COLLEGE ACCESS FOR FIRST-GENERATION HIGHLANDER COLLEGE STUDENTS OF NORTHERN THAILAND

BY

NANNAPHAT SAENGHONG

DISSEPTION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Policy Studies in the Graduate College of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2015

Urbana, Illinois

Doctoral Committee:

Professor James D. Anderson, Chair
Professor William Trent
Assistant Professor Lorenzo Baber
Professor Emeritus Jacquetta Hill
ABSTRACT

This study focuses on first-generation college students of highland ethnic minorities, formally known as “hill tribes,” who have languages and cultures very different from mainstream Thais. Little is known about college attendance among these students, and the Thai government collects no statistical data on these populations. This study asked the following questions. What are the key determinants that support college access for first-generation highlander college students? How do students perceive the role of ethnicity in relation to their college access? What significance does higher education have for highlander students, families, and ethnic communities? Among the relatively few first-generation highlander college students, I chose to study young people of Hmong, Karen, Lahu, Akha, and Mien ethnic backgrounds attending a public university in Chiang Mai, Thailand. Using a qualitative inquiry and life history approach, I conducted interviews, participant observation, focus group interview, and document analysis. The analysis indicated five key determinants contributed to the students’ successful college access: parental support, significant others, students’ resilience, student loans, and a college admission quota for highland ethnic minorities. Next, the findings indicated that highland students viewed that ethnicity provided them with both advantages and disadvantages. Lastly, the findings indicated that higher education was perceived to provide benefits in three different ways. The study also spelled out the implications for educational policies and practices that could create more equitable opportunities in college access and could address the issue of ethnic harassment experienced by highlander students.

Keywords: college access, higher education, hill tribes, highland ethnic minority
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My Ph.D. journey would have been impossible without the guidance and contributions of many people. First of all, I thank Dr. James D. Anderson, my chairperson and advisor, for his enduring support during my graduate study and for his kind consideration in allowing me to explore educational issues among the highland people in Thailand, a research area where he has little knowledge, but that I have a passion for. I was privileged to study with a committee of excellent scholars—Dr. Jacquetta Hill, Dr. William Trent, and Dr. Lorenzo Baber. These wonderful guides and mentors all helped me to sharpen my ideas, provided stimulating questions, made important critiques of my work, and offered much useful advice to strengthen this dissertation to be a representation of my best work. I also thank Dr. David Plath, Dr. Hill’s dear spouse, for his generous support and advice for my work.

My sincere gratefulness goes to the twenty-three participants in this study for sharing their lives with me. Without their willingness, this project would not have been conceivable.

Many special thanks to my dear mother, my beloved father who passed away while I was in graduate school, my brothers, and my two wonderful aunts for their support. Most importantly, thank you, Mom and Dad, for believing in your daughter, for making sacrifices and commitments, and for providing financial, emotional, and spiritual support from the time I was in primary school in our little village until the time I completed graduate school in America.

I give my thankful heart to Debbie Cassels for her emotional support and excellent editing. Writing academic papers in a third language is challenging. Without
Debbie’s great proofreading and patience, my dissertation would be less comprehensible.

I also thank the Hill-Plath Foundation for offering financial support so I could pursue graduate studies. Lastly, I thank my friends, Som-O, Chai, Benjamin, Eve, Dan, Lynn, Arezoo, Kate, and Sophy for their friendship to warm my life, encouragement to motivate me, and listening to me throughout my graduate school years.

I could not have reached my goal of attaining this Ph.D. degree without assistance from every one of you. I cannot thank you enough for all your great support.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION ......................................................................................1

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW ........................................................................7

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY ................................................................................37

CHAPTER 4: VILLAGE CONTEXT: THE CASE OF FIVE VILLAGES ......................62

CHAPTER 5: KEY DETERMINANTS FOR SUCCESSFUL COLLEGE ACCESS:
   MICRO-LEVEL FACTOR ..................................................................................121

CHAPTER 6: KEY DETERMINANTS FOR SUCCESSFUL COLLEGE ACCESS:
   MACRO-LEVEL FACTORS .............................................................................169

CHAPTER 7: ETHNICITY AND COLLEGE ACCESS ...........................................201

CHAPTER 8: THE MEANING OF COLLEGE EDUCATION ..................................230

CHAPTER 9: SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS, SIGNIFICANCE, AND
   RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH .....................................254

REFERENCES .....................................................................................................285

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR STUDENT PARTICIPANTS ........297

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR PARENT PARTICIPANTS ............305

APPENDIX C: FIELD OBSERVATION GUIDELINES AND FIELD NOTE
   FORM ..............................................................................................................306

APPENDIX D: FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL .........................................................309

APPENDIX E: LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS ..........................................................310
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Little is known about higher education among the highland ethnic minorities of northern Thailand, formally known as the hill tribes. Highlanders or hill tribes are groups of ethnic minorities typically inhabiting the mountainous areas of the northern, western, and upper-central provinces of Thailand.\(^1\) Thai highlanders are comprised of ten ethnic groups, including Karen, Hmong, Lahu, Akha, Lisu, Mien, Lua, Htin, Khamu and Mlabri. Most hill tribes migrated from China, Burma, and Laos to Thailand between 1840 and 1950 (Bhruksasri, 1989). According to the most recent survey conducted in 2002 by the Department of Social Development and Service (DSDS), in cooperation with UNICEF, the highlander population accounted for 1.74 percent (923,257) of the total Thai population (approximately 63 million).

Higher education can have a great impact on social and economic mobility for individual highlanders. The higher the level of advanced education that an individual attains, the higher the social and economic mobility the individual is likely to gain. Partially, this positive correlation occurs because the level of schooling completed has an impact on the types of occupation and level of earnings the individual can pursue (Perna, 2003). In Thailand, the level of earnings increases as the level of schooling increase, even though men’s earning are still higher than those of women (Hawley, 2004).

---

\(^{1}\) The terms ‘hill tribe,’ ‘Thai highlander,’ ‘highlander,’ and ‘highland ethnic minority’ will be used interchangeably throughout the dissertation.
provides opportunities for highlanders to enter the labor workforce in cities or even in their home villages. While, having education prior to postsecondary education is important, it is not sufficient to secure professional jobs with better earnings. Highlanders who have middle school or high school education work in restaurants, gas stations, and retail shops, or return to their community to become sub-district representatives and political leaders as well as better-informed farmers (Buadaeng, Bunyasaranai, & Lipricha, 2003). Some highlander students who have graduated from universities have better opportunities to enter and secure jobs in both government and private sectors. To illustrate, Hmong students who obtained higher education have become lawyers, teachers, nurses, academics, and other professionals in cities (Chumsakul, 2006). The benefits of higher education for individual highlanders is acknowledged to some extent, but little is known about their access to higher education and the issues they faced with regard to obtaining access to higher education. This lack of information means that the subject of access to higher education or college access remains as a challenging issue for highlanders.

**Statement of the Problem**

Thailand is committed to providing access to higher education for students of all backgrounds, but there is no federally-funded policy research to examine the issue of college access for highlander students and how their success in obtaining higher education could be improved. The Thai government fails to acknowledge that some ethnic minority groups in society lag far behind the majority group in accessing and benefiting from educational opportunities, particularly higher education. While some highlander students have overcome the obstacles and successfully secured access to
higher education institutions, we know very little about the background characteristics of these students, and the bases for their success. The exact number of highlander students in the Thai higher educational system is unknown; since no collection of statistics of students’ ethnic backgrounds has been compiled by individual universities, state agencies, or private research organizations. Thus, access to higher education has remained an invisible, as well as a challenging issue for highlander students.

In the past several decades, considerable research on Thai highlanders or hill tribes has been conducted. These studies regarding hill tribes by Thai state agencies, foreign agencies, and oversea academics historically began after the Hill Tribe Welfare Committee was set up in 1959 by the Department of Public Welfare (DPW) and the problems (i.e., opium production, communist insurgency, and forest degradation), the ‘hilltribe problems,’ were politicized and nationalized. Although a large number of studies about the hill tribes in Thailand are now available, most of these studies focus, not on education, but rather on agriculture, history, language, culture, citizenship, identity, socioeconomic issues, social and political structures, and environmental practices. Research on education was given minimal attention. A few studies concerning highlander education were conducted by private research entities and mainly focused on general aspects of primary and secondary education, rather than on higher education (Buadaeng, 2007; Buadaeng, 2008; Chuamsakul, 2006; McNabb, 1993; & Vogler, 2010). Research on higher education provisions for highlanders has been historically neglected and is currently been overlooked. The particular issue of access to higher education for Thai highlanders has been given even lesser attention; viewed as less significant, or even overlooked, by both Thai state agencies and private researchers. The lack of information
and research makes the topic of access to higher education an extremely challenging issue that needs to be addressed.

For the foregoing stated reasons, I conducted a qualitative study that examined the issue of college access for highlander youths of northern Thailand. Among the relatively few first-generation highlander college students, I chose to study young people of Akha, Hmong, Karen, Lahu, and Mien ethnic groups, since they were renowned in obtaining higher education degrees.

**Purpose of the Study**

Studies that deal directly with the issue of college access for highlander students hardly exist or have not been properly documented, as stated earlier. It is less known, less well defined, and less understood than other topics in Thai higher education. Therefore, this study aimed to obtain depth of understanding in how highlander students successfully gained college access in the face of their limited opportunities and challenging barriers. The study also aimed to explore highlander student’s viewpoints and understanding about the role of ethnicity in their educational experiences and in their college access. Lastly, the study sought to scrutinize what lay behind the students’ motivation to obtain college educations.

**Research Questions**

The research questions that guided the study were:

a) What are the key determinants that contribute to college access for first-generation highlander college students?

b) How do first-generation highlander college students perceive the role of ethnicity in relation to their college access?
c) What significance does higher education have for highlander students, families, and ethnic villages?

Chapter Overview

This study is comprised of nine chapters. Chapter One introduces the study by providing the context in which this study takes place, including describing the background problem, the purpose of the study, and research questions. Chapter Two introduces highland ethnic minorities and their background information, including highlander history, cultures, religions, social organizations, and political organizations. It also provides information about the higher education system in Thailand and explores studies concerning education for highlanders. Finally, Chapter Two details some strands of research that offer explanations for educational participation and college access. These research strands include cultural capital, social capital, and critical race theory (CRT). Chapter Three discusses the importance of qualitative research in my study and also presents a detailed description of the participant selection process, data collection, and the data analysis process. Chapter Four is centered on descriptions of the five different villages I visited during my research. The chapter describes a brief history of each village, along with the village’s distinctive culture and social structure, livelihood, and schooling. It also discusses common shared characteristics among the five villages. My objective in this chapter is to provide contextual backgrounds of the settings from where the highlander students come and a contextual basis for my empirical analysis. Chapters Five and Six chapter present and discuss the key factors that support successful college access for first-generation highlander students. Chapter Seven presents the viewpoints of the research participants regarding ethnicity and college access.
Chapter Eight presents the pride and the pressures experienced by highlander students as the first college goers in their families or in their villages and also how highlander students viewed the importance of college education. Chapter Nine provides an overview of the research findings and the implications of these findings as they relate to college access and to multicultural education. The chapter also offers recommendations for future studies and discusses the significance of this study.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I first present background information regarding the highland ethnic minorities, or hill tribes, which are the focus of this study. In order to understand the context in which highlander youths are educated, I will provide brief information regarding Thailand’s higher education system and also a brief history of education for highlanders. Finally, I will present strands of research that help to frame my understanding of college access for highlander students. These strands of research include: cultural capital, social capital, and critical race theory (CRT).

Who are Highland Ethnic Minorities (or Hill Tribes)?

Highland ethnic minorities, also known as hill tribes, in Thailand generally refer to ten ethnic minorities living in the mountainous regions of northern Thailand. These groups include Karen, Hmong, Mien, Lahu, Akha, Lisu, Lua, Htin, Khamu, and Mrabri. The term “hill tribe” was first used in 1959, when the Thai government set up the Central Hill Tribe Committee, previously called the Hill Tribe Welfare Committee (Department of Public Welfare, 1991). The groups were identified as hill tribes based on the geography where they lived (i.e., remote, mountainous areas). According to Buadeang (2006), historically, the Karen and Lua ethnic groups were well-established peoples who were considered to be indigenous to Thailand. The other highlanders, except for the Mrabri, migrated into northern Thailand from China, Burma, and Laos between 1840 and the early 1950s (Bhruksasri, 1989). The hill tribes of Thailand are classified into three major linguistic families: Sino-Tibetan, Austro-Asiatic, and Austro-Thai (Suwanbubpa,

---

2 Hill tribes or highlanders in Thailand are known as “Chao Khao” (Chao=people, Khao=hill) or as “Chao Doi” (Chao=people, Doi=mountain).
The Karen, Akha, Lahu, and Lisu tribes are included in the Sino-Tibetan language family. The Khamu, Lua, Htin, and Mrabri tribes are included in the Austro-Asiatic language family, and the Hmong and Mien are placed under the Austro-Thai language family, which is closely related to the Chinese language family.

The latest comprehensive census survey of the hill tribe populations was conducted in 2002 by the Department of Social Development and Service (DSDS), currently known as the Department of Social Development and Welfare (DSDW), in cooperation with UNICEF. The survey covered the highland communities found within 20 provinces of Thailand: Chiangmai, Chiangrai, Phayao, Phare, Nan, Lampang, Lamphoon, Maehongson, Tak, Kamphaeng pet, Phitsanuloke, Petchaboon, Sukhothai, Uthaithanee, Loei, Kanchanaburi, Ratchaburi, Suphanburi, Petchaburi, and Prajuabkirikhan. Most of these provinces are located in north and west regions of Thailand. According to this survey, the highlander population accounted for 1.74 percent (923,257) of the total Thai population (approximately 63 million) (See Table 1). There was 222,696 highlander households located in 3,881 villages. Karen had the largest ethnic minority in Thailand, Hmong constituted the second largest ethnic minority, and Mrabri had the smallest population. Even though all of the tribes were grouped under the same term “hill tribe,” each ethnic group had its own language, culture, religious beliefs, practices, rites, and traditional dress. Each group also has its own ethnic name, given by the members of each ethnic group to itself, and also each highland group had a unique ethnic name given to it by the culturally dominant Thais.
Table 1

Highlander Data in 20 Provinces by Ethnic Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic Group</th>
<th>Villages</th>
<th>Households</th>
<th>Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>1,912</td>
<td>151,186</td>
<td>147,168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hmong</td>
<td>253</td>
<td>45,382</td>
<td>45,703</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lahu</td>
<td>385</td>
<td>32,059</td>
<td>32,094</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Akha</td>
<td>271</td>
<td>20,948</td>
<td>21,876</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mien</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>15,260</td>
<td>15,442</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Htin</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>15,512</td>
<td>14,941</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisu</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>12,345</td>
<td>12,505</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lua</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>7,454</td>
<td>7,553</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khamu</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>3,991</td>
<td>3,873</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mlabri</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3,422</td>
<td>304,213</td>
<td>301,223</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Adapted from Department of Social Development and Service and UNICEF, 2002.

In addition, some highland groups divided themselves into a number of culturally-significant subgroups. Lahu, for example, is divided into four main subgroups: Lahu Shehleh, red Lahu, black Lahu, and yellow Lahu. Traditional dress, dialectical differences, various aspects of material culture, and certain features of social and religious organization distinguish one division from another. Over time, the term “hill tribe” developed a stereotypical or discriminatory connotation. It referred to people who were isolated, uneducated, illiterate, or poor. The term was also used to disparage the highlanders’ limited fluency in the Thai language and their distinctive religious practices and beliefs. At present, other terms such as upland people, highland ethnic minority, or highlander are used in place of “hill tribe.”
In order to provide better insight into the highlanders’ lives, brief details regarding their cultures, religions, social organizations, political structures, and economics are provided.

