansas. However, if you refuse to sign, you cannot participate in this study.

CANCELLING THIS CONSENT AND AUTHORIZATION

You may withdraw your consent to participate in this study at any time. You also have the right to cancel your permission to use and disclose further information collected about you, in writing, at any time, by sending your written request to: Stacy Mendez, 1122 West Campus Road, #305, Lawrence KS 66045

If you cancel permission to use your information, the researcher will stop collecting additional information about you. However, the researcher may use and disclose information that was gathered before they received your cancellation, as described above.

QUESTION ABOUT PARTICIPATION

Questions about procedures should be directed to the researcher listed at the end of this consent form.

PARTICIPANT CERTIFICATION:

I have read this Consent and Authorization form. I have had the opportunity to ask, and I have received answers to, any questions I had regarding the study. I understand that if I have any additional questions about my rights as a research participant, I may call (785) 864-7429 or (785) 864-7385, write the Human Research Protection Program (HRPP), University of Kansas, 2385 Irving Hill Road, Lawrence, Kansas 66045-7568, or email irb@ku.edu.

_____ I agree to take part in this study as a research participant. By my signature I affirm that I am at least 18 years old and that I have received a copy of this Consent and Authorization form.

_____ I agree that the researcher may make an audio recording of my interviews.

_____ YES  _____ NO
Type/Print Participant's Name ___________________________ Date ___________________________

_________________________________________  
Participant's Signature

Researcher Contact Information
Stacy Mendez, Ed.D. Candidate  
Educational Leadership and Policy Studies  
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Appendix D: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Script - Welcome / Introductions / Informed Consent

**Introductions** - Hello! Thank you for taking the time to talk with me today. I’d like to start by telling you a little bit about myself and this research study. I am a project director for a CAMP program in Kansas, and have worked with college students for the past 17 years. I am also a doctoral student in education and my purpose with this study is to explore and understand the experiences of first-generation college students at four-year universities whose families came to the U.S. as refugees and who have worked in agriculture.

I want learn more about how students think about and describe their culture, communities and families in relation to their college experiences. My hope is that we can meet and talk two times – today, and then again in two weeks.

**Informed Consent** – Today’s interview and the second interview should each take about one hour. Are you interested in participating in this study? Great! Let’s go over the consent form together so that I can answer any questions you might have. Once you sign that form, we can begin!

**Recording / Transcription** - If it’s okay with you, I will be recording our conversations since it is hard for me to write down everything you say while also listening carefully to you.

- **If No** – Thank you for letting me know. I will only take notes of our conversation.

- **If Yes** – Thank you! Please let me know if at any time you want me to turn off the recorder or not include something you’ve said.

**Confidentiality / Pseudonym** – Before we begin, I’d like to select a pseudonym (or different name) that will be used throughout the study when referring to you so that your real name won’t be used. Using a pseudonym protects your identity and allows our conversations to be confidential. Do you have a name you’d like me to use? If not, that’s okay – I can create a name.

Okay! Let’s get started. Today, I would like to learn more about your background and how you decided to go to college. There are no right or wrong answers. I would like you to feel comfortable talking about yourself, what you think and feel.
Do you have any questions for me before we begin?

INTERVIEW #1

Warm-up

1. I’d like to start by just getting to know you. Could you tell me a little bit about yourself?
   - What you’re studying, what year you are in college?
   - What do you like to do when you’re not studying or attending class?

2. Now I’d like to learn a little bit about your history – your family, their immigration stories, and any people that were important to you, growing up.

3. Now, could you tell me about your family?

4. What do you know about the country you (or your family) came from?
   - When did they come to the U.S.?
   - What were some of your/their experiences beginning a life in a new country?

5. How would you describe your place in your family, growing up?
   - What were some of the ways you helped your family, as a child and teenager?

6. You are/were in CAMP because at some point, one or more of your family members worked in agriculture in the U.S. Do you know anything about the work they do/did? What do you know/remember?

7. Could you describe the Burmese (Hmong, Viet, etc.) community in your current hometown?
   - Outside of your family, did you spend time with other (Hmong, Viet) people, growing up? What was that like for you?

Thank you for sharing this information with me about your family and cultural background. What you’ve shared so far is helping me to better understand your childhood experiences. I’d like to shift to a new set of questions – more about your experiences in school, and how you decided to go to college and how you prepared to go to college.

8. If you were to write a book about your childhood and teenage experiences in school, what significant events would you want to include?
8. What do you remember about your first school experiences in the U.S.? What was that like for you?

9. How was your family involved in your learning, when you were a child?

10. Could you describe your earliest memory of wanting to go to college?
   - What motivated you?
   - How did you come to see college as possible?

11. Who helped you learn about and prepare for college? How did they help you?

12. Tell me a story about any encouragement you received about going to college.

13. Could you describe a time when you first talked to family members about going to college?
   - How did family members help you prepare for college, and make decisions about college?

Thank you for sharing this part of your story with me. It has helped me to understand how your childhood experiences, family members, and others have been helped you get to where you are today. Is there anything else you’d like to share with me about your childhood or school experiences before we stop for today?

Again, thank you so much for your time and willingness to talk about your history. Our next and final interview will center on your experiences as a college student at (Univ of Kansas, etc.) When would be a good day/time for you next week?

**INTERVIEW #2:**

Hello! Thank you for taking the time to talk with me one more time. Today, I’d like to learn more about your experiences as a college student. I might also ask a couple of follow up questions from our last interview.

Like our last meeting, I’d like to record today’s interview so that I can listen carefully to you. Is that okay? Also, please remember that you don’t have to answer a question if you feel uncomfortable, and you can decide that you want to stop the interview at any time. Just let me know.

Okay! Let’s get started!
1. If you were to write a story about your college experiences so far, what would be 2 or 3 important things you would want to include?
2. How did you decide to study X?
   - What do you enjoy about your field of study?
3. Could you describe any other responsibilities you have while going to school? For instance, with work, or family, volunteering, etc?
4. What is a college accomplishment you feel most proud of, so far?
5. Tell me a story about a significant challenge you’ve experienced in college, and how you faced it.
6. Who are members of your support network while in college, and how do they support you?
7. Could you describe a time when you felt different from others on your campus? What was that like for you?
8. Has there been a specific time or place that you have felt valued, understood, or like you belonged at KU (Adams State, etc)? What was that like for you?

Thank you so much for sharing your college experiences with me. My final questions are about your family and their involvement in your academic life now.

9. How has attending college affected your family, if at all?
10. Could you describe ways that family members provide support or encouragement to you now?
11. What lessons have you learned from your family that are helping you now that you’re at KU (Adams State, etc)?
12. What does it mean to your family that you’re in college?
13. What do you hope to achieve with a college education?

**CLOSING SCRIPT**

Thank you so much for taking the time to share some of your life story with me today, and for participating in this study. Your story will help me better understand the experiences for first-generation college students from refugee and agricultural labor backgrounds. Is there anything else about your background or your experiences at [KU] that you’d like to share before we close this interview?