

**University of Wisconsin – Extension  
Hmong Educational Needs Assessment Project**

**Winter 2002**

**Brown, Dane, Eau Claire, LaCrosse, Marathon, Milwaukee, Outagamie,  
Portage, Sheboygan, and Winnebago Counties**

**University of Wisconsin – Extension  
Hmong Educational Needs Assessment Project  
Executive Summary**

With funding from a UW-Extension Cross Divisional Grant, a statewide Hmong Educational Needs Assessment was conducted through a focus group process held January through March 2002. Focus groups were conducted in ten of the 11 counties in the state with the largest Hmong populations. The participants totaled 384. The purpose of the assessment was to determine the educational needs of an important segment of the Wisconsin population, the Hmong, and how UW-Extension through its divisions can better serve that population.

Several overarching concepts threaded through all the focus groups. These concepts included a need for leadership development programs, respect for diversity is needed, partnerships between the Hmong community and other community groups, service providers need to learn about the Hmong culture, elders feeling a loss of respect, gang issues, intergenerational issues, and loss of cultural understanding by younger Hmong.

Two general themes were evident. The first is the pursuit of identity (by both younger and older Hmong) and the second is communication in relation to generational issues.

The focus groups also provided insights into preferred methods of learning. Specific educational program topics were identified in the areas of business, elderly, family, childcare, intergenerational relationships, health, housing, and formal classroom settings.

Insights from the focus group process highlighted the need to understand that each community is unique and successful educational programming is based on building relationships and trust. Many good programs are in place and need to be shared between communities as well as build on the foundation of established community coalitions to develop additional educational programs. UW-Extension divisions partnering with community-based organizations could provide university resources in delivering educational programs to meet the identified needs of the Hmong citizens through the focus group process.

## **University of Wisconsin – Extension Hmong Educational Needs Assessment Project**

The Hmong Educational Needs Assessment Project was an initiative funded by a University of Wisconsin – Extension Cross-Divisional Grant in 2001-2002. The project planning group determined that the focus group process would provide the best method to conduct the assessment. The purpose of the assessment was to determine the educational needs of an important segment of the Wisconsin population, the Hmong, and how UW-Extension through its divisions could better serve that population.

As a companion to the needs assessment, the Applied Population Laboratory at the University of Wisconsin - Extension provided a comprehensive summary of the demographics data about the Hmong in Wisconsin. It is expected that these two components used together provide the planning tools for future UW-Extension educational programs for Hmong citizens in Wisconsin.

### **The Focus Group Process**

The planning group spent several months evaluating the best method to collect the information needed for this assessment. Should there be a statewide meeting, bringing members of the Hmong community together for a discussion? Should a survey method be used? Would focus groups be the best method? The group decided to use local focus groups in ten of the 11 counties with the highest Hmong populations in the state. The rationale was that there would be more Hmong participation and the opportunity to get a broader perspective of the Hmong educational needs. The ten counties that participated in the needs assessment were Brown, Dane, Eau Claire, LaCrosse, Marathon, Milwaukee, Outagamie, Portage, Sheboygan, and Winnebago counties. The total number of participants in the focus group process, which was held from January to March 2002, was 384. See Appendix 1 for a state map indicating the locations of the focus groups and Appendix 4 for focus group demographics.

Each location used the same questions with their focus groups. See Appendix 2 for the questions and the recommended process. A subcommittee of the planning group developed the process and questions that were approved by the entire group. Although there was a recommended process, that of one large meeting with break out groups by age and gender, each location could determine how to conduct their local focus groups. The questions and age/gender segmentation were emphasized. Some counties used the large group method and other locations used a preformed group method where the facilitators met with four or five groups that were meeting for other purposes and met the criteria of age and gender. For example, in Marathon and Portage Counties, meetings were held with a Hmong Headstart Parent Group, another with a Hmong Mothers Group, a session was held at a technical school ESL class, a meeting was held at the Stevens Point Area High School, a discussion session with a group of Hmong elderly was held, a

meeting was held at a work site in Wausau, another was held with a Hmong Association leaders group, and one session was held with the UWSP Hmong Student Association.