**Cultures.** As stated previously, each highland group has its own culture, language, costumes, holidays, and festival celebrations. For example, each ethnic group celebrates its own individual New Year, which may occur at the end of December, in January, or in February in conjunction with the Chinese New Year. Suwanbubpa (1976) stated that the geographical isolation of hill tribes has in fact contributed to the preservation of their cultural identities. However, this statement is not completely true for today in the era of globalization, where highlanders have more contact with either Thai lowlanders or foreigners and also have comparatively more access to various types of technologies. At present, even though the hill tribes still live in remote areas, they have access to satellite television, newspapers, and personal cell phones. The cell phone, especially, has become very popular among hill tribes in recent years as the cost of cell phones and provider services fees have decreased and coverage areas have been expanded. Moreover, the younger generations in the hill tribes have access to the Internet, since they are required to learn practical online skills by schools and postsecondary educational institutions. In fact, highlanders in Thailand, like other indigenous groups across the world, are concerned about the extinction of their cultures, traditions, languages, and indigenous knowledge coming about as a result of exposure to ideas and practices of the larger world. These concerns are especially critical among the elder generations.
Religions. The religious beliefs of the highlanders are mostly characterized as animist (Hanks & Hanks, 2001). That is, most highland people believe in a great number of spirits both good and bad: spirits of natural phenomena, spirits of people living and dead, guardian spirits, locality spirits, and many others. Religious specialists, including priests, spirit specialists, and shamans, are important figures in community life. Major religious activities are typically related to health and fertility (for people, animals, and crops), economic prosperity, harmony among men, harmony between men and the supernatural world, the seasons, and the agricultural cycle. Buddhism is the major formal religion throughout Thailand. A large number of highland ethnicity minorities are identified as Buddhists in their state identification and household registration books. However, Buddhism is practiced largely among Karen population, while other ethnic groups combine Buddhism into their traditional belief systems or animism. Historically, Buddhism was not widely introduced to highland people until 1965, when the Office of National Buddhism (ONB) founded the Dhammacharik (missionary-monks) Buddhist program with a strong appeal and assistance from the Department of Public Welfare (DPW), which was responsible for hill tribe affairs at that time. Hundreds of Buddhist monks were sent into the highland villages each year to promote Buddhism, which is a national religion, among highland people, to create sense of “Thainess” through religion (i.e., Buddhism), and to improve the socio-economic condition of the highland children through education (Department of Public Welfare, 1991). Since then, Buddhism has become known among highland people and practiced by some highland groups. Christianity is largely practiced among highlanders due to its extensive history in disseminating religious beliefs and later, after 1950, in making considerable efforts in
improving the lives and educational opportunities for the highlanders. Over the years, more highland people were converted to Christianity and more churches were accordingly set up. According to Buadang (2008), there were about 55 Protestant-based organizations and 13 Catholic-based organizations that have worked with the highland ethnic minorities and their education.

**Social organizations.** In highland communities, there are also no social classes; they are markedly egalitarian societies (PERVE, 2006). The smallest unit in the highland society is the household. Several generations commonly live in the same household. A nuclear family household is comprised of a husband and wife with children, just two generations living together. The relationships among the members of each household unit are very different in the various ethnic groups. Among the Hmong, Mien, Lisu, and Akha, patrilineal clanship (i.e., inheritance is passed through the male line) is an important unit of social and political organization. The clan has control over marriages, rituals and celebrations, rights of succession, and other social aspects of their life. Historically, Akha, Hmong, and Lisu men could have several wives, but their polygyny practice has been gradually changed. The rest of the highlander societies are bilateral and monogamous. Highlanders generally get married at a very early age. However, for some individuals, the usual age of marriage has been delayed somewhat because they sought educational opportunities. In addition, intergroup marriages between ethnic groups, and between highlander people and Thais, are frequent occurrences. Highlander people, especially girls, may marry Thais, move to live in the lowland areas or cities, and have more mainstream Thai lifestyles.
**Political organizations.** Highlanders organize themselves into relatively small and autonomous village communities. In each village, an officially-elected headman acts as a governmental representative. The headman oversees his village and manages village affairs in consultation with the leading elders of the village. Since 2002, each village has two locally-elected representatives in addition to the headman. This policy is part of the 1999 Political Decentralization Act, which grants greater power and authority to the district level. Both the headman and the locally elected representatives are important links between the village and the governmental offices. At the present time highlanders are systematically linked with mainstream Thai society. Their cultural, economic, demographic, and administrative interdependencies are stronger than at any time in the past. The decentralization policies give greater authority to district units and promote more political participation among the highland people. Men and women from different highland groups and villages are selected by their villagers to be representatives in local political organizations and administrations. In addition to the governmental representatives, each village usually has at least one male or female priest or shaman who is elected by the elders and villagers. Different highland groups have different names to call their religious leaders. The priests are very important to the villages and their religious and cultural practices, since they are in charge of all religious ceremonies. The priests usually have the authority to decide how the villages’ rituals and ceremonies will be conducted.

**Economy and agriculture.** Historically, the highlanders who resided in the mountainous areas practiced swidden or slash-and-burn agriculture (Kampe, 1997; Tribal Research Institute, 1989). The highlanders who practiced swidden agriculture and moved
frequently from one area to another in order to find newly fertile fields were criticized by Thai government officials for not being a settled population with villages in a permanent location (Katemanee, 1989). Their traditional ways of farming were viewed to cause destruction to forest systems, agricultural lands, and the environment. After the Thai government implemented permanent settlement policies and restrictions on removing forest resources, the highlanders began to grow mostly cash crops such as red beans, corn, potatoes, chilies, ginger, and taros (Department of Public Welfare, 1991). A same time, they planted rice and vegetables and raised pigs and chicken for consumption. In the present time, most highland groups participate in cash crop economy. Their farming success highly depends on market prices and requires substantial investments in seeds, pesticides, chemical fertilizers, and farming technologies. Some highlanders, such as the Hmong and Akha set up shops in the cities such as Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai to sell their agricultural and handcrafted products, while young people with limited education went to major cities to work as laborers at restaurants, bars, nightclubs, shops, and hotels (Buadaeng, et al., 2003). Obtaining jobs and finding meaningful occupations are still difficult due to lack of personal networks, cultural capital, and language proficiency. Some young highlanders who received higher levels of education are able to work at factories, private companies, governmental agencies, and non-governmental organizations.

**Brief Background of Thai Higher Education System**

Thailand is one nation that has succeeded in educational development at all levels. Student participation across all levels of education has been steady and has substantially increased over the last three decades. The Ministry of Education (MOE), which has
primary jurisdiction over educational development, promotes and oversees all aspects of education. The 1999 National Education Act (amended in 2002) serves as the fundamental law for administration and provision of education and training.\(^3\) The Thai higher education system is under the administration of the Office of the Higher Education Commission (OHEC). In principle, OHEC is responsible for proposing policies, plans and standards for higher education; mobilizing resources; ensuring educational quality and standards in all public and private intuitions of higher education; improving higher education institutes and community colleges; monitoring, inspecting and evaluating the educational provisions of higher education; and conducting the secretarial work of the Commission. The Fifteen-Year Higher Education Plan serves as the main framework for higher education legislation\(^4\).

The higher education system in Thailand is composed of public and private educational institutions. In 2013, the Thai higher education system under OHEC consists of 173 higher education institutions: 101 public higher education institutions (i.e., 16 autonomous universities, 14 public universities with limited admission; 2 Buddhist universities; 40 Rajabhat Universities (former teaching colleges); 9 Rajamangala Universities of Technology; 20 community colleges; and 72 private higher education institutions (i.e., 42 private universities, 10 private institutes, and 20 private colleges). There was also a total enrollment of 2,080,643 million students (855,113 men and 1,225,530 women) and over 50,520 faculty members (i.e., 44,662 in public universities, 1,858 in private universities, 10,242 in public institutes, and 5,396 in private institutes).

---

\(^3\) The Act includes nine chapters: general provisions (the objectives and principles); educational rights and duties; educational system; national education guidelines; educational administration and management; educational standards and quality assurance; teachers, faculty staff and educational personnel; resources and investment for education; and technologies for education.

5,715 in private institutions, and 147 in public community colleges). About 1.79 million students were enrolled in the public institutions and about 294,074 students were enrolled in the private institutes. A group of Rajabhat Universities had the highest number of students enrolled. The higher education intuitions, except for the public and private colleges, offered programs of studies in bachelor’s degrees and master’s degrees, as well as doctorate degrees. Public and private colleges offered degrees at lower levels or diploma levels. The majority of the courses offered in these colleges are associated with vocational education, which requires two years of study. All public institutions, (that is, excluding private colleges and universities) operate on a governmental budget. From 2003-2013, the amount of the national educational budget of Thailand averaged 21 percent of the total national budget or 4 percent of Gross Domestic Product (GPD). The average budget allocation for higher education accounted for 16 percent of the total educational budget. The government allocation for of K-12 education was about 22 times higher than that of higher education.

Concerning undergraduate admission, limited public universities and autonomous universities, regarded as the first-tier public universities, recruit students mainly through the system of national entrance examinations, while other types of higher education institutions recruit students based on their individual examination and recruitment systems. The current admission system, named the Central University Admissions System (CUAS), was officially implemented in 2006 and revised in 2012. The CUAS system is managed by National Institute of Educational Testing Service (NIETS), under the Commission on Higher Education (CHE), in coordination with higher education institutions, which pool admission quotas for the students. The CUAS uses four
components for determining the admission. The first component is Grade Point Average (GPAX). The GPAX is a student’s cumulative grade point average (GPA) from grades 10 to 12. GPAX principally demonstrates the academic performance of students and indicates the effects of teaching and learning of upper secondary education. The GPAX score accounts for 20 percent of the total admission score. The second component is the Ordinary National Educational Test (ONET). ONET scores are an assessment of students in the twelfth grade in eight subject areas: Thai Language, mathematics, sciences, social studies, English language, health education, art, and related vocational education. The ONET tests the basic knowledge and skills students have learned in their high school education, and every student must take ONET in order to qualify for university admission. The score of ONET comprises about 30 percent of the total admission score. The third component is the General Aptitude Test (GAT). The compulsory GAT is the use of mathematics and language to measure the following abilities: writing, critical thinking skills, problem solving skills, and competency in English communication. The score of GAT accounts between 10-50 percent of the total admission score. The last component determining university admission is Professional and Academic Aptitude Test (PAT). The voluntarily PAT is a set of tests to measure particular knowledge and skills in a particular area. PAT covers a choice of seven subjects, including mathematics, science, engineering, architecture, educational professional, fine and applied arts, and languages. PAT counts for 0–40 percent of the total admission score. The central university admission selection process is usually held in April of each year. Students have to submit their application forms along with scores of the four components, and they can select up to four choices for program studies and universities. It is important to point out those
students select programs of study and universities based on their statistical scores of the previous year and on their estimation of the current year’s scores. In other words, students have to guess the highest and lowest score of the current year of the programs and institutions they want to attend and then compare them with the scores they receive to make decisions about the choices of programs of study and universities, which are very limited.

With its highly emphasis in test testing, the CUAS system is used as a key device for controlling access to higher education to the most prestigious universities, to good jobs and occupations, and to choice opportunities in life (Bovornsiri, 1985; Suthasasna, 1973; Suwanawongse, 2005). It is also used as the mechanism that limits higher educational access for many students, especially students from poor and low-income families or students with ethnic backgrounds who have few to no chances of receiving testing preparation from private tutoring schools. The CUAS certainly allows the first-tier public universities to have a larger pool of high school students and mainly recruit the best-educated group of high school students into their institutions. However, these institutions have also tried to diversify their admission system by exercising other admission schemes. These include an instructional direct-entrance admission system and a quota system where a certain number of students are recruited to certain undergraduate programs through specific requirements.

Currently, Thai higher education is under reform by the Autonomous University Act (AUA), which began in the 1970s. In general, AUA provides all public universities autonomous authority in terms of financial, academic, and personnel management policies. The AUA also provides public universities with block grants from the central
government. In 2014, about 16 of the 80 public universities have already changed their status to become autonomous. The remaining public universities are in a slow transition process to become autonomous universities under domestic political turmoil.

**Historical Background of the Highland Ethnic Minorities’ Education**

State education was first introduced to the highland ethnic minorities with the establishment of the first school in 1935 in a Hmong village in Tak province. Two years later a second school was set up in Lava village in Chiang Mai province. Both schools were public schools operated by the Department of General Education (DGE), currently known as the Office of Basic Education Commission (OBEC), under the Ministry of Education (MOE). The structure and systems of these schools were designed in similar centralized ways (i.e., same curriculum and administrative structure). DGE slowly set up more schools, mainly in accessible highland villages. By 1966, there were 109 highland schools under DGE (Buruphat, 1975).

However, education was not widely provided to highlander populations until after 1959, when the Thai government declared national concerns on hilltribe problems: opium cultivation, security problems (i.e., communist insurgency), and forest and land degradation. As the result, the term “hill tribe” was first officially established and used in government policy documents and discourses to refer to nine ethnic groups, namely Karen, Hmong, Mien, Lahu, Lisu, Akha, Lua, Htin, and Khamu. MOI then appointed the Department of Public Welfare (DPW) to be the main agency to address such problems. Since then, various governmental agencies have been appointed by DPW to cooperate in dealing with “hilltribe problems.” However, I will only describe the organizations that
were involved in education for highland populations, as shown in Figure 1, and will shortly detail their roles.

Figure 1. Governmental agencies

The Department of General Education (DGE) was the first state agency to provide education to highland populations. In 1999, the role of DGE in providing education to the highlanders declined when the Office of Provincial Administration (OPA) under Ministry of Interior (MOI) took over the responsibility for regional educational affairs. All schools set up by the DGE were transferred to be under the authority of the OPA. Although its roles have declined, the DGE has still continued to set up and operate boarding schools for low-income, disadvantaged students, including the highland children across the country (Buadaeng, 2007). The boarding schools provide free education, hostels, and meals. In 2012, there were 67 boarding schools located across the country, and three of the schools primarily served highland children.
The Office of Provincial Administration (OPA) was involved in providing education to highland children in 1999, but its authority ceased in 2002 when the Department of Local Administration (DLA) was established by the MOI and appointed to oversee a certain number of schools. At present, the majority of schools in Thailand and also in highland communities are overseen by OBEC. DLA mainly oversees and provides funding for pre-schools.

Regarding the Department of Public and Welfare (DPW), in 1963, DPW founded the Mobile Development and Welfare Program to implement educational, health, and agricultural programs in areas where the hill tribe people lived. With respect to education, DPW sent mobile teams to mountainous areas, where there were no schools available, to provide basic education to highland children and adults. In 1965, the DPW also began to set up temporary schools in the highland villages, especially in very remote villages where the DGE could not set up formal schools. By 1979, the DPW had already set up 171 schools with 3,694 highlander students and 194 teachers in the highlander villages (Office of the Educational Council, 1981). Most of the schools were located in Chiang Rai, Chiang Mai, and Mae Hong Sorn provinces where the majority of the highlander populations lived. The majority of students enrolled at those schools under the DPW were Karen, Hmong, and Lahu. As part of the integration policy, the DPW used education as an instrument to gradually instill and influence the highland ethnic people to become Thai. When the 1999 Administration Act was passed, the DPW’s role on highland education was ended, as did DGE.

In addition to the DPW, the Border Patrol Police (BPP), founded in 1953 as a special agency to protect Thailand’s border, also provided education to highland children.
The BPP founded schools in the highland villages to teach the central Thai language to highland people, to discourage them from being enticed into communism, and to create a sense of Thai citizenship in the highland people through education (Buadaeng & Leeprecha, 2006; Bhrusasri, 1989; Sukonthaphatipak, 1997). The BPP set up the first school in the village of Akha in Chiangrai province in 1956 and has continued to work on education for the highlanders since then. By 2005, the BPP had already established 713 schools, but only 191 schools remained under its control, out of which 189 were primary schools and only 2 were secondary schools (Buadaeng, 2007). The rest of the schools were transferred to be under OPA and later under DGE. The BPP schools use the same national curriculum and are largely supported by the King and royal family members.