This assessment took into consideration differences within the Hmong culture based on age and gender. There is a difference between the Hmong who immigrated to the state 15 to 20 years ago from Thai refugee camps and the second and third generation Hmong in Wisconsin. Many of the older Hmong family members do not speak or read English. Many of the young Hmong family members do not speak Hmong. That is the reason there was need to look at age differences in the population. There are also definite gender roles in the culture that needed clarification by having focus groups meet in segregated gender groups. The traditional Hmong culture is a patriarchal society with males having a dominant role in the family. There is an expectation by some in the culture for women to marry young while still in their teens with their primary roles to be mothers and caregivers so they can adapt easier to their new family.

For detailed responses from each of the focus groups, see Appendix 3.

### **Overarching Concepts**

In reviewing the summaries from the ten counties, there were several overarching concepts that threaded through all the focus groups.

#### *Leadership Development*

There was a need to help current and future Hmong leaders learn skills to provide good leadership in their community. This also included developing skills to encourage more cooperation within the Hmong community, particularly between clans.

#### *Respecting Diversity*

The issue of racism and respecting diversity was an item of discussion at several of the focus group locations. Both young and older Hmong expressed being discriminated against because of their culture. Young people talked about being ignored, teased, not chosen for activities in school, being hired for the lowest level jobs that others wouldn't want, etc. Adults talked about being ignored or discriminated against in the various social systems – everything from health care to housing to assistance for limited resource families. Both groups discussed the need for citizens in their communities to have a better understanding of the Hmong culture.

#### *Partnerships*

Another point that the majority of the participants agreed was that there needed to be more partnerships and better relationships between the Hmong population and other community groups. This included respecting each other for what they could do for each other and for the community.

#### *Understanding of Hmong Culture by Others*

All agreed that service providers (education, social service, health care, etc.) needed to learn about the Hmong culture so they can understand Hmong needs better. In some cases

this may mean having the provider learn the Hmong language or providers hiring Hmong people to deliver the services or act as interpreters.

### *Loss of Respect*

From the comments of the older Hmong, having the respect of their family members and other Hmong in the community is important. They expressed their belief they do not have this respect. They are confused when dealing with United States social and political systems because they are so different from their experience. Bureaucracy is burdensome, often because of language and culture differences. The older Hmong are also concerned about their own personal safety and health issues.

### *Gangs*

The issue of gangs came up as a topic in both the youth and adult focus groups. The adults are concerned about the safety of their youth as well as their concern about youth becoming involved in the legal system.

### *Intergenerational Issues*

There are many intergenerational issues. These deal with the differences the older Hmong and the younger Hmong have in the gender roles and family communication. The many of the older Hmong see the traditional roles of men and women, while the younger generation, particularly the females, see gender roles more broadly (i.e., careers, later marriages, responsibilities men and women have in a family, etc.). Within the family, both the older and younger generation don't believe they have the respect they should have as a family member. Communication and respecting each other's opinions are a problem. Part of the communication issue is language – many older Hmong do not speak English and many of the younger Hmong do not speak Hmong.

### *Losing Cultural Understanding*

The younger Hmong, usually second or third generation in the United States, are feeling they are losing their heritage and their understanding of their culture. They want to learn the Hmong language. They especially want to learn more about the Hmong culture and Hmong history.

## **Outcomes – General Themes**

From the results of the focus groups conducted in the ten counties, two general themes were evident. The first is the pursuit of identity and the second is communication in relation to generational issues.

### *Pursuit of Identity*

All of the focus groups expressed in a variety of ways their experiences in finding an identity in the United States society. The greatest difference of pursuing an identity was between younger and older Hmong. Younger Hmong participants are considered high school age and early 20s, while the older Hmong are over the age of 25, particularly over 50.

The younger Hmong, in almost all focus groups, stated they wanted to learn more about who they are – to learn their Hmong culture and heritage. Many asked to learn the Hmong language, both written and spoken. One individual requested that Hmong be considered a second language in school, like other foreign languages. Teaching the Hmong language in schools was requested several times in both younger and older Hmong focus groups.

The younger Hmong also discussed learning Hmong history. This includes clan history, the Hmong people in China and the relationship Hmong people had with China, and the secret war in Laos. One individual thought there should be a way to educate the Hmong about the cultural family tree, that all Hmong are related, and that people should have a better understanding of the clan family trees. They would like to know more about the Hmong culture so they could better understand why there are generational issues in a family and community. According to one participant, “(I) would like to learn this from parents or relatives for they have been this student’s ideals since she was a little child.”

One young person summarized his thoughts on identity this way. “(We are) facing the question, ‘What is Hmong?’ every day. (We) struggle to define self and fit in (with the larger community).”

For the older Hmong, the issue of identity is trying to understand the systems that surround them, how they work, and how they as individuals can utilize them. With this lack of understanding, many older Hmong have become isolated and have lost their identity in the community and in their families. The focus group results listed many systems that the participants feel they don’t understand or know how to use. One participant said he has become isolated because he didn’t know how to use the telephone. Many of the older Hmong said they didn’t know how to access resources such as the housing authority, educational opportunities, English classes, health care, how to take the civil service exams, the local transportation system, etc. They don’t know where to go for help and assistance. The legal system, the school system, the government system, and the tax system are all very confusing. Two of the specific issues in accessing the systems include a need for more education on laws/rights as parents, especially in disciplining children; and a better understanding of the finance system – e.g., how to buy a home, how to use a bank, and “how to take care of homes.”

To help access these social systems, several participants expressed a need for interpreters or, better yet, Hmong people working in these systems. One older Hmong participant who had limited English speaking skills stated “Language is an issue that impacts us because we can’t be normal...we can’t be involved in the community.”

### *Communication and Generational Issues*

Based on the focus group responses, there are challenging communication and generational issues within Hmong families. The issues, which are not much different than family issues in the general society, seem to be more problematic when trying to function

within a larger culture that is much different. Both younger and older Hmong acknowledged this as part of the environment in which they live.

The Hmong youth participants stated that they know that their lack of understanding of the Hmong culture contributes to communication/generational conflicts. They identified several issues related to culture. According to the younger Hmong, their parents have very high expectations based on how the older generation was raised. There is the family name and reputation to uphold so families have a need for privacy so others don't talk about their family issues. They know older Hmong see education as very important. However, parents discourage creativity and participating in the arts and literature, because they want their children to have the security of math and science careers, such as becoming doctors. Many Hmong youth want to participate in extracurricular activities, but their parents don't understand the importance of these activities in the college application process. Their parents expect youth to do duties at home. Parents cannot help their children with their schooling because they don't understand or have the academic knowledge themselves to help. It was stated several times by the young people that role models are very important. They would like to develop a mentor relationship with an adult (that individual being Hmong was not specifically stated) they can trust and know who will support them. Several young females expressed cultural issues relating to Hmong females. Hmong families expect their daughters to marry young and do not always see the need for education for women because of their subordinate role in the family. A daughter who is too well educated may "leave the family" and may find another direction for her life. If a son is educated, those benefits come back to the family, but if a daughter is educated, that wisdom will go to the family in which they marry.

The adult Hmong participants also addressed the cultural contribution to communication/generational issues. One individual stated, "(I) want children to be successful in America, but do not want them to lose the Hmong culture." Parents do understand that their children are struggling with two cultures and different expectations, but they aren't sure how to help their children. The older Hmong state that the education of their children is important. They are concerned about the lack of Hmong professionals, such as doctors, lawyers, and teachers. Participants in these focus groups were concerned about the job search skills of both themselves and their children. The older Hmong are concerned about their own lack of education because they "feel dumb when they don't know" something. They are concerned about the appearance of their youth, especially when they don't fit what the parents think are the norm. Parents are concerned about their youth participating in gangs. Older Hmong also are concerned about their finances because they fear they are not able to support their children and provide the education they need. Several times the adults express the need to understand their legal rights as parents, especially in the area of discipline, such as why they cannot use traditional Hmong forms of punishment.

In respect to family communications, older Hmong not only shared their parent-child concerns, but the relationship they have with their spouses. Many participants, male and female, shared the need for good communication in marriage that builds trust and respect. One person stated, "Men fear women becoming too independent." There seems to be

concern about domestic abuse and how Hmong following the traditional culture are having a hard time adjusting to the changes in gender roles.