The Department of Non-Formal Education (DNFE) was founded in the 1940s under the MOU to provide basic literacy, originally to adults and later to children, especially in rural and remote areas where formal schools were not available. The DNFE has played key roles in providing education to highland ethnic minorities since 1981, when DNFE, together with DPW, established the Hill Area Education Project (HAEP). HAEP, a non-formal education program based on a community-based learning model, provided educational services to highland communities with support from governmental and non-governmental organizations (Fujioka, 2006). With its success in providing education to the highland people, the project was expanded and set up in more highland villages in northern Thailand. To honor Her Royal Highness, the Princess Mother, in her great support for the program, HEAP was renamed as Mae Fa Luang Hill Area Community Learning Center. In 2003, there were 710 educational centers in 16 provinces the north and central regions of the country. About 168,000 highlanders acquired
education and other benefits from this project (Chuamsakul, 2006). This project continues to provide literacy to highland children and adults.

The Office of National Buddhism (ONB) was approached by the Hill Tribe Welfare Division, which was responsible for hill tribe affairs, under DPW to set up the Dhammacharik (missionary-monks) Buddhist program in 1965. This program aimed to create sense of “Thainess through religion (i.e., Buddhism) and to improve the socio-economic status of highland children through education (Department of Public Welfare, 1991). This program was located at the Wat Sri Soda temple in the city of Chiang Mai province. Over the years, monks from the program were sent to highland communities to engage in development activities and to recruit the highland boys to receive both Buddhist training and Thai public education at the temple, while persuading hill tribes to become Buddhist. In 1972, the program founded a school inside Wat Sri Soda to accommodate young highland boys, who were ordained as novices, to study from primary school to junior high school (Chuamsakul, 2006). In 1993, Wat Sri Soda Temple School founded another campus at Wiwek temple in Chiangmai, to teach novices at the junior high school level. In addition to providing education for boys, in 2004, the Wiwek Temple School also set up a vocational school program for highland girls to study both core subjects and subjects such as making clothes, cooking, and music. The temple schools have been alternative schools for highlander boys and, more recently, for girls (Buadaeng, 2007; Chuamsakul, 2006; Vogler, 2010). There are no tuition fees and every Buddhist monk is eligible to enroll. After they graduate from this school, students can attend one of two Buddhist universities. The highland students can leave the priesthood.

---

5 These are Mahamakut Buddhist University and Mahajularchawithayalai Buddhist University, which have campuses across the country.
and pursue higher education at public or private universities, work in the cities, or return to their home villages.

Even though several governmental agencies had worked in providing education for the highlanders, access to basic education was still challenging during that early period. For example, the 1985-1988 Thai hill tribe census, conducted by the National Statistical Office (NSO) with assistance from DPW, showed that highlander villages with schools comprised 52.67 percent of all villages. 73.9 percent of the highlanders had no education, 21.69 percent had primary education, 1.12 percent had secondary education, and 3.21 had other kinds of training. This educational data was similar to the results of the linguistic data of their ability to speak and understand the Thai language. About 59.3 percent could speak Thai, but only 22 percent could read Thai and 21.1 percent could write Thai.

Over the years, education has been slowly introduced to the rest of the highlander villages. At present, elementary schools are located in or near most highlander villages. Most schools in the highland areas are set up to educate children without charging any tuition. Educational materials and supplies as well as lunch are provided without charge to most students. Access to elementary and secondary schools is very much possible with the compulsory education laws and the government policy of providing 15 years of free education, which was implemented in 2008. However, the poor quality of education that children receive is of considerable concern.

---

6 The 15-year free education starts from the kindergarten level through the secondary education level. Under this policy, the government distributes funds to all schools nationwide and schools are authorized to manage the funds by themselves. Yet, the schools will directly allocate the money to parents to buy uniforms for their children. The list of free items to be provided to Thai students under this policy includes: tuition fees, textbooks, learning materials, school uniforms, and activities that promote quality improvements among students.
Review of Studies on Highlander Education

As stated in Chapter One, little scholarship has focused on the experiences of first-generation highlander college students. There has been no systematic research particularly focusing on college access for highlander students. Some related reports have been published, but most of these earlier studies rely on very small populations, mainly due to large-scale data being previously unavailable.

McNabb (1993) looked at the educational mobility of hill tribe students who enrolled in middle schools, high schools, vocational colleges, and universities in Chiang Mai province, north of Thailand. The majority of survey respondents were Karen, Lahu, Hmong, and Lisu students, and most of them were Christian students who benefited from boarding services and hostels provided by missionary groups. The study found that most hill tribe students received financial support mainly from missionary groups and NGOs, followed by Thai government sources. The major problems the students faced include having places to stay while attending school in the city and passing the university entrance examination. Interviews data with 30 students from four ethnic groups revealed that students secured financial support by combining support from missionary groups, NGOs, and Thai governments. The study concluded that the Thai education systems, in principle, is open to any hill tribe individual who is capable of accomplishment in the Thai academic context and is able to meet the expenditures of tuition and living costs. “There are no articulated ethnic barriers,” said McNabb (1993, p. 24). However, the study argued that educational opportunities provided for hill tribe students by the Thai government in Chiang Mai were intended to socialize hill tribe youths into the Thai system and to recirculate them back to their villages. McNabb further argued that “the
system of village schools has certain colonial overtones: tribal people are being asked in essence to devalue elements of their traditional cultures, learn an alien curriculum, and come up to Thai standards of culture and language” (p. 24).

In addition, Buranasombati (1995) conducted a qualitative study to examine factors that influenced the adjustment and achievement for low socio-economic status (SES) Hmong, Karen, and Lisu students who attended a predominately high SES college in Thailand. Compared to other available studies, this study is exceptional in providing an account of the experiences of hill tribe college students. The research finding showed these students valued education as a means to upward SES, and they were willing to work hard academically and socially in order to achieve academic success. The study also found that inadequate academic preparation for college and lack of sufficient finances were two critical issues faced by hill tribe students, while social interaction with non-hill tribe students was found not to be problematic. In addition, hill tribe students indicated that they had had poor academic backgrounds prior to attending college and had to struggle to catch up with non-hill tribe students. The students also pointed out that their previous primary and middle schools as well as high schools had poor buildings and a large number of under-qualified teachers and lacked educational materials for teaching and learning. Since their parents did not provide financial support for the education, these students had to earn money for educational expenses by working part-time jobs, which reduced their available time for studying and homework. Based on the research findings, the study suggested that supporting scholarships, providing academic and social counseling, and providing better housing while the students attended schools and colleges
in Thai towns would increase college access opportunities and college success for hill tribe students.

Buadaeng (2007) examined the roles of state agencies in hill tribe education. The study found that five major agencies have played essential roles in managing, providing, and supporting education for hill tribes. The state agencies included the Office of Basic Education, the Border Patrol Police, the Department of Public Welfare, the Department of Non-Formal and Informal Education, and the Office of National Buddhism. In addition to establishing schools in the ethnic villages, education was provided to highland youths in the form of welfare boarding schools. These schools provided free hostels and meals, since the schools were located in the big cities and most students came from rural and remote areas and from poor or extremely poor families. In 2012, there were 67 boarding schools located across the country: 25 Social Welfare Schools under the Office of Basic Education Commission and 42 Patronage Welfare Schools under the Royal Family support. Yet, only three boarding schools primarily served the hill tribe children. However, the education provided and supported for hill tribes by these agencies was mostly at the basic educational level rather than the higher educational level.

Buadaeng (2008) also conducted another study examining the roles of Non-Governmental Development Organizations (NGOs) in supporting hill tribe children and communities access to formal education. Through examining related existing studies and interviewing NGOs officials, the study found that NGOs have long played major roles in supporting education for hill tribe children since 1950s. In 2006, there were 116 NGOs that have been operated in the Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Mae Hong Son, and Lampang provinces in northern Thailand to support education for highland children. These NGOs
were mostly established after 1978. Among the 116 NGOs, 69 are religious organizations (55 Catholic, 13 Protestant, 1 Buddhist), while 47 are non-religious organizations. About 31 out of the 116 NGOs were founded or operated by ethnic groups themselves, and the number of ethnic-based NGOs was projected to be increased. The majority of these 116 NGOs secured funding primarily from Europe, the U.S, and Canada. These NGOs supported education for hill tribe children as follows: (a) 97 NGOs provided scholarships and boarding; (b) 78 NGOs carried out non-formal and alternative learning activities for children and youth; (c) 31 NGOs offered non-formal education for communities; (d) 23 NGOs worked on media projects; (e) 18 NGOs provided shelters for vulnerable children and women; and (f) 12 NGOs worked with and provide help for disabled children. The major issues faced by the NGOs included lack of sufficient funding, along with rising costs of education and uncertain state policy and regulation on the position of NGOs in arranging education for hill tribe children and youths. In addition, there are a few more studies concerning hill tribe education. But the studies mainly focused on the impact of education on hill tribe culture or identity (Buadaeng & Lipricha, 2009; Chuamsakul, 2006; Fujioka, 2002; Vogler, 2010).

In short, the review of available studies indicates that evaluations of the educational experiences of hill tribe college students have been minimally present in research and educational discourses.

**Theoretical Guidelines**

To examine the issues of college access for highlander students, I drew upon different theoretical guidelines, including cultural capital, social capital, and critical race theory (CRT) as shown in Figure 2.
Cultural Capital. Cultural capital is a concept of resources developed by Pierre Bourdieu that can be used to explain and understand children’s participation and outcomes in education. Cultural capital is possibly the most recognizable of Bourdieu’s concepts to sociologists of education and remains popular as a framework for understanding inequalities in educational systems in the United States and around the world (Dumais, 2005). According to Mahar, Harker, & Wilkes (1990), Bourdieu defines cultural capital as culturally-valued taste and consumption patterns that include a broad range of goods, arts, knowledge, education, forms of language, dispositions, values, and modes of behavior that are passed down, or reproduced, through generations. Cultural capital is the characteristics of a person that gives the person certain kinds of benefits in particular fields, mainly occupational markets and status competition (Bennett & Silva, 2011). Cultural capital exists in three forms (Swartz, 1997): (a) the embodied state (e.g., general cultural awareness, verbal skills, and a taste for what is considered noble); (b) the objectified state (e.g., material objects, such as paintings, requiring embodied cultural capital to be appreciated); and (c) the institutionalized state (e.g., educational credentials).
According to Bourdieu (1977), cultural capital, under particular conditions, can be converted into other forms of capital such as social capital (e.g., social networks) and economic capital (e.g., money). This conversion process forms the basis of the strategies adopted by individuals and social groups to ensure the reproduction of capital.

Cultural capital is passed down, or reproduced, through generations in both the home and the educational system (Bennett & Silva, 2011; Bourdieu, 1977; Harker, 1990). Families from different social class positions pass on different types and quantities of cultural capital to their children. Bourdieu (1977) argues that this reproduction of cultural capital serves to marginalize or exclude some individuals in society, since cultural capital is unequally distributed in society, with upper class families possessing large amounts, and working-class and poor families possessing very little or none at all. For Bourdieu, schools operate both to change and to reproduce social and cultural equalities from one generation to the next (Harker, 1990). Bourdieu (1997) argues that the educational system, which is supposed to be meritocratic, in fact perpetuates and aggravates existing inequalities because it has a hidden value system that grants privilege to individuals from higher-status backgrounds and because individuals from lower-status backgrounds may self-select themselves out of the educational hierarchy due to their habitus (i.e., a set of dispositions). Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) believe that school and educational systems are developed by the cultural capital of the dominant class and are structured to favor students who possess the cultural capital of the dominant classes. This systemically marginalizes students from lower classes. Schools and teachers are prejudiced in favor of students who possess cultural capital (i.e., students from the upper classes), instead of rewarding and promoting individual students simply based on their abilities or
performance. Teachers may place upper-class students in higher performance groups and spend more time with them in the classroom. Children who possess greater cultural capital will communicate more easily with teachers and grasp the course material more promptly, and hence be more likely to do well in school (Bourdieu, 1977). “When gatekeepers reward cultural capital, they advance the careers of the socially-dominant group and set up class-linked barriers to the less privileged. Cultural capital is not, then, just a general resource available and valuable to everyone; it is largely the property of the existing elite.” (Kingston, 2001, p. 88)

Students enter the educational system with different access to cultural capital based on their social and economic status. Higher-status children obtain general cultural knowledge from their parents that gives them an advantage in the school setting and better prepares them to master academic materials, develop a greater taste for learning abstract and intellectual concepts, and know about how to use their cultural capital to their advantage, compared to students with low levels of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1997; Kalmijn & Kraaykamp, 1996; Kingston, 2001). This unequal advantage in cultural capital, in turn, leads to unequal social and economic rewards. For students from a non-dominant cultural background to succeed, appropriate cultural capital has to be acquired (Harker, 1990).

**Social capital.** Social capital historically grew out of sociology and political sciences and developed also from the theory of social capital articulated by Pierre Bourdieu as well as James Coleman and Robert Putnam. Here, I focus on the social capital theory developed by Bourdieu and Coleman.

Bourdieu (1986) described social capital as:
The aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possessions of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words to membership of a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a “credential” which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word. (p. 248)

In other words, social capital is the actual or possible networks of support and resources that the individual can draw upon to successfully interact with various institutional agencies such as schools and universities. Social capital is derived from, and exists within, the relationships among groups of individuals or the relations between the actors. According to Bourdieu (1986), the social capital of any individual may consist of institutionalized networks such as families, classes, political parties, and these networks are held together only by material or cultural exchanges between their members. The amount of social capital the individual has or acquires depends on (a) the size of the network of relations he/she can effectively mobilize and (b) the amount of capital (i.e., economic, cultural, and symbolic) that each member of the network has. Social capital, under particular circumstance, can be converted into cultural capital (e.g., arts and education) and economic capital (e.g., wealth, income, material possessions and financial assets) or institutionalized in the form of educational qualifications. Bourdieu (1986) argues, as he does for cultural capital, that social capital plays important roles in the distribution of power in a society. It functions to preserve and reproduce class structures and inequalities in society, since individuals have different degrees of access to social networks—unequal possessions of social capital.

The concept of social capital, as developed by Coleman in the early 1980s, like that of Bourdieu, has been widely employed in research, especially in the field of education. Coleman (1990) defines social capital as follows:
Social capital is defined by its function. It is not a single entity, but a variety of different entities having two characteristics in common: They all consist of some aspects of a social structure, and they facilitate certain actions of individuals who are within the structure. Like other forms of capital, social capital is productive, making possible the achievement of certain ends that would not be attainable in its absence. (p. 302)

To put it another way, social capital is subtle social resources based on social relationships that one could draw upon to facilitate action and to achieve certain goals.

Social capital is created when the relations among individuals change in ways that facilitate action, so it exists in the structures of the relations between the actors, rather than within the actors themselves. Coleman points out that a given form of social capital that works for one individual might not work for another individual; it may even be futile or destructive. To illustrate social capital, Coleman compares social capital with physical capital and human capital. Social capital, being embodied in the relations among persons, is much less tangible, compared to physical capital being embodied in material form, and human capital being embodied in the knowledge and skills obtained by an individual.

Coleman’s social capital consists of two components: structural and cognitive component. The structural component consists of networks, connectedness, associational life and civic participation (behavior), whereas the cognitive component consists of perceptions of support, trust, social cohesion, and perceived civic engagement (attitudes/perceptions).

While Bourdieu emphasizes the power of social capital in changing and reproducing the inequality in society, Coleman focuses on the mechanisms and the usefulness of social capital as part of a potential solution for marginalized individuals of any social class. Coleman (1988) also points out that social capital has important roles in schooling or education. In order to facilitate educational achievement, trust must be
produced between schools and families to provide access to trustworthy information and access to institutional agents with the capacity to facilitate increased institutional support.

One of the purposes of this study is to examine key determinants supporting successful college access for highlander college students. Bourdieu and Coleman have somewhat different concepts about social capital, but they both acknowledge the significance of social networks of different types and sources as well as the effects. Bourdieu’s theory of social capital describes the power aspects of social capital possessed by highlander students and how the resources that they have available to them can affect their access to social capital. Colman’s theory of social capital provides useful concepts like norms, social networks, social connectedness, trust, and community engagement in relation to schooling and how these affect highlander students with regard to their ability and opportunity in securing college access. Besides, the theories of Bourdieu and of Coleman are effective conceptual tools in examining the role of networks or significant others in relation to college for ethnic minorities and socio-economically disadvantaged students such as highlander students.

Critical Race Theory (CRT). Historically, critical race theory (CRT) emerged in the early 1970s due to the dissatisfaction of legal scholars over the slow pace of racial reform in America, limited progress regarding affirmative action, and development of dominant ideologies (i.e., objectivity, race neutrality, merit, meritocracy, and equal opportunities) (Ladson-Billings, 1999; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solorzano, 2009). CRT was initially developed by the legal scholars, Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman, in the early 1980s. It has its roots in critical legal studies (CLS), a leftist legal movement that challenged traditional legal scholarship by arguing that the laws have to focus on how
they are applied to specific groups in particular circumstances (Ladson-Billing, 1999). In 1989, CRT departed from the umbrella movement of CLS with the following rationales (Roithmayr, 1999): CRT determined that (a) CLS did not develop theories about the relationships between law and racial power; (b) CLS ignored the transformative power of rights for a group of disempowered outsiders, who had been denied recognition as fully legal persons; and (c) CRT held the view that the concepts of color-blindness, formal legal equality, merit, and integration not only reflected, but also created and perpetuated institutional racial power.

The key tenets of CRT can be summarized based on the work of Ladson-Billing and Tate (1995), Tate (1999), McKinley & Brayboy (2006), Yosso, Smith, Ceja, and Solorzano (2009), and Chandler (2010). First, CRT views race and racism to be endemic in American society and that racism intersects with forms of inferiority based on such characteristics as gender, class, sexuality, language, immigrant status, and culture. Second, CRT challenges the claims of prevailing views, which include objectivity, meritocracy, color blindness, and race neutrality, that are used by influential groups for their self-interest and to uphold elite power. Third, CRT calls for social justice by aiming at eradicating racism, sexism, and poverty and by empowering oppressed people. Fourth, CRT crosses disciplinary boundaries by extending its analysis of race and racism to both historical and contemporary frameworks and by using various kinds of theoretical traditions such as Marxism, feminism, post-structuralism, critical studies, and pragmatism to broaden the analysis of race and racism. Lastly, CRT recognizes the experiential knowledge of people of color as a way to inform thinking and research and

---

7 Interest convergence implies that equality and equity is pursued when the interests of people of color meet with the interests of the Whites (Teranishhi, Behringer, Grey, & Parker, 2009).
regards narrative accounts and stories through counter-storytelling as vital sources of data.

CRT, as it originated in the U.S., is a critique of the racial reform movement. CRT has been developed and applied to other issues related to race, including education. CRT can even be a useful tool to examine issues related to land, human rights, and nationalism (Villenas, Deyhle, & Parker, 1999). So, there is little doubt that CRT can be applied for examining the same or similar issues in other nations’ contexts, especially for exploring and analyzing educational issues related to race and ethnicity. The key tenets of CRT can be used as conceptual tools to examine college access for Thai highlander students, who are historically under-represented groups. This issue within the field of education has been hidden by their ethnicization as hill tribes.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I introduced highland ethnic minorities by presenting overall information about their cultural, religious, social, political, and livelihood contexts. A brief background of the Thai higher education system and a historical context of highland education were also presented in order to provide contextual basis for understanding the present educational states for highlanders. Lastly, I talked about the three theoretical strands of cultural capital, social capital, and critical race theory (CRT) that helped frame my understanding about how student backgrounds, social networks, and race/ethnicity affect pathways to college and the nature of college access among highland students.
CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

Introduction

My trip to Mae Nam village began on the morning of May 17, 2013, when I picked up Pam, an Akha student from Mae Nam village, at her dormitory. This home visit trip was a month after my first village visit trip to a Karen village in Mae Hong Son. It was also three months after I first interviewed Pam, two weeks after conducting a classroom observation for one of the courses Pam was taking, and a week after I joined a class field trip with Pam, her classmates, and her instructor. Pam’s village was about 110 miles from her university. After four hours of driving, including visiting her high school, the private dormitory where she used to live, and a dormitory staff person that Pam regarded as a supportive person, we arrived at the northern Thai village nearest to her village. As I glanced around, I saw a small police station, a temple, a private health clinic, a few grocery stores, small restaurants, and a small wet market. Pam said this was nearest market to her village and suggested that we stop to buy foods and other items we needed before heading to her village. It was early evening time so the little market was filled with many customers (i.e., northern Thais, Lisu, and Akha) who did shopping for their evening meals. After we finished shopping, we headed to Pam’s village, which was about 12 miles away. May was the end of summer season and the beginning of rainy season in Thailand, and the scenes along the road were quite lovely with red soil turned over for planting, green trees, bright orange flamboyant flowers, and purple lagerstroemia flowers. However, after 3.5 miles of well-paved road, the road and the roadside scenery began to change. The road became steep and the concrete road surface was bumpy with small potholes. The road scene also changed from a valley panorama to a mountainous panorama. Longan groves, lychee groves, upland fields with red-brown soil, and huge green mountains alternately showed their magnificence all the way to Mae Nam village. A few minutes later we reached Phamee Akha, another sub-group of Akha. Once we passed by Phamee Akha village, the road became even steeper, narrower, and more twisted. The less steeper areas were not paved while steep areas were paved only by making two small tracks of concrete-paved surface that allowed car tires to run, while the middle section was left as dirt. I asked Pam why the district officials did not pave the whole area of the road. She quickly responded “the current road is much better than in the past. In the past, during rainy season, only a few pickup trucks with skillful drivers and with strong tire chains were able travel back and fourth to the village. The headman and sub-district representatives have already requested funds to improve the road from the Sub-district Administrative Organization (SAO), but they were told to wait for the budget.” I could imagine how bad the road was in the past or even current years. A few days later Pam and I went down to the wet market to buy more food, but just before we headed back to the village, rain poured down heavily. Pam said it was impossible for me to drive back to the village in such a muddy, slippery, and steep uphill road. She said only pickup trucks and
experienced drivers could do that. So, we decided to leave the car at her uncle’s house near the market and hitchhiked back to the village in a villager’s pickup truck.

My asking about the road condition may have made Pam worried about whether I could deal with such kind of road. So, she tried to tell me in advance what kinds of curves or road conditions I could expect. I found that such guidance was helpful for me, as I was traveling on this road as the first time. A month before this trip, I experienced driving on a dirt road, which was very challenging for me, but this road to Pam’s village was not less challenging, either. The road from Phamee Akha village to Pam’s village is mainly steeply uphill, with no downhill sections. For the return trip the direction of the incline was vice versa. Luckily, there was no rain on that day and we arrived at the village safely. I felt relieved when I saw the sign ‘Welcome to Mae Nam Village’ and a school sign. As soon we entered the village gate, I saw a huge church on the left and a few houses. As I was driving past the curve approaching the top of the hill, I saw another church on the right and more houses. This time I saw a half-map of the village and suddenly thought in my mind why these people settled in this incredible slope mountain. I told Pam that I was surprised by how steep the slope was and how big her village was. Pam quickly replied, “The size of the village you see now is just half of the total size. The other half size of the village is on the right side of us. It’s the back of this hill. But Lisu people mainly live there. Most Akha live this side of the hill (i.e., the side we were facing).”

My research interest in college access for highland ethnic minority students, also known as hill tribes, began when I started my Ph.D. study. As mentioned in Chapter One and in Chapter Two, little scholarship has focused on higher education for the hill tribe students of northern Thailand. Thai education policy pledges to provide access to higher education for students of all backgrounds. However, given that the educational experiences of highlander students and the examination of their educational trajectories have been largely absent from educational discourse, there is no federally-funded policy research to study this particular group of students. While some highlander students have overcome the barriers and successfully gained access to institutions of higher education, very little is known about their background characteristics and the bases for their success. The exact numbers of these students in Thai higher education system are also not known,
since there is no collection of statistics on students’ ethnic backgrounds by individual higher education institutions or state agencies overseeing higher education affairs. Lack of research and information on how they highlanders gain college access, what made them gain, what issues these students have face, and how their highlander position shape or misshape their educational trajectories directed me to use qualitative research inquiry as a research method of the study. This research approach does not only make the invisible issue of college access for highlander students to be researchable, but also meets the unique circumstances of the topic of this study, such as geography condition (e.g. remoteness and road condition) as shown in the narrative of the Akha village visit in the beginning of the chapter.

In order to develop groundwork in the issue of college access, I reviewed minority education issues that have been extensively studied in the U.S. higher education context. Such issues included college access for first-generation college students of Latino, Native American, African American, and Asian American descent (Barry, Hudley, Kelly, & Cho, 2009; Engle, 2007; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Ishitani, 2006; London, 1989; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Reid & Moore, 2008). Review of these selective studies provided conceptual ideas and important implications on how the issue of access to higher education for ethnic minority students in Thailand context might be studied or examined. The review first examines the definition of first-generation college students and then focuses on key determinants affecting college access that have been broadly studied in U.S. The key determinants include academic preparation, parents’ education, parental income, tuition, financial aid, and race and ethnicity.
The heart of the college access study focuses on the trajectories of students from early ages to the point where they entered college. So, a life history approach, which is a method of qualitative research, was employed to collect data. Looking back on individual students’ lives before college allows the researcher to learn about their educational journeys, school experiences, circumstances, and long-term changes in social, cultural, and economic contexts that shaped their pathways to college. Their pathways to college were an extended journey in which they struggled to obtain college education in a nation where their ethnicity is not recognized positively in school contexts. Providing students the opportunity to tell their educational story does not only make their experiences visible, but also allows them to reflect on the significance of their lived experiences.

For the remainder of the chapter, I will describe in detail the research site, research participants and selection process, data collection, and the data analysis process.

Research Site

For reasons of accessibility and cost containment, I chose to study Thai highlander students at Northern University (NU) (pseudonym) located in Chiang Mai province in the north of Thailand as shown in Figure 3.

![Figure 3. Map of Chiang Mai province, Thailand](image)
Chiang Mai is an appropriate setting for the study since it is readily accessible to highland ethnicity minority villages. In January-February, 2012, I conducted a pilot study on college access for Hmong students at Northern University (NU). This pilot study and the social networks I established there later facilitated my research fieldwork, which took place a year later. Chiang Mai, with a population of 1.5 million, is regarded as the second largest and busiest province compared to Bangkok, which is the capital of Thailand. Chiang Mai province is located at 1,027 ft above sea level and covers about 7,799 square miles of land area. With its rich Lanna history (distinct from the history of central Thailand), unique Thai dialect and culture, and mountainous geography, Chiang Mai attracts millions of visitors from all around the world. One aspect that makes Chiang Mai unique in its cultural is its diverse population, which includes Khon Muang (i.e., northern Thai), Tai-speaking people including Tai Lu, Tai Yong, and Tai Yai), and highland-dwelling peoples, known in the past as “hill tribe” people, who live in the mountainous districts surrounding Chiang Mai. As compared with other provinces in Thailand, Chiang Mai has the highest and largest number of highland-dwelling peoples, followed by Chiang Rai, Tak, and Mae Hong Son. The major highland dwelling groups concentrated in Chiang Mai province are Karen, Hmong, and Lahu, and Lisu.

Chiang Mai province has increasingly become a modern city. It is a center of businesses such as tourisms, hotels, restaurants, and handcrafts shops. It is also the largest and most important center of education of Northern Thailand, especially with regard to secondary and postsecondary education. In Chiang Mai, there are nine higher education institutions: four national public universities, three private universities, and two institutes;
and also ninety-seven schools and more than ten public and private technical and vocational colleges.

Northern University (NU) was established in January 1964, as the first provincial higher education institution of Thailand. With its long history and advanced developments in academics, NU has become a well-known public research university and is ranked as one of the top ten national universities of Thailand. NU provides a wide range of academic programs in Bachelor’s degrees, graduate diplomas, Master’s degrees, and Doctoral degrees. It offers 296 academic majors ranging from social sciences, education, law, arts, business, medicine, engineering, agriculture, and sciences. It also provides international programs at graduate level. In 2013, NU had 34,373 students: 25,868 undergraduates, 8,202 graduates, and 303 diploma recipients.

Northern University (NU) is a selective university, mainly publicly funded, which draws a large pool of highly qualified high school students from all over the country. NU recruits students from two major systems: the Central University Admission System and the Institutional Entrance Examination System. The first system is a national admission system that is used by all national public universities. The second system is NU’s direct admission system that includes the Northern Quota Entrance Examination through which it recruits students from only 17 provinces of northern Thailand and from special undergraduate programs such as academic excellence, music, and athlete quotas. With its outstanding reputation in academic excellence and affordability, a large number of high school students apply for NU. In 2011, about 29,416 students submitted applications for NU through the two admission systems, but only 6,424 students were admitted.
NU is concerned about the issues of educational opportunity for all students as it has tried to recruit students from diverse backgrounds. In 1994, NU together with the Ministry of the Interior, established a college admission quota for highlander ethnic minorities in order to recruit highlander students from nine ethnic groups residing in fifteen provinces of northern Thailand to study in the fields of education, political sciences, and law. However, only nineteen students are annually recruited through this admission system and each student is supported with a scholarship of 30,000 baht/year ($1,000) for four or five academic years. Most highlander students recruited through this admission system are academically qualified but financially disadvantaged students. Since its establishment, more than 340 highlander students have already obtained their Bachelor’s degrees from NU through this special admission system. Currently, this special admission system for highlander students has also been implemented at one other university.

Northern University (NU) also has a long history of hill tribe research and studies, which began when the Tribal Research Institute (TRI) was established in 1965 on the NU campus as a result of an agreement with the Department of Public Welfare. TRI was an academic institution, founded in order to study and conduct research on hill tribes and to provide socio-economic data, information, and facts about hill tribes to support planning development projects for hill tribes (Buadaeng, 2006). By 2002, hill tribes were viewed to be well integrated into mainstream Thai society and the Bureaucratic Reform Act was implemented. As the result, TRI was closed down. However, a few researchers continued

---

8 The nine ethnic groups include Karen, Hmong, Lahu, Mien, Akha, Lisu, Lua, Khamu, and Mlbr. The fifteen provinces are Chiangmai, Chiangrai, Tak, Mae Hong Son, Lamphun, Lampang, Phrayao, Sukhothai, Nan, Kamphaeng Phet, Phrae, Phitsanulok, Phetchaboon, Uthaithani, and Kanchanaburi.
9 1 dollar is equal to 30 baht.
to pursue ethnic studies and, as a result, the research program was transferred to be under the Social Research Institution (SRI) of Northern University (NU). More recently it has become the Center for Ethnic Studies and Development (CESD), located in the College of Social Sciences, where it offers a Master’s degree in ethnicity and development.

**Participants and Selection Process**

Research participants in this study are first-generation highlander college students from five different ethnic groups (i.e. Karen, Hmong, Lahu, Akha, and Mien) attending at Northern University (NU). These five ethnic groups, together with four other ethnic groups, were officially designated under the term ‘hill tribe’ in 1959. Even though there are nine ethnic groups under the term hill tribes, only six ethnic groups (i.e., Karen, Hmong, Lahu, Akha, Lisu, and Mien) are well recognized in mainstream society, sometimes negatively portrayed in the media, and largely studied in the academic arena. The other three groups (i.e., Lau, Khamu, and Mlbri) are less recognized. In addition to being grouped under the same designated term, the five ethnic groups in this study also share migrant status in that their ancestors and populations which have historically migrated from China, Burma, and Laos.

**Criteria.** The criteria used for participant selection are: (a) ethnicity, where participants come from one of five ethnic backgrounds—Karen, Hmong, Lahu, Akha, and Mien and (b) first-generation status; they have to be the first in their families to attend a four-year institution of higher education (i.e., their parents did not go to college). These criteria allowed the researcher to focus on people who were likely to have experience, know about, or have insights into the research topic.
Recruitment process. Once the criteria was set, the researcher began to recruit participants through the use of purposive snowballing sampling, which is a method that selects a sample of participants through social networks (Schwandt, 2007). Snowball sampling was used in this study mainly because universities in Thailand do not collect students’ ethnic background and there is no record that officially shows the number of highlander students enrolling at NU. Moreover, most highlander students physically look like lowland Thai students and wear the same university uniforms. Some of them may not want to reveal their ethnic identities publicly other than to their friends from the same ethnic background. So, one possible way to find and recruit students in these circumstances is through the use of snowball sampling—through social networks.