### **Outcomes – Preferred Methods of Learning**

All participants in the focus groups were asked how they preferred to learn, by what methods they prefer to receive information and education. All focus groups expressed the need for any instructors to be culturally sensitive and preferably from the Hmong community. It was suggested that they learn from each other. It is important to bridge the communication gap when it comes to education. Nearly all groups stated they would prefer educational programs to be held early evening, not during the day or on weekends. A local assessment of meeting times would be appropriate to meet specific Hmong family needs. The Hmong youth also indicated that having sessions during school breaks would be appropriate and they would provide something for them to do. Although they were not major issues, several adult focus groups indicated that childcare was an issue and both youth and adults stated that transportation could be an issue for some members of the Hmong community. The use of Hmong TV and radio programs would be an appropriate method, especially for the older Hmong who would prefer the Hmong language, although it was noted that many Hmong families don't have cable TV, which is where Hmong programs usually are aired. Adults and youth mentioned having educational programs on video tape which could be checked out of video rental stores at no charge or from libraries. The majority of the focus groups indicated they prefer having their educational experiences in person rather than through technology.

Participants of the adult focus groups stated they preferred experiential learning or demonstrations for their educational methods. Other methods mentioned included workshops, modeling, outreach programs, support groups, clan meetings, home visits, and classes in the workplace. Female adults mentioned learning as couples or families.

Participants of the Hmong youth groups indicated they would like to learn through classes/conferences, hear oral history from the elders, class projects, support groups, newsletters (in both Hmong and English), have a Hmong mentor, plays/entertainment, audio tapes, and high school clubs. Several youth stated they wanted to learn among their friends. One young person said learning with his/her parents without siblings would be good.

The summary of the five focus groups held in Marathon County provides a good summary for all the participants' comments. "An overwhelming majority of students and adults prefer a teacher instead of 'high tech' forms of learning including seminars, conferences, videotapes, audiotapes and any other. They learn best with professional, well-trained, highly motivated, enthusiastic, energetic teachers who are gentle and kind. A number of participants, regardless of age or stage of life echoed, 'We want a good teacher in the classroom'. Students and adults identified the need to recognize individual learning styles and patterns and to make several options available. Adults want and need to continue to learn English, but don't want to be overwhelmed with information, causing

an ‘overload.’ For some, ‘hands on’ learning is helpful. Assistance with homework is needed. Learning to read English continues to be a challenge and some adults want to try learning to write in Hmong because they feel it may be easier to learn than English.”

### **Outcomes – Specific Educational Needs**

Focus group participants were asked a variety of questions to identify types of educational programs and specifically the content of such programs. These questions included asking what challenges are facing individuals, families, businesses and business owners and communities (i.e., issues or needs for the elderly, entrepreneurs/economic development, families, child care/work issues, intergenerational issues, health of individuals and families, housing, and educational programs) as well as the educational topics they would like to learn more about. They were also asked what has successfully worked for their local Hmong community to address these challenges and issues. The following is a summary of the educational topics identified.

#### *Business Issues/Topics*

Hmong adult focus group participants stated that they didn’t have successful business role models and they have a lack of training to be business owners. They also noted that Hmong business owners tended to compete among themselves, as they need more diverse services for the Hmong community. The Hmong businesses have not marketed to the broader community. They believe that other community businesses need to accept Hmong-made products. Topics they would like to have as educational sessions include understanding government, how to market, handling finances, finding start-up funds for business (and having more funds available), customer service training and competing with larger businesses. Additional issues include childcare and preventing vandalism.

Hmong youth focus group participants saw language as a barrier for Hmong businesses. They also said that Hmong businesses don’t seem to have profits and business owners have a hard time finding financing. Educational sessions they would like to see provided include the legal aspects of running a business, getting businesses known in the community, and dealing with competition within the Hmong community. They would like to see more work study options for students.

Although not identified under business issues, several focus groups discussed the need to have technical help with developing gardening skills to raise produce to sell at farmer’s markets, thus adding to the family income.

#### *Elderly Issues/Topics*

All focus groups noted that the major elderly issue was the language barrier between the elders and the younger family members as well as with the general community. Lack of the English language prevented adults over 55 from getting a job. The adult focus groups also identified the need to provide more funding to support elder programs and more

transportation services. Depression of the elderly and their isolation were also stated as issues.