The participant recruitment procedure was as follows. Using social networks, I first contacted a freshman Lahu student whom I personally knew. I was then told that the Ethnic Minority Student Association at NU, which I learned about during the pilot study, was going to organize a three-day-fieldtrip to a remote school in a Karen village in Mae Hong Son province. I joined the fieldtrip with thirty highlander college students to a Karen school.

This school, founded in 1984, was a very small and had twenty-five students and only two teachers. The school was ninety-six miles away from Northern University (NU), but it took us about four hours to travel there by pickup trucks due to a very poor dirt road and mountainous geography. About 30 students traveled together. The activities included distributing donation items (e.g., blankets, used clothes, snacks, food, and school stationery) to school children, the school, and villagers; preparing lunch for children and villagers; repairing a school fence; cleaning school buildings; and
organizing fun and game activities to children. My three-day involvement in the field trip
gave me the opportunity to introduce and explain my study to this group of college
students and also to build rapport with prospective research participants. A week after the
field trip, I contacted and interviewed a male Karen student, Nat, who had expressed his
interest in my study the field trip. At the end of the interview, I asked Nat whether he
knew other students who met the predetermined criteria and might be interested in
participating in the study. Nat helped locate potential participants and referred me to
other students whom he knew and whom I also knew from the fieldtrip.

Table 2

*Participant Information*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Academic Major</th>
<th>Years of Study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Som</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Hmong</td>
<td>Food Science</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaem</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Hmong</td>
<td>Education (Science Education)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poom</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Hmong</td>
<td>Education (Primary Education)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manee</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Hmong</td>
<td>Education (Primary Education)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yong</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Hmong</td>
<td>Social Science</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ming</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Hmong</td>
<td>Humanities (English)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pong</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Hmong</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chaem</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Hmong</td>
<td>Political Science</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chati</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Hmong</td>
<td>Economic</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nat</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>Political Science</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naak</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>Education (Social Studies)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sai</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>Political Science</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Puu</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>Public Administration</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Euuy</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>Economic</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ranee</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Akha</td>
<td>Political Science</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pam</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Akha</td>
<td>Education (Social Studies)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ake</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Akha</td>
<td>Economic</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kaeo</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Lahu</td>
<td>Social Science and Anthropology</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pla</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Lahu</td>
<td>Humanities</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singh</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Lahu</td>
<td>Public Administration</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sorn</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Mien</td>
<td>Political Science</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fang</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Mien</td>
<td>Education (Agricultural Education)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pon</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Mien</td>
<td>Law</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As a result, students made use of their social networks to refer other students who met the preselected criteria and could possibly participate in the study. At the end, a total of twenty-three first generation highlander college students from various academic majors participated in the study as shown in Table 2. There were fourteen male students and nine female students. In term of ethnicity, there were nine Hmong students, five Karen students, three Akha students, three Lahu students, and three Mien students. Regarding ages, they were in the age range from 18 to 24 years.

**Sample sizes.** Sample sizes were not fixed prior to data collection. There was no predetermination of how many highlander college students would be recruited to participate in the study. The number of research participants was expanded as the data collection process moved along. Since there was an ongoing recruitment, the researcher conducted data review in conjunction with data collection. When the researcher could not locate more potential research participants and when data from further participants did not bring additional information or insights to the research questions, the recruitment process was ended. The number of interviews and observations the researcher conducted were also restricted by the limited resources and time that she had. In addition, informed consent was obtained from participants before they began to participate in any research activity. Participants were informed what their participation involved to ensure that they could reach a truly informed decision about whether or not to participate in the research. Pseudonyms were assigned to students’ names in order to protect students from identification.
Researching Home Site of Selected Student Participants

As part of the study, the researcher also travelled with five students from five different ethnic backgrounds to their home villages. These include a Karen village in Mae Hong Son province, an Akha village in Chiang Rai province, a Lahu village in Chiang Rai province, a Mien village in Phayao province, and a Hmong village in Mae Hong Son province. The distance of these villages from Northern University (NU) was varied. The closet village, a Lahu village, was 88 miles away and the farthest village, a Hmong village, was 162 miles away from NU (See Table 3 and Figure 4). In the home and village visits, the researcher aimed to interview students’ parents and siblings and to observe home-village contexts.

Table 3

*Village Information*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Village Name</th>
<th>Province</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Major Occupation</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Distance from district (Miles)</th>
<th>Distance from NU (Mile)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mae La</td>
<td>Mae Hong Son</td>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>Farming</td>
<td>K-6</td>
<td>Christian: Protestant</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mae Nam</td>
<td>Chiang Rai</td>
<td>Akha and Lisu</td>
<td>Farming</td>
<td>K-9</td>
<td>Christian (Lahu) and Buddhism (Karen)</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pa Dee</td>
<td>Chiang Rai</td>
<td>Lahu and Karen</td>
<td>Farming</td>
<td>K-6</td>
<td>Christian and traditional religion</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duang Den</td>
<td>Phayao</td>
<td>Mien</td>
<td>Farming</td>
<td>K-9</td>
<td>Traditional belief system</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sai Jai</td>
<td>Mae Hong Son</td>
<td>Hmong</td>
<td>Farming</td>
<td>K-6</td>
<td>Traditional belief system</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
After the individual interview, I selected five students, who later also participated in the focus group interview, and asked them whether they agreed to the researcher visiting, interviewing, and observing their parents at their home. Once they agreed, the researcher asked the students to explain the study to their parents and to ask whether their parents would like to participate in the study. After I received a confirmation about their parents’ agreement from each student, I arranged the date and time for a home visit. During the visits, the researcher stayed at student participants’ house and the visits ranged from three to seven days.

The home-village visits gave the researcher opportunities to meet and interview students’ parents and their significant others, to experience their real-life settings, to learn about their living situations, and to learn about various aspects of their village settings. But what was more special is that the home-village visits allowed the researcher to learn through first-hand experience and realize the circumstance of the geography where those
villages were located, where the students came from, and where their primary schools were located. The remoteness of the villages played important roles in determining the quality of education the village children obtained, the kinds of teachers they had, the educational supports to which they had access, the chance to be exposed to outside world, and Thai language acquisition, which is an instructional language in school. The description of each village is presented in the following chapter, Chapter Four.

Data Collection

This study employed multiple data-generating methods to produce data to answer research questions: interview, observation, focus group, and document analysis. The use of multiple methods of data generation makes findings and argument-supporting conclusions to be more convincing and accurate. It also provides multiples measures of the same topic under study, since data drawn from each method has its own limitations (Yin, 2009). The strengths of one method of evidence generation can supplement the weaknesses of others.

Interview. Interviewing is one method of data generation that is widely used in qualitative research. In this study interviewing was used as one of several data-generating methods, because the research questions asked for in-depth understanding, meaning, and complexity of the students’ perspectives and their accounts of their past experiences in relation to education. One way to secure such data to answer my research questions was to engage highlander students in extended conversations for their accounts of their past experiences and to talk and listen to them about their success in securing college access, issues they faced, the meanings of college education they hold, and the role of ethnicity in their educational experiences. The interview method used in this study was based on a
life-history approach, which examines the educational experiences of first-generation highlander college students even before they arrived at college. With this approach, the interview was divided into two phases.

In the first phase, each student participant was individually interviewed in a semi-structured interview format, where the interviewer prepared an interview guide that specified the content of the topics to be covered, but the interviewer maintained the flexibility to alter or waive the interview guide when appropriate. The interview guide is shown in the Appendix A. In the one-on-one interview, the participants were asked to tell about, describe, and reconstruct as much as possible the details of their past life up until the time they became college students. They were asked to narrate their early experiences in their families, in school, in their ethnic villages, with significant others such as friends, teachers, and mentors, and with government officials. The participants were also asked to reconstruct details of their experiences in relation to how past experiences led to who they were now and where they were now. For example, interview questions included: How did you come to be a student in this university? What were your primary school, middle, and high school experiences like? How were your parents involved in your education? Do you have any mentors now or in the past when you were in school? If so, could you please tell me who they were, how they became your mentors, and what roles mentors have in your life? In addition, the participants were also asked to talk about the influence or the relationship of their ethnic cultural and social practices on education. The individual interviews lasted approximately one and a half hours to two hours and were recorded by using a digital recorder.
In the second phase, the researcher had informal conservations with the participants. The informal conservations between the researcher and participants took place frequently as the researcher participated in various activities with participants on and off campus such as social gatherings, meetings organized by the Ethnic Student Association, a scholarship award ceremony, and a Byenior (or Thai prom) event. This informal dialogue allowed the researcher to gain additional information about participants or to check the accuracy of the information the researcher was given previously. The informal conservation was not recorded, but was written down as field notes.

In addition to student participants, during the home-village visits, the researcher also interviewed the parents and significant others of five chosen participants in a semi-structured interview format (see Appendix B). Before the interviews took place, oral consent was obtained from the parents. The examples of questions I asked students’ parents were how their child was in the past and in the present time; what were their views about their child’s education; why they supported their child’s pursuit of secondary education and then college education; and how important or unimportant education was for them as parents, for their children, and for the whole family. However, it is vital to note that some of students’ parents could not speak either the northern Thai dialect or the central Thai language. They spoke only their ethnic languages, so the researcher asked student participants to assist with oral translation of interview questions in the parents’ mother tongue language. The interview session with parents and/or significant others took about two hours and was recorded by digital recorder.

In addition to student participants and parents, the researcher also visited and informally talked to significant others who had had influence on the students’ lives,
especially pertaining to the educational aspects of their lives. Significant others were identified from the prior individual interviews, such as when someone was mentioned several times during interview. The significant others were siblings, relatives, school dormitory staff members, and school friends in the villages.

The researcher also informally talked to non-governmental organization (NGO) personnel who had worked extensively with various ethnic groups in Thailand on various aspects, including cultural revitalization and preservation, education, citizenship, children and human rights, natural resource management, and political participation. These NGO members include both staff who have ethnic backgrounds and staff who have mainstream Thai backgrounds.

**Observation.** Observation is another method of data generation used in this study. Observation was used along with interviews and was employed because it allowed the generation of data on social interaction in specific contexts as they occurred. Observing, participating in, or experiencing real life settings (Yin, 2009) allowed the researcher to generate or obtain data that was needed, but was not available in other forms or ways. These data included how students interacted with other highlander and non-highlander students; what kinds of activities the students participated in; what role students had in various activities; how students and their parents interacted or talked about school or education in their daily lives at home; how students participated in their own ethnic cultural activities that were part of their identities; and what aspects of their ethnic ways of life and culture affected the students’ views about or aspiration for education (See Appendix C). The observation method also allowed me to connect activities with interview questions about their ethnic ways of life and culture that
influenced their educational experiences and opportunities. In the observation method, the researcher set her position as a semi-participant observer where she conducted direct and indirect observation. The researcher attended and observed student participants in classroom settings, at social events, and at home and village settings.

For classroom settings, I only attended the large classes with permission from the instructor for the observations. In classrooms, I focused on participants’ interaction with classmates and instructors, his or her relationships with the teachers, and Thai language proficiency. For the social setting, I attended various social events on and off campus with student participants. These events, which were mainly organized by the Ethnic Student Association at NU, included a three-day field trip to a rural school, a Byenior or Thai prom, freshman welcome activities, monthly meetings, a scholarship award ceremony, volunteer activities, and informal social gathering such as lunch and dinner. In those events I observed social skills and interactions, the roles the participants took in the events, the contributions the participants made to the events, the participants’ disclosure of ethnicity, the use of ethnic languages with students from the same ethnic group, the kinds of conversation topics they had among them, the variety of supports that senior students provided to freshman, and other interactions.

As mentioned beforehand, I also travelled with five student participants to their home villages. During my stay in the villages, I concentrated on learning about their families’ living conditions and livelihoods. I also observed the kinds of activities that the students and their parents did at home, the participants’ conversations with their parents about university student life and school work, the students’ participation in their ethnic rituals or cultural activities, the participants’ roles in their siblings’ education, how the
participants provided education role models for other children in the villages, and the kind of work they had or took responsibility for when they were at home. I also tried to learn about their village environments, such as social and cultural practices, political situations, ways of life of the villagers, occupations, frequency of contact with outsiders, and access to necessary facilities and services such as water supplies, electricity, roads, schools, health clinics, telecommunication, etc.

**Focus group interview.** A focus group interview was selected as one data-gathering method in this study. It was used as a complementary method where it allowed the researcher to learn and gain additional insights regarding educational experiences and students’ views about the issue of college access that did not emerge in the one-on-one interview. The focus group interview also gave the students a chance to rethink their previous responses to those questions, to compare and contrast their views and stories with those of other students, to commend each other’s perceptions, and to develop basic understandings regarding educational issues faced by highlander children. The focus group activity was conducted at the end of fieldwork or after the one-on-one interviews and observations were completed. The participants for the focus group interviews were recruited from the participants from the individual interviews. At the end of the individual interviews, participants, who had interesting and different life stories in their educational journeys and whom the researcher thought had insightful and critical views about the issue of education for highlander students were asked to further participate in the study. Additional involvement meant they traveled with the researcher to their home villages and took part in the focus group interview. At least, one student from each ethnic
background was recruited to participate in the study, regardless their gender and year of study.

Before the focus group took place, the researcher had already traveled with these five participants to their home villages, interviewed their parents and relatives, and joined in various social activities with them. The focus group interview lasted approximately two hours and was conducted in the Thai language. The focus group was video recorded, viewed, transcribed, and translated from Thai to English afterward. The focus group was conducted at a small conference room at the NU campus, which offered privacy and a quiet environment. In the focus group interviews, the researcher acted as a moderator who led the discussion, raised discussion questions, facilitated the discussion, and summarized the discussion.

The focus group interview procedure was as follows. First, the researcher briefly explained the research project, the objectives of focus group interview activity, and the focus group interview process. The researcher then asked each participant to introduce his or her name, ethnic background, academic major, and year of study. (See the focus group guide in Appendix D). Second, the researcher opened a discussion by raising selected interview questions, which each participant had already been asked during the one-on-one interview. These questions included: what roles your family played in your education, why you wanted to have college education, what made you to come all the way to college, and what are some major issues regarding college access for highland students. Other questions were on their perceptions of being ethnic minority students and their chance of obtaining education (especially college education), how they perceived the impact of ethnic origins on their school experiences, and other questions related to the
study as they came up in the discussion. The researcher opened another discussion that focused on college access issues faced by highlander students. The participants also were encouraged to talk and discuss about possible recommendations, based on their lived experiences, to address the issues of college access that they had previously identified. Examples of questions used in the discussion included: How do you see the issue of access to higher education in the future? Based on your views, what are some possible ways to deal with or improve college access for highlander students? Lastly, the researcher asked the participants about what information they thought was important that the researcher had not asked, covered, or collected. The researcher also asked participants to comment on and provide feedback about the way the research project was conducted, the way research activities were carried out, and the way the researcher performed her roles as a researcher in the research project. The researcher ended the focus group interview by summarizing key points of the discussion and thanked all students for their time and participation.

**Analysis of documents.** Analysis of documents is another data-generating method used in this study. There are some documents concerning highlander education available. Most documents were issued before the year 2000 by state agencies that were responsible in affairs concerning hill tribe populations, such as the Department of Public Welfare and Tribal Research Institute. The analyses of documents were conducted to examine how education and other policies concerning hill tribes, which were issued in the past five decades, led to or affected current education provisions for hill tribe students. The existing documents used for generating data included educational laws, policy documents regarding ethnic minority education from 1950s to the present time,
newspapers, academic research and studies on hill tribes, and related documents. Data sets from interviews, observation, and acquired documents were triangulated to detect shortcomings in the analysis, interpretation, and explanation.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis is based on grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). With this method, preliminary data analysis was conducted at the same time as the data were collected. One advantage of conducting early data analysis during data collection is that the emerging analyses raised new or unanticipated issues and questions that benefited and guided the collection of further data. In addition, codes or themes, which referred to the name for the idea of several passages that were identified, were not decided or predetermined prior to the coding of data. Coding began without a given list of codes, pre-perceptions, or prior knowledge (Gibbs, 2007). The codes were developed during data analysis.

The data analysis procedure was as follows. First, the researcher listened to all interview records and read over all notes from the fieldwork. Then, the recorded individual interviews of the five students, who both traveled with the researcher to their home villages and took part in focus group interviews, and the recorded focus group interviews were transcribed and translated from Thai language to English. After the transcription process was completed, the researcher carefully read interview transcripts line by line and coded the results by locating and segmenting data, labeling meaningful segments of the text, jotting the emerging code/theme name, categorizing the responses into themes, and drawing relationships among the themes (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). This process produced the following themes: major
factors contributing to students’ successful college access, students’ perceptions about the role of ethnicity in their experiences in schools, and their understandings about the importance of college education. Subsequently, the rest of data that had been collected in interviews, observational notes, and field notes were selectively transcribed and translated from the Thai language to English, and then typed into word processing documents. The descriptive themes or codes generated previously were used as guides for selectively transcribing and translating the rest of data. The codes/themes derived from the first and the second stages of data analysis were modified and put into categories based on patterns, similarities, and related relationships for broader ideas or thematic codes. After the codes were categorized into thematic codes, such codes were examined, compared, and contrasted. Lastly, I wrote a summary of key analytic themes that emerged from the set of data, which included quotations illustrating the themes. To ensure confidentiality protection, pseudonyms were assigned to the name of the student participants and to the five villages.

**Researcher Self-Disclosure**

As the researcher, I considered how my experiences as an ethnic Lahu and my status as a first-generation college student from a farming family could have both advantages and disadvantages in interviewing the participants and in interpreting data. Since I have experienced being a first-generation highlander student myself at both undergraduate and graduate levels, I was able to draw upon my personal experiences to understand and to feel what the informants were experiencing when they shared their stories with me. I found that the stories and pathways to college of many participants were very similar to mine: such as, being the first in the family and in the village to
attend college, struggling to obtain education to get away from farming work, receiving support from parents to attend school and college, navigating educational systems and affairs mainly on one’s own, facing pressures or expectations to complete studies, gaining assistance from various significant others throughout the entire educational journey, etc.

In other words, my compassion with participants allowed me to better understand the data collected through various methods as previously described. However, having the same status of ethnicity and first-generation student and having similar experiences may also prove to be a limitation. It might create a limited perspective or overlook a new angle with regard to understanding about the college access experiences of first-generation highland college students. It was vital for me to keep this in mind while interpreting and presenting the participant’s voices. My interpretation and presentation should be centered on the insights of the participants while searching for negative cases, those that do not fit within the pattern that is being looked for, to ensure validity (Yin, 2009).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I provided justification for selecting qualitative inquiry as a research approach to look at the pre-matriculation life experiences among first-generation highlander college students and the key determinants contributing to their successful college access. Shortage of studies on college access for highlander students and absence of statistical data on student ethnic backgrounds were major reasons for why my research topic was qualitatively studied. This study was conducted at Northern University (NU) in Chiang Mai province since NU has an extended history in researching highlander populations and Chiang Mai is one of the top provinces that has a large number of highlander populations.
I also detailed the research process employed during the participant selection process, data collection, and data analysis. A total of twenty-three highlander college students were recruited based on ethnicity and parental educational backgrounds to participate in the study. This research study employed three methods in the collection of the data: interview, participant observation, and document analysis. Using the life history approach, the researcher interviewed twenty-three highlander students using semi-structured interviews and also informally interviewed parents, significant others, and NGO workers. The researcher also conducted direct and indirect observations. She attended classrooms with participants, joined with students in a variety of social settings and events both on and off campus, and selectively visited students’ home and villages. The data collected in interviews, observations, and field notes were selectively transcribed and translated, and then coded and analyzed using grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). The following chapters will report and discuss the research findings.
CHAPTER 4  
VILLAGE CONTEXT: THE CASE OF FIVE VILLAGES

As part of the study, I traveled with five students, recruited from the individual interviews, to their villages in order to visit their parents and learn about their village contexts. The villages I visited were: Mae La village and Sai Jai village in Mae Hong Son, Mae Nam village and Pa Dee village in Chiang Rai, and Duang Den village in Phayao, as shown in Table 3 and Figure 4 in Chapter Three. One student comes from each of these villages. The chapter first provides descriptions of five different highland villages: a brief history of the villages, their cultures and social structures, livelihoods, and schools. These five villages are demographically, culturally, and geographically different, so the uniqueness of each village will be particularly highlighted, but commonalities also will be noted. However, it is important to note that the descriptions of the five villages I will provide cannot be said to represent all other eighteen villages as a whole. Rather, the descriptions offer basic accounts of the settings and the life of the villages where the first-generation highlander college students come from and a contextual basis for my empirical analysis of college access for first-generation highlander college students.

Subsequently, I will provide a brief discussion on key common characteristics shared by the five villages: agriculturally-based communities, sojourn, and poor school preparation.

The Five Highland Villages

Mae La Village (A Karen village)

My trip to Mae La village began around 8 am of April 8, 2014, when I picked up Nat, a male Karen student, from his dormitory near his university. After five hours of driving on a highway, we reached the road to Mae La village, and the road changed from a two-lane road to a rough concrete single-track road. Once we passed a prospective national park, the road became a single-lane dirt road, curvy and bumpy. Since the road is located in mountainous areas, I could not see
beforehand whether the road would be straight, curvy, or steep. What I did see ahead of time were green trees, plants, or forest. As I continued driving, the road was neither less bouncy nor less challenging. The more I drove into the deeper mountainous areas, the more the road became narrower, sharper, and twisted. Some curve areas were damp and slippery, possibly caused by the moisture and cool temperatures of the deep forest. I told myself in my mind, how lucky I was that I came here before the rainy season, which started a month later. I could not imagine how driving a car, riding a motorbike, or even walking would be in a rainy season. But I could imagine that students who attended schools in the district and came back home during school breaks would go through this rough and twisted road. Along the way, I saw a few sub-villages with a small number of households. Whenever I saw houses along the way or bamboo huts in the fields, I kept asking Nan “Are we close to your village? Nat constantly responded, “Not yet, but we are almost there.”

Mae La village is a Sgaw Karen village located in Sob Moei district of Mae Hong Son province. Sgaw Karen, also known as Pwa Ka Nyaw, is one of the four subgroups of Karen and has the largest population in Thailand. Officially established in 1981, Mae La village is located in a Thai conserved forest, which will become a national park in the next few years. The villagers have no formal land ownership rights for the land where they live and cultivate for farming. Mae La village is about 22 miles from the district office and 154 miles from Northern University (NU). Mae La, recognized as an official village, has five sub-villages under its supervision. Mae La alone has about 46 households with 260 people. Mae La people’s way of life is different from lowland Thais. They speak the Paw KaNyaw language and have a distinctive culture, traditions, and customs. Households are generally composed of a nuclear family rather than extended family. The number of nuclear families is expected to increase due to changes in socio-economics and rising demands for cash income in order to afford changing life styles, such as buying televisions and motorcycles and sending children to school.

In terms of religion, about ninety-nine percent of the villagers are Protestant Christians, while the remaining villagers practice Buddhism. The church, located at the
The church, located in the center of the village, is regarded as an important social institution of Mae La village. In addition to being used for religious affairs, the church also serves as a community space where the village meetings and other events are held. The majority of the villagers have Thai citizenship that allows them to receive social services such as free basic government education and health care. There are a few villagers who still do not have Thai citizenship.

In order to understand the way of life of Mae La villagers, I will present a usual day in the life of Mae La villagers, reflecting on my observations while I was there. Typically, the villagers began their daily life around 4 or 5 am in the morning. They first made fire to cook rice, fed chicken and pigs if they owned any, and then cleaned up the dishes from the previous night’s dinner. Once the household chores were completed, the villagers prepared breakfast. At the same time, other people in the house, who were not in charge of cooking breakfast, packed a big bag of rice, ingredients for cooking lunch at the field, drinking water, and farming tools. Around 7 am the breakfast was over. Parents went to the fields by walking or by motorbike or pickup trucks, if they had one. The villagers worked on the farm from 8 am to 5 pm. Once they came back home, they did household chores as they had done in the morning. If their children had already done the evening household chores, the parents could go take a bath and then cook food for dinner. After the dinner, if the family owned a television and had enough electricity from solar panels, they would watch news broadcasts or dramas. If the family did not have a television, they would go to watch television at their neighbors’ houses. Some adults preferred to go to relatives’ or friends’ houses for chatting about topics such as, work on the farms, agricultural prices, news, and gossip. By 10 pm, most of households went to
bed and the village became completely silent. The life in a typical day of the villagers would be like this from Monday to Saturday. For Sunday, they had slightly different schedules. After breakfast, the villagers who were Christian went to the church and participated in religion ceremonies. On Sunday afternoons, the villager mainly just stayed at home.

The village children, on the other hand, had a different typical day of life from their parents. The children normally woke up later, around 6 am. If they could, they helped their parents do household chores, including cleaning the dishes and the kitchen, feeding the pigs and dogs, and taking care of younger siblings. While parents prepared breakfast, children cleaned their faces, dressed in school uniforms, prepared school bags, and packed small bags of rice, which they were required to bring to school to supplement the lunch provided by the school. When their parents left home for the field, the children also left home for school. The school was just a mile away, so the children normally walked together as a group to school. The parents were in the field from 8 to 5 or 6 pm, and the children, similarly, spent their time at school from 8 am to 4 pm. Once they were back home, older children, such as the fifth or sixth grade children, did household chores while little children played. Performing household chores and taking the role of caregiver by older children is very common in many highland communities. In fact, it is viewed as the responsibility that older children are expected to fulfill. Some first-generation highlander college students disclosed that doing household chores and helping their parents work in the fields at early ages placed them in advantageous positions for future independent living. (I will discuss this topic in detail in Chapter Seven). After dinner, some children went to play with their friends along the street, while some preferred to
watch Thai dramas at home or at their neighbor’s house if they did not have a television. Watching television seems to be the most popular evening or night activity among the children and adults of Mae La village. For the weekends, children had a different schedule. Some older children voluntarily or involuntarily went to the fields to help the parents work. The labor from the children became very necessary, especially at the height of planting and harvesting seasons. Students in extended families stayed at home to do household chores or to care for their younger siblings rather than working alongside their families in the fields.

Mae La village had no full access to electricity, no paved roads, and no telecommunications. The villagers powered their house with solar electricity. The solar panels that each household had were small and could produce only very limited amounts of electricity, so most households had only a few lights inside their homes, such as in the living room and in the kitchen. The availability of solar electricity became an even more serious problem during rainy season, when sunlight used for producing electricity was less available. The villagers could watch television for only a few hours and could not watch at all on rainy days. They had to reserve electricity for night-lights rather than for watching television. Doing homework and reading at night were often not possible for children, since the few lights available were mainly in common spaces in the house and minimal electricity was generated.

The road leading to the village is another major problem. Mae La village is about 44 miles from Sob Moei district office, but because it is in a mountainous area and the road is dirt, curved, and narrow, it takes more travel time than other kinds of roads. There is also no public transportation from the village to the closest highway, about 15 miles
away, where they can catch the bus to go to the district. If any villagers did not have motorbikes or pickup trucks, they either have to walk or travel with people who have vehicles in order to go to the district for a doctor’s visit or for business reasons. This way of commuting is also problematic for students who attended middle school or high school located in the district areas. The children have to stay at the school dormitory, if available, or a private dormitory while attending school. Commuting back and forth becomes a greater problem for them and other villagers during rainy season. Landslides and flooded roads due to heavy rainstorms are serious problems that Mae La villagers face almost every single year. In some years, the villagers were cut off from communication and from outside help for several days. The villagers who needed to see a doctor or give birth could not travel to the hospital located in the district. The teachers at Mae La School could not travel back home during the rainy season, while students attending school in the district or other places could not return back home, either. Mae La and its natural disaster news became national news on television, newspaper, and radio. At present, many highlanders or highland communities have access to mobile phone service, but this is not true for Mae La village. Mae La people still have no access to mobile phone reception. If any villagers want to use mobile phones, they have to travel all the way to the highway to get adequate reception.

Because of poor road conditions, limited access to electricity, and unavailability of communication technology, the district office provided reading materials for this village. A temporary and simple reading space with a red metal table and two red plastic chairs was set up in front of the village headwoman’. The reading materials were made available to all of the villagers, and included Cosmopolitan magazines, Koosangkoosom
magazines (a bimonthly magazine focusing on family life and society), Thai drama magazines, and newspapers. The headwoman told the researcher that the district office told her that the reading materials were provided to her village so that the villagers could receive news and information from the outside. Any villager who went to the district office was asked to pick up the reading materials and place it at the community reading space. During the visit, the researcher saw a few children and teenagers come to read the magazines. Children seemed to look at pictures in the magazines, while teenagers seemed to spend time on reading. Reading activity took place to some extent at the community reading place where reading materials were available. However, the observations indicated that both adults and children preferred to watch television rather than read. The adults who could not speak northern Thai or central Thai also enjoyed watching television. Television programs that they watched included dramas, boxing, cartoons, and news. The researcher asked a few adults why they liked to watch TV instead of reading magazines. The most common answer was they could not read. Another answer was they could not really understand what was written in the magazines. They just opened magazines and looked at the pictures in the magazines. Another interesting point was the reading materials might not be what the villagers are interested in. The readings materials might not attract or encourage the villages to engage in readings. For example, agricultural magazines or journals would draw more attention from the villagers rather than Cosmopolitan magazines. Comics or children’s storybooks would interest children in reading rather than magazines or newspapers.

Regarding its traditional livelihood, Karen is historically renowned for shifting cultivation that is a self-sufficient and sustainable system. However, this might not fully
apply to Ma La Karen. In these past few years, Mae La villagers have slowly changed from subsistence agriculture to a cash crop economy. They have become part of wider market systems, along with other highland groups and many indigenous populations around the world. Still, Mae La villagers live off the land, growing yellow beans and red chili as a main source of cash while raising rice, vegetables, pigs, and chicken for family consumption. As part of the cash crop economy and lack of cultivating new lands due to national park restriction, the villagers increasingly rely on chemical fertilizers and pesticide to increase the yields. They gradually invest more of their own money and of their own labor in those costs. Lack of sufficient land for farming has increasingly become a critical problem for Mae La village as its population has increased. About 30 years ago the villagers moved from upper area of Mae La village to a lower area, due to natural disasters such as landslides.

Some villagers said they had lived in Mae La area long before the National Park Act passed in 1961. Since the National Park Act was enacted, Mae La villagers became illegal residents and some were evicted from their lands for farming. Opening new land for farming is very difficult for Mae La villagers. Land for farming has become limited for the younger generations. So, some young people, epically men, who had received primary or lower secondary education, went to work as wage laborers in big cities such as Chiang Mai and Bangkok. Young people were recruited by the ones who had worked and lived in cities with Thai employers for quite a while.

With regard to schooling, Mae La School, founded in 1983, is located about a mile from the village. The school offers education from preschool through primary school. In the 2013 academic year, there were 141 Karen students, 5 Thai teachers, and a
Karen kindergarten teacher. Among the 141 students, there were 19 pre-school students and 122 primary school students. The class size for the primary school grades was approximately twenty students. The number of female students was higher than that of male students (71:51). Students from Mae La commuted to school mainly by walking. However, students from the other five sub-villages lived in a school dormitory during the school week, since it was impossible for them to commute back and forth due to poor road conditions, unavailability of public transportation, and unaffordability of vehicles by their parents. Mau La School, like other Thai public schools, is funded by the government and it implements the same centrally-designed curriculum and administrative structures even though Karen students have very distinctive language and culture compared to mainstream Thai students. Educational materials, school supplies, and lunches are provided without charge to the students.