One Hmong youth focus group stated they thought the elderly needed to learn more about the American community. Adult Hmong focus groups identified the following: activities for the elderly to help them learn English, nutrition and food safety, food preservation, understanding the younger generation, health education and how the health care system works, child care, understanding nursing homes, funeral costs, insurance issues, and end of life issues.

### *Family Issues/Topics*

Although most of the family issues and educational needs have been identified previously in this report, additional issues and topics were named. The Hmong youth focus groups additionally identified peer pressure and language issues between parents and children. They stated that educational programs should include developing more reliable resources for parents and children, helping parents to understand about different career choices for their children, and helping parents to understand changing gender roles.

Adult Hmong focus groups continued to identify family relationships and communications as an issue, both between spouses and parents and children. They stated that educational sessions they would like to have include educating young people about not marrying too early, parent/child communication (building trust), consequences of life decisions, family planning, parent education, youth prevention programs, nutrition, child care, and financial management/budgeting.

### *Childcare Issues/Topics*

Focus groups in six counties addressed this issue. Both adult and youth Hmong focus groups identified the same issues: more funding for childcare facilities, the need for more licensed Hmong childcare workers, and the need for affordable childcare. Many Hmong families don't see childcare as a need because of the extended family support. Some parents are not comfortable allowing strangers to look after their children and the older generation does not understand the concept of daycare because when they were in Laos they lived in one household. Topics that were named for childcare educational needs were childcare classes for Hmong to become childcare providers and training for both older and younger family members in childcare.

### *Intergenerational Relationship Issues/Topics*

Intergenerational relationship issues and topics were provided earlier in this report under operational themes and family issues/topics.

### *Health of Individuals and Families Issues/Topics*

Health issues and topics were discussed in several counties with both adult and youth Hmong focus groups. Information was also shared from the “Hmong Healthcare Needs Assessment Project” conducted by the Hmong Mutual Assistance Association of Sheboygan. Responses from both the focus groups and the Healthcare Needs Assessment Project were compatible. All sources stated that the health care community needs to understand the importance the traditional medical practices of elderly Hmong (herbal remedies) and consider these when addressing Hmong health issues. The cost of health care (including prescriptions) and health insurance are issues that prevent Hmong individuals and families access to medical services. Many families found themselves not meeting the criteria for medical assistance.

In addition, adult Hmong participants stated that health care providers need to be more aware and educated about the Hmong culture. They also saw a need for more physical and mental health care providers from the Hmong community. Many of the elderly Hmong have a difficult time understanding medical terminology. The elders are often superstitious and not trusting of medical care and are afraid of being drugged.

Educational topics that were identified by both adult and youth Hmong participants included understanding the health care system, understanding medical terms, helping Hmong understand the need and use of various drugs, health education (including taking care of oneself, the need for exercise, and various diseases and their prevention), transcultural training about the Hmong culture for health care providers, family planning, understanding social security benefits, and encouraging nursing careers.

### *Housing Issues/Topics*

Only five of the ten counties addressed housing issues. All five counties and all focus groups in those counties said the greatest issue is that there are not enough large houses to rent and they are too expensive to buy. Because Hmong families tend to be large, they need larger homes and apartments than are available to rent. Both adults and youth stated more accessible loan programs are needed for Hmong to buy homes. Several adults voiced their concern that there is too much discrimination against the Hmong in renting and buying homes, that there should be equal opportunity in renting and buying. One adult said that taxes for homes were too high – and not only do they pay property tax, but income and sales tax as well. One participant noted that once a large home was purchased it was hard to resell because it is too large. One young Hmong participant said that the Hmong need to get along better with their neighbors.

Educational topics that were identified included landlord-tenant rights, understanding the process of renting and buying a home, understanding housing codes, and how to take care of homes (cleaning, emergencies, need for smoke alarms, etc.)