A typical day at Mae La School is as follows. Children were required to arrive at school before 8 am. Their school day began around 8 am when the school bell rang to signify to the students that they should start making their ways to the playground for the morning assembly. Once all students were assembled and lined up based on their class level, they then were divided into groups. Each group was then assigned to do a particular school chore such as cleaning toilets, kitchen, dining areas, school playgrounds, and a teacher’s office. After completing the cleaning tasks, around 8:30 am, all students assembled again. They lined up in front of the Thai national flag, sang the national anthem as the flag was being raised, and then chanted some Buddhist prayers while facing the Buddha shrine. Finally, one of teachers gave a talk on various topics. In some weeks, the students had inspections for cleanliness and the length of their hair. After the
assembly, around at 9 am, students went straight to their classrooms. From 9 am to noon
students had three 50-minute lessons. Around noon, the students lined up in the cafeteria
for lunch. After lunch, the students washed their own dishes, spoons, and forks. The duty
students helped to clean cooking utensils such, as pots and pans, and the canteen. During
the lunch break, most of students played in the playground, played sports, or played
games. The classes began again at 1 pm. In the afternoon, students had three more
lessons. Around 3:20 pm the students on duty cleaned the classroom: cleaning the board,
taking the trash out, and sweeping and mopping the floor. The school officially ended at
4 pm. The kindergarten students went home as early as 2:30 pm, while the rest of the
students went home at 4 pm. A typical day at school of Mae La children was similar to
that of the children in the other four villages and also in other highland communities.
Since its establishment, Mae La School has educated many Karen students. However,
only very few of the students that graduated from this school successfully attended
college. At present, children from Mae La and its sub-villages have greater access in
primary school education. Access has become less of a concern for the parents than the
quality of education that the children receive. Some of the parents graduated from this
school and hoped that their children would receive a better quality of education than they
had received; however, this may not be true because some villagers complained about
their children not being able to read and write the Thai language fluently. In addition,
some villagers also complained that the teachers failed to arrive at school prior to start of
classes on Mondays and they frequently left school a few hours before the regulated end
of the school day on Fridays in order to travel back to their homes in the lowland areas.
All the teachers, except the Karen kindergarten teacher, stayed only during the week and
traveled back home during the weekends. Some villagers think that the teachers’ absences contributed to their children’s lack of a full time for learning. Nat, a male college student who had attended this school until the fourth grade and then transferred to another school that was 32 miles away, criticized the poor quality of teaching at his former school. His criticism will be discussed in detail in Chapter Five. In Mae La village, enrollment in college is minimally acknowledged. In fact, Nan was the first person in this community who attended college. In addition, there are a few youths attending high school or vocational school in Chiang Mai or in Mae Hong Son.

**Mae Nam Village (an Akha village)**

“Most of them go to work outside the village. Value in education, there is no educational role model in the community. Most young people went to vocational school. After they completed school, they came back to work in the village or went to work in other places, but the work they did differed from what they were trained in schools. Some people could not finish school though. This is one factor that made some parents view that education was not important. It did not help make the quality of their life better. Something like that, you know. So, the social value in going to work is favored more than that of going to school. Something like that…Right now, there is a new trend of social value in which parents send their children to work in abroad in countries such as South Korea and Taiwan…It’s a factory job. Most are factory jobs. But I don’t know, some parents wanted their young children to go to work like that because they thought it made the life of the family better. But they didn’t look to a long-term vision. They thought their child could earn money and help the family; making the living of the family better. But they didn’t look to future, a future of their children, what their children would do in the future for a living or after they came back (from working abroad).”

Pam, a female Akha student

Mae Nam village is the second village I visited a month after my first village visit to the Karen village in Mae Hong Son province. Mae Nam village was founded in the 1970s, and it is located in a steeply sloping mountainous terrain in the Heuy Chom Phoo district in Chiang Rai province. This mountainous terrain is home for several highland ethnic minorities, including Akha, Lisu, Lahu, and Mien. One could say it is a home of
highlander people. Mae Nam was originally a small Lisu village, which is a different ethnic group, but a few decades ago, Akha people from distant villages located in the same sub-district moved into this village and later another group of Akha from Myanmar also moved in. The ones that have been long settled in this village have nice houses—two-story wood or concrete houses, pickup trucks, and motorbikes, whereas the ones that have more recently arrived or settled down have bamboo houses with thatched roofs, built either on stilts or on the ground, which is Akha traditional house style. As more Akha people moved in, Lisu people, on the other hand, moved out to another mountain and sold their fields to Akha people. At present, the Akha people are the majority ethnic group with 185 households, while the Lisu are in the minority with only 15 households. Mae Mon has about 1,000 people, and it is one of the biggest Akha villages in Thailand.

Akha is a Sino-Tibetan language group and has its own history, language, culture, and social structure. Historically, the majority of the Akha people in this village were animists with ancestor worship. They profoundly believed in spirits and had complicated rituals and prohibitions. In the past few decades, most of the villagers turned to become Christian. At present, about ninety-nine percent of the Akha and Lisu in Mae Nam village are either Catholic or Protestant. Yet, their belief in spirits is strongly ingrained in their culture. Even when they acquire a new belief, they continue to practice some rituals from the previous faith along with the new faith. The Karen people practice bilateral system with matrilineal descent. The Akha, in contrast, practice patrilineality. In Akha society, men are regarded as the main authority figures of the house. The father has most authority. The authority, descent, and property are often traced and passed from father to son rather than from mother to daughter. Historically, most households were extended
families or multi-generational families in which grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins all live in the same household. However, with changes in economic, social, and political conditions, over time, the extended family transformed to become a nuclear family, consisting of a married couple and a child or children. To illustrate, when Pam’s father was young, he lived in a house that had about twenty-four people, including his parents, older and younger siblings, older and younger sisters- and brothers-in-law, nieces, and nephews. Over the years, the already married couples moved out to have their own houses, while his single siblings eventually also married and moved out when they were older. In Mae Nam village, half of the total Akha population are Pam’s relatives from both her father’s and her mother’s sides.

Schooling was historically introduced to Mae Nam village through informal education provided by the Mobile Development and Welfare program, launched in 1963 by the Department of Public Welfare, which aimed to provide education to highland populations, especially those in remote or less accessible areas. A formal school named Baan Mae Nam School was not established until June 1985. It was first founded as a sub-primary school of Baan Huai Lan School (pseudonym), a northern Thai school located about eight miles from Mae Nam village, which was founded in 1939. In 1991, Baan Mae Nam School, located in the western part of the village where the Lisu people live, was granted full status with a newly appointed school principal. Over the years the number of students increased, and the school obtained a few more school buildings from the government and from donors. In 1999, as the student enrollment increased and as a nine-year-compulsory education requirement was implemented in conformance with changes to the Thai Constitution of 1997, Mae Nam School expanded to offer lower secondary
education in addition to preschool and primary school education. In November of 2004, Baan Mae Nam School also changed its name to from Baan Mae Nan School to become Baan Mae Nam Witthaya School. In 2013, the school had 221 students: 43 kindergarten students, 131 primary school students, and 47 middle school students. There were 20 school personnel including 16 teachers, 3 contracted teachers, a kindergarten Akha teacher, and office staff.

Mae Nam School, like Mae La, the Karen village school, and other public schools in Thailand, implemented the same set of national school curriculum and administrative structures that were centrally designed by the Department of Curriculum and Instruction Development, Ministry of Education. The current national curriculum was issued in 2008 under the Basic Education Core Curriculum B.E. 2551 (A.D. 2008). This core curriculum is applied to K-12. The curriculum is divided into eight learning subject groups, namely: Thai Language, Mathematics; Science; Social Studies, Religion, and Culture; Health & Physical Education; Art; Vocational Education & Technology, and Foreign Languages. Teaching and learning based on this curriculum should develop learner’s skills or competencies in communication, thinking, problem solving, life skills, and technology. It also aims to have the following desirable characteristics: (a) to foster loyalty to the nation, religion, and the king; to be honest, to have discipline; to pursue learning; to live life sufficiently; to commit to work; to love Thainess; and to have public consciousness or social responsibility.

The current curriculum has been criticized in several aspects. For example, the curriculum is highly centralized and does not take local contexts into account, and it gives students excessive studying hours. As the result, a working group was appointed to
develop the new curriculum. The new curriculum has already been developed consisting six learning subject groups: Language and Culture; Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM); Work Life; Media Skill and Communication; Society and Humanity; and ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), Region, and World. At present, it has been under the process of consideration from various stakeholders. If it is passed, it will first be implemented at 1,000 schools and revised as needed before it will replace the current one.

A day in the life of Mae Nam children at home and in school is very similar to that of Mae La children in Mae Hong Son province, even though they are 260 miles apart. One of the key issues Mae Nam children and villagers have faced with regard to schooling is the issue of poor quality education, which also faced by Mae La children. Pam received her primary and middle school education from Mae Nam School, and talked about this issue based on her lived experiences, both in the individual interview and in the focus group interview. She saw this as one of the disadvantages of highland ethnic minority status. Her understandings and reflections on this issue will be presented and discussed later in Chapter Six, which focuses the topic of ethnicity and college access.

With respect to their way of living, Mae Nam is a farming village like Mae La village. Historically, Mae Nam Akha practiced slash and burn farming using a shifting cultivation method. The villagers cut and burned forest for new land, and the land was then cultivated temporarily and abandoned afterward to revert to its natural vegetation while the villagers moved on to another existing plot of land or cleared the forest for new land. The Akha practiced subsistence farming along with mixed cropping. They grew
food enough for their household consumption and then sold the remaining produce to the markets. With multiple cropping, vegetables such as greens, pumpkins, cucumbers, beans, peppers and yams were planted in the rice fields and other kinds of fields. They also collected food from forest such as wild mushrooms and baby bamboo shoots. However, since the forest regulations progressively prohibited them from clearing forest for new lands and with the spread of lucrative cash crop farming, the villagers turned to cash cropping. They grew cash crops such as corn and tomatoes to generate income for their families’ needs. At the same time, they began to use pesticides, chemical fertilizers, and farm machines and to buy seeds from commercial sources, instead of producing their own seeds as in former times. In these past six years, the majority of the households have raised coffee as their major cash crop and peas, tomatoes, and corn as minor cash crops. They still grow rice in upland fields on the slopes of mountains for their own consumption, which completely depends on rainfall. As I walked around the village, I noticed that most of the households raised pigs and chicken for feasting. Some houses that have available space also have vegetable gardens.

However, as more people within the village and other villages began to raise coffee, enticed by high prices, the amount of coffee in the market became plentiful. As the result, the price decreased. In 2012, Pam’s father sold his dried coffee beans for about 140 baht ($4) per kilogram, but in May 2013, he sold the beans only for 80 baht ($2.67) per kilogram.

As a farming village, the day-to-day life and activities of Mae Nam villagers are very similar to those of the Karen people in the Mae La village discussed earlier. One aspect that makes Mae Nam village differ from Mae La village is that in these past six
years, young Akha, both men and women, have begun to work as wage laborers and work not only outside of their home village, but also outside of Thailand. They go to work in Taiwan and later in South Korea. At first, the villagers went to work in Taiwan, but since wage laborers in South Korean earned higher wages, they turned to work in South Korea instead. The majority of the overseas workers work in textile and electronic factories and in the construction industry, while the rest work in the farming sector. However, Akha is not the only ethnic group that has gone to work in East Asian nations. In fact, a number of Mien, Lisu, Lahu, and Hmong also go to work in those countries.

In the case of Korea, initially, labor-recruiting agents came to Thailand to recruit the villagers to work in Korea, but anyone who wished to work in Korea had to pay a large recruitment fee to the brokers prior to departure. In some cases, the villagers ended up with a larger-than-expected debt and were unlawfully and involuntarily forced to work for a longer period of time to pay the debt. In addition, some Akha went to Korea by themselves as tourists and then illegally worked there, even though there was a high risk for them to be deported at any time. Later on, the villagers who wished to work in Korea directly contacted the migrant Akhaaa who Hs already secured work in Korea and asked them to help them find the jobs. In some cases, relatives who worked in Koew came back to the village and recruited other relatives to work with them. At present, the villagers prefer to work in Korean legally through labor recruiting agencies, personal networks, and the employment permit system (EPS).

EPS, which was instituted in 2004, is a bilateral recruitment program between the Thai government and the Republic of Korea. Anyone who wishes to work in Korea through EPS has to take and pass a Korean language test called the Test of Proficiency in
Korean (TPIK). This is one of the reasons why more young people go to work in Korea rather than older adults, who did not go to school and have very minimal knowledge of the Korean language. Prospective overseas workers still have to be responsible for all costs arising before departure, such as passport fees, EPS fees, flight costs, and Korean language and culture training fees.

Mae Nam villagers who used to work or who currently work in Korea, have influenced the economic welfare of households in the village through sending their earnings home to supplement their families’ incomes, to improve the life quality of their families’, and to enhance their households’ economic status. The evidence one could see walking around the village is a certain style of house. The households that have at least one former or current oversea worker have a nice house already built or in progress. A majority of these houses are two-story houses in which the first floor is built with concrete and the second floor is built with wood. This new style of house architecture is completely different from the traditional Akha house described earlier.

The other evidence exhibiting the effects of earning abroad and remittances is ownership of pickup trucks. Some households with oversea workers have both nice houses and a pickup truck, while some households prefer to buy pickup trucks, which are greatly useful in farming and transporting crops to sell in the markets, rather than building new houses. In addition, in most cases, earning abroad also becomes an important source of economic capital for the family to invest in and expand their farming businesses, which in turn allows them to generate more income from farming.

The flow of labor migration among highland people in search of better employment opportunities and higher wages has continued. Earning abroad, or
remittance, shows its impact on household economics and the quality of the lives of their families. So, working abroad becomes an alternative life path or an unconventional career choice for many young Akha in Mae Nam village. In fact, a group of young Akha overseas workers also told us that they preferred working abroad rather than pursuing higher education to improve the quality of the lives of their families as well as their own. One could see that working overseas, which allows them to generate substantive income at early ages, became a new competitor for pursuing higher education or college. The temptation of working abroad influenced Mae Nam youths to pursue technical or vocational education after graduating middle schools located in or outside the village, rather than pursuing high school tracks, which led them to study at a public or private college, to obtain a certain degree, and then to seek for employment. And the village youths learned from other oversea workers that people who are trained or hold certificates from vocational schools have better opportunities to secure jobs, especially factory jobs, in Korea or Taiwan than non-vocationally-trained persons. Surprisingly, the number of girls pursuing vocational school is higher than that of boys.

However, young people, especially boys, who finished middle school or vocational school but preferred not to work outside the village or abroad remain in the village and become farmers, like their parents. Farming coffee has become an attractive business; since the coffee beans prices are doing better than those of the other cash crops they had grown in the past or are producing now.

One could not imagine how the houses looked like or how many pickup trucks were available in Mae Nam village before the boom of the coffee farming and the flourishing of working abroad.
Pam has seen many changes take place in her village, including changes in the young villagers’ livelihoods. She has witnessed that, in these past few years, more and more young people from her village went to work in Korea. She has also seen that more youths pursue middle school education after primary school and then pursue technical and vocational schools. She was glad that more young people in her village pursued vocational school or upper secondary school, including one of her younger sisters, after lower secondary school. But at the same time she also expressed her concern about young people opting for vocational school instead of regular schooling and preferring working overseas, as shown in her earlier quotation. From Pam’s viewpoint, many parents in her village view that the social value of working in the fields or working abroad is better than that of going to school or college, which requires a substantive period of time and financial investment.

Pa Dee Village (a Lahu village)

A week after coming back from the Akha village in Chiang Rai, I made another journey to a Lahu village, Pa Dee village, located in Mae Sui District of Chiang Rai. This village is the village which Pla, a male Lahu student, comes from. Pa Dee is located in a mountainous area and is only about 11 miles from the highway and other Thai villages, but surprisingly it still has no full access to electricity, no school, no health station, no well-paved road, and no land tenure. And so far, only four out of the three hundred people have gone to college. Thai villages located 11 miles south of Pa Dee and predominately Chinese Haw villages located 10 miles to the north of the village have electricity, public schools, and health stations. In addition, a good number of people from those villages have attended college or have already secured college degrees.