### *Educational Programs Issues/Topics*

*(K-12 experiences, dropout problems, college preparation for high school students, older adults, continuing education classes, etc.)*

Six counties specifically addressed educational issues and topics. Overwhelmingly in adult and youth Hmong focus groups, the need for more teachers of color, specifically Hmong was a priority. The youth groups stated they need more guidance counselors of color and/or bilingual counselors that understand the Hmong culture. The young people also feel that non-Hmong students and teachers need education about the Hmong culture. Both adults and youth said that more scholarships for Hmong low-income families are needed for college. The adults had several other issues including the need for more English as Second Language (ESL) programs, more funding for citizenship classes, more funding for drug, tobacco and gang prevention, and concerns about their children dropping out of high school. Parents said there needs to be closer supervision in school concerning tobacco use. They are also concerned about school dances because they are not sure if their children are really there or somewhere else and they don't know how to find out. Parents stated unsupervised break time or study hall might lead to bad behavior. They also see a lack of educational opportunities for young Hmong children. Some parents fear that Hmong children get falsely accused because of language barriers and some interpreters do not provide complete translation.

There was some overlap between the adult and youth topic suggestions. Both identified English classes for people of all ages who do not speak or write English and tutoring programs for K-12. Employment skill/career training, both vocational and college prep, was noted by adults and youth. The adults stated that Hmong language programs are important. The young participants asked for motivational workshops and the adults noted the need for more positive curriculum (character building) K-12 and extracurricular activities.

In Marathon County, this summary was shared: "These parents shared a lot of concern for school-family issues related to language and cultural barriers and differences. Parents fear the worst when they don't understand and cannot communicate with their children and teachers. They question if some information may be lost in the communication and translation."

### **Insights from the Planning Group**

Each community is unique and the state summary of the focus groups cannot be generalized for each of the communities with Hmong populations.

Relationships are critical for service providers to be effective. We need to work *with* the Hmong community not *for* the Hmong community. Time is needed to build relationships that in turn build trust with members of the Hmong community.

Perception and reality are sometimes difficult to distinguish.

Many of the community gardens sponsored and supported by UW-Extension have Hmong gardeners. Little was mentioned during the focus groups about the need for these gardens and Extension's support. This could relate to the time of year of the focus groups (January to March) or maybe the Hmong communities do not know Extension's involvement in the gardens.

Incentives were necessary for participation in some of the focus groups. The impact of this is unknown on participation in educational programs that may be planned on the basis of this needs assessment.

Participants express their appreciation that they were asked about issues their Hmong community and families were facing. However, they also wanted to make sure that not only was the information going to be collected, but used to provide educational help and information regarding their concerns and issues.

The focus group process was flexible to allow local communities to obtain information based on local connections, existing networks, and contact. This facilitated in obtaining solid feedback from focus group participants.

### **Suggestions for Using the Hmong Educational Needs Assessment Results**

Make sure the information gained in the needs assessment is used to develop educational programs that meet the needs of local Hmong communities.

Share the results of the Hmong Educational Needs Assessment with all divisions of UW-Extension to develop a broad-based educational response to the needs identified. This sharing of information will also provide insights for UW-Extension faculty and staff to have a better understanding of Hmong communities throughout the state.

Share the results of the Hmong Educational Needs Assessment broadly through the media and at conferences.

Pursue future UW-Extension Cross Divisional Grants to develop educational programs to address the identified needs.

UWEX needs to hire bilingual Hmong faculty and staff. Where hiring is not possible, determine ways of teaching effectively with Hmong interpreters.

Review current educational programs to determine how they can be modified to meet the identified content and delivery needs of the Hmong communities in the state.

Share the Hmong Educational Needs Assessment Report with the individuals, agencies and organizations that were involved in the process. Build upon these relationships to determine educational programming on a local level.

Encourage more sharing of successful educational programming between communities that have Hmong populations.

Tap resources already in place. Many communities have Interagency Councils or Committees that can build on the work they have already done.

## **Conclusion**

The Hmong Educational Needs Assessment Project provided the opportunity to better understand the educational desires of the Hmong citizens of Wisconsin. The broad-based focus group process provided the organizers of the project a greater understanding of the issues facing Hmong individuals, families and businesses. With these new insights, UW-Extension has the opportunity to expand its educational programming in all its divisions to better serve the Hmong community. It is not only important for the organization to conduct a needs assessment; it is now time to act on the educational programs and delivery methods that were identified in the assessment. UW-Extension must take the next step to provide this educational support to continue to build relationships and trust with the Hmong people of the state.

## **Planning Group**

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### **Appreciation**

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## **Appendix**

State Map with County Participation  
Focus Group Process and Questions  
Local Focus Group Summaries  
Focus Group Demographics