Pa Dee village is the third village I visited after Mae La and Mae Nam village. Pa Dee village is one of the four sub-villages of Pa Kha village (pseudonym). It is a small village located in a valley surrounded by mountains in the Mae Suai district of Chiang Rai Province. These mountainous areas, where Pa Dee village is situated, are also the home of various ethnicity minority groups, including 713 Akha households, 477 Red
Lahu households, 144 Chinese Haw households, and 13 Karen households. The areas were historically concentrated with opium production and trafficking, in which highland ethnic minorities produced opium, and Chinese Haw acted as opium buyer and distributor. Pa Dee village, as Mae Nam village, is an interethnic village in which Pwa Ka Nyaw Karen and Red Lahu people live together in the same village. The village was originally a Karen village, but three decades ago, Lahu people who were in the other areas in Chiang Rai or who had recently migrated from Myanmar moved into this village. At present, the Karen tribe, with 13 households, is the minority group in the village, while the Lahu people, who settled in the village at a later time, are the majority group in the village with 55 households. This interethnic village is an interesting village in several aspects. First of all, both Karen and Lahu have the same language family. They speak a Tibetan-Burmese language that is a dialect of the Sino-Tibetan language family. A few of the Karen people were able to speak the Lahu language, however, the Lahu people could not speak the Karen language. I witnessed this in the second morning of my stay in the village. A male adult Karen came to Pla’s house in the early morning while we were cooking in the kitchen. A Karen man spoke to Pla’s father in Lahu language, saying that he had to go to the district office and he would like to borrow Pla’s father’s motorbike. Pla’s father responded in the Lahu language, saying that a tire of his motorbike had a problem and it had not been fixed yet. This village is in a remote and mountainous area and public transportation was not available. If one does not have vehicle, then, he or she has to borrow one from a neighbor, hitchhike in other villagers’ pickup trucks or in the ones passing by the village, or walk down about 11 miles of a mountainous road to the highway in order to catch public transportation. In addition, the Karen people live on the
east side of the village, while Lahu people live on the west side of the village. There is no explicit mark dividing the two ethnic groups, but the way each ethnic group clusters among their own ethnicity indicates that the line is drawn between the two ethnic groups. Lastly, Karen practice Buddhism and the wood house of the Buddhist priest is located on the top hill of the village, while the Lahu people practice Christianity and have a Baptist church on the opposite hilltop of the village.

Geographically, this village is situated about 11 miles from Chiang Rai-Chiang Mai highway, about 24 miles from the district office, and about 88 miles from Northern University. Since it located in the mountainous area, the road from the highway to Pa Dee village interchanges between a large number of steep uphill and downhill slopes and a few flat areas. The degree of navigational difficulty of this road is less compared to those of Mae La and Mae Nam villages, but it is still problematic compared to the roads of Duang Den and Sai Jai village, because only a few very steep areas were paved with concrete and the remaining parts of the road were either dirt or gravel. By the time I traveled to this village, the areas that had been previously paved were deteriorating due to heavy rains and landslides during the rainy seasons. At the same time, the sub-district office was hiring a construction company to pave a few new steep and difficult areas where several accidents had occurred. Pla, a Lahu student from this village, told me that the current road was much better than the past, since some difficult areas of the road had at least been paved, even though they were not well paved. When Pla was attending a primary school in a Thai village, he had difficult times in traveling back and forth between the school and the village during rainy seasons. At that time, the road was much narrower and unpaved, very few pickup trucks were available in the areas, and his father
did not have a motorbike. When rainy seasons came, the road became muddy and slippery, and there were very few pickups from other villages passing by his village. It was even less possible for small vehicles such as motorbikes to travel on such poor roads, so when Pla returned from the village to a dormitory near his school, he often ended up walking with his father along the muddy road back to the dormitory, a trip which took several hours.

As indicated earlier, Pa Dee village is only 11 miles from the major highway and from Thai villages, which have full electrical access. However, Pa Dee village, like to Mae La village, still does not have full access to electricity. The villagers only have access to limited amounts of electricity generated from small solar panels provided by the Thai government. Having limited access to electricity means the villagers are cut off from the development and opportunities that electricity offers, such as up-to-date news from television, enough light for students to do homework or reading at night, and educational supplies, such as computers and the Internet, could not be utilized by the village children for the sake of learning. Without power, the villagers also could not enjoy or take advantages from modern household goods such as refrigerators and rice cookers. Surprisingly, Hauí Nam Rin (pseudonym), which is a predominately Chinese Haw village and located about 22 miles away from the major highway, has full electricity; access and the village children have access to a formal public school located in the middle of their village.

However, Pa Dee village, unlike the other four villages I visited during the fieldwork, has no formal school in the village. It used to have only a non-formal learning center located at the edge of the village. The center was founded in 1993 by the
Department of Non-Formal Education (DNFE) under the Ministry of Education. This type of learning center was historically founded in rural Thai villages and later in many less-accessible highland ethnic villages that were not served by a formal school throughout the northern part of Thailand. This kind of center was also set up in several highland villages that are located in the same areas with Pa Dee village. The learning center in Pa Dee village was established in order to provide basic education to Pa Dee pupils during the day and to teach basic Thai language literacy to adults at night. As the school was a non-formal one, only one teacher at a time was assigned to teach at the learning center and each teacher was required to mainly teach Thai and math to pupils. In contrast, regular Thai public schools are mandated to implement the national core curriculum for primary schools, as I detailed in the section for Mae Nam village. Since there was only one small school building with a single room, all students of various age groups were placed in the same room. While one group of pupils was given lessons, the rest of the pupils were asked to either do the assignment or to play at the playground. Pla, a male Lahu student, received his kindergarten through 3rd grade education from the non-formal learning center in Pa Dee village and then he was transferred to Mae Tang School (pseudonym) located 11 miles away, in a Thai village. Pla stated that the learning and teaching provided by the non-formal learning center and the ones offered by Mae Tang School were very different. At the center he learned only Thai language and math, while at the new school he learned English, science, and other subjects contained in the core curriculum. Students who completed the sixth grade at the center were awarded with certificates of non-formal primary education. These certificates allowed the children to pursue a secondary education in a formal school setting if they wished. Based on the
interview with Pla and my informal conversations with Pa Dee villagers, the kind of education students received from the learning center created significant academic challenges to students when they transferred to study at lowland Thai schools or when they pursued lower-secondary education.

However, the non-formal learning center in Pa Dee village was shut down in early 2008 and the students were transferred to another non-formal learning center located in Doi Lan village (pseudonym), a nearby village. There, students were taught on Mondays, Tuesdays, and Wednesdays and on Thursdays and Fridays they were bussed to a Mae Tang School. Doi Lan’s non-formal learning center was also shut down in 2012. The majority of these students were also transferred to a Mae Tang school. Some children stayed in student housing near the school while others commuted back and forth in a school pickup truck provided by the government. During the week, commuter students left their homes around 6 am for school and returned at 5 pm in the evening. In addition, a few students who received support from NGOs were transferred to public schools located in the cities of Chiang Rai and Chiang Mai. Commuting back and forth between Pa Dee village and Mae Tang School was possible due to an approved budget for a road development. But commuting was less possible in the past when the road was mainly a dirt road.

In addition to the Mae Tang School in a Thai village, there was also another school located about 10 miles away in a predominately Chinese Haw village. This school was the only regular public school available in the whole mountainous area where 8 highland villages and 19 sub-highland villages, including Pa Dee village, are located. This school was originally founded in 1970 as a Chinese language school and
subsequently, a Christian Bible study program was added. In 1978, the school was registered to become an officially recognized formal school under the Ministry of Education. At present, the school offers classes from K-9. The students are ethnic Akha, Lahu, and Chinese students. In the 2013 academic year, there were 697 students.

However, none of children from Pa Dee village attends this school because the road from Pa Dee village to the school in the Chinese Haw village is problematic, since it is a dirt road and only few steep uphill areas are covered with gravel. The road from Pa Dee village to that school is also steeper and more twisted than the road from Pa Dee village down to Mae Tang School, so it is more reasonable for Pa Dee children to attend the lowland Thai school rather than the school in the Chinese Haw village.

Moreover, the pursuit of education beyond primary school has long been a challenge for Pa Dee village. In former times, children were given education through a non-formal education track where leaning and teaching minimally took placed compared to a formal public school. The curriculum implemented in such a center was also regarded as a weak curriculum due to the fact that only a few subjects were offered and educational supplies were also minimally available. After the completion of primary school, many young people decided not to continue with secondary education. A large number of them chose to stay in the village and then become farmers like their parents, although some decided to work as a wage laborers in the cities. In recent years, a few students completed lower secondary education, but they decided to return to their home village and work in the fields. So far, there are only four people who attended college. The first two are women, and they successfully obtained Bachelor degrees from Chiang Rai Rajabhat University, a former teaching college. The other two, a man and a woman,
are currently attending the university. Pla, a research participant, is one of the two students currently pursing undergraduate study.

Regarding their livelihoods, Pa Dee villagers, like villagers in the other four villagers, have farming as their main occupation. Their farming success depends highly on rainfall. Pa Dee Karen farmers have historically raised rice in paddy fields and collected foods in the forest, while Lahu farmers raised opium as their main cash crop, along with raising other crops for household consumption. As opium production became illegal, Lahu people, as other highland ethic groups, changed their methods to raise other types of cash crops such as ginger root, taros, and fruits. As stated earlier, the area where Pa Dee village is located used to be a major zone for producing opium, which was viewed by the governments to be a danger to the nation. The highland people also practiced a slash-and-burn farming method, which was viewed to cause deforestation. So, in 1983, the Royal Project Development Center, which was originally instituted in 1969 by His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej of Thailand, was founded in Huai Nam Rin village, an interethnic village of Chinese Haw, Akha, and Lahu. This village is about 10 miles north of Pa Dee village. The Royal Project was established in order to address the problems of deforestation, opium production, and poverty by promoting alternative crops to all highland ethnic villages in that area. Initially, the Royal Project introduced and supported the villagers to raise vegetables such as napa cabbage to replace drug crop production. Later on, the villagers were encouraged and supported to raise fruits such as passion fruits, strawberries, plums, Chinese plums, and persimmons, as well as tea and Arabica coffee. The Royal project also initiated a forest revitalization and conservation

Please see more details about the Royal Project from this website: http://www.hrди.or.th/en/home.
project. To extend the working areas, the Royal Project later set up its sub-unit at Pa Dee village. At present, Huai Nam Rin village and its neighboring villages have become major areas for producing tea and coffee beans.

Among the five villages I visited, Pa Dee is the only village that is under the Royal Project organization. As part of the Royal Project, Pa Dee villagers, both Karen and Lahu, have farmed plums, Chinese plums, and persimmons. They could not raise vegetables, tea, or coffee, since either its elevation was not high enough or there was no land with water irrigation to raise such crops. However, in these past few years, Pa Dee Lahu have entered to a single cash crop economy in which they raise corn as the major source of their household income year after year, while at the same time, they continue to grow rice in dry lands for their consumption. Corn has become one of the major crops in many parts of northern Thailand. In farming corn, Pa Dee villagers needed to invest more money for seeds, fertilizers, and insecticides than any crops they had ever farmed before. Fortunately, in these past few years, corn prices were good enough for some households to generate considerable income. Some households with several family members and enough lands were able to buy used pickup trucks, while others were able to buy motorbikes. Karen people, on the other hand, largely continued to grow rice in the paddy fields. Nevertheless, recently, a few Karen households have begun to raise corn as they were lured by the lucrative incomes gained by Lahu people from farming corn.

Farming corn is not always the best choice for making living. Corn prices were fruitful in some years, but not profitable in other years. When corn supply was over the market demand, the corn prices were very low and the villagers hardly made enough income to cover their expenses. Some households had very limited lands for farming and
they were not allowed to clear the forest for more lands as they did in former times. The land for housing and farming become inadequate as the number of offspring in the village was expanded. This problem has become a critical issue, faced by not only Pa Dee village, but also the other four villages I visited. The lands the Pa Dee villagers and other four villagers both lived on and used for farming were not tenured lands. The villagers could occupy and use those lands, but they had no legal landownership. This means the government could take the lands back from those villagers any time, as is currently happening in many highland communities in the north and west regions of Thailand. The conflicts between the highland communities and forest regulations and policies by the Royal Forest Department (RFD) over the rights for lands and national resource managements have been a significant issue for several decades. With those circumstances, some Lahu villagers turned to alternative sources of income by working as wage laborers in construction sites in Chiang Mai and other big cities. Some young couples even left their babies with their grandmothers as they went to work in the cities and send money back home for family expenses. The trend for migrating to the cities for work would likely continue, especially among young people of Pa Dee village. Nonetheless, as an agricultural community, a day in the life of Pa Dee villagers, who reside in the village, is very similar to that of the other four highland villages I visited. Pa Dee villagers spend most of their daytime hours working in the fields day after day.

**Duang Den Village (A Mien village)**

After I arrived at Sorn’s house and greeted his parents and relatives who were having a big feast, Sorn gave me a tour of his village. As we walked around the village, I saw many big wood houses. I wondered about why many Mien, also known as Yao, households in this village had such huge wood houses. But what made me more surprised was that many houses were locked and left empty, and the yards around those houses were full with weeds or broken glass. The yards
seemed to be poorly kept. As soon as I got a chance, I asked Sorn what had happened to those houses. Sorn quickly responded, “Those families left their houses to work and live in the cities. They also rent their fields to other villagers. They sell soymilk in Chiang Mai. Many of the soymilk sellers you saw along streets and at markets in Chiang Mai are Mien.”

Duang Den village is a Mien village situated in the Chiang Muan district of Phayao province. It is a village in which Sorn, a male Mien college student, comes from. Duang Den was founded in 1982, right after the Thai government granted a timber/forestry concession to a Thai private construction company. About 5 or 6 Mien households, who originally came from Lam Pang province and had established a village in the forestry concession area, were forced to move out of their village and to relocate their lives at a new location named as Duang Den village. A few years later, more Miens, including Sorn’s parents and relatives, moved from Ngao District of Lam Pang province into Duang Den village. At present, this village has 82 households with 424 people. This village is located in a valley area of a national park and is 21 miles from the district office and 133 miles from Northern University. As it is located in a basin and near Thai villages, the road from the nearest highway to this village is well-paved and straighter than mountain roads. Compared to the other four villages, this village is geographically better off. Even though it is located in a valley in the mountainous areas, it has a well-paved road and has full access to electricity, water, schools, and a health center.

Miens in this village are the successors of the Miens who originally migrated from China to Vietnam, to Laos and then to Thailand around the 1850s. At present, the majority of the Mien people live in the northern provinces of Thailand, especially in Chiang Rai, Nan, and Phayao provinces. Duang Den Miens, as Miens in other villages, still maintain their distinctive language, customs, clothing, and beliefs and practices.
Miens in this village practice a combination of animism and Taoism, in which they believe in spirits and worship their ancestor spirits. This belief system plays important roles in their religious life, culture, and societies.

Regarding schooling, Duang Den village, unlike Mae La, Mae Nam, and Sai Jai village, does not have its own school inside the village, but there is a public school available about two miles away in a Thai village. This school, named Ban Rong School (pseudonym), was founded in July, 1971. This school has historically had only northern Thai students. However, when Miens from Lam Pang province moved to settle in Duang Den village, the school began to have a Mien student population. At present, this school offers class from K-9 grades and uses the same core basic curriculum, as do other public schools around the country. In 2013, there were 91 students (including 16 kindergarten students, 53 students from the 1st - 6th grade, and 22 students from the 7th - 9th grade) and 15 teachers. The majority of students are still northern Thais. Mien children speak their native language at home, while the school uses only standard Thai language for teaching and learning. The use of different languages at home settings and at school settings becomes challenging for both Mien pupils and the school. School administrators acknowledges this issue and states that it is very difficult to communicate with hill tribe Mien students, especially Mien pupils in kindergarten and in the first grade level. In addition, none of school teachers have a basic knowledge of the Mien language that enables them to communicate with Mien students.

A typical day at school and in the life of children in Duang Den village is very similar to that of the children in other four highland villages. From Monday to Friday, children are in school from 8 am to 4 pm. Once they come home, they help their parents
do household chores such as cleaning and feeding pigs and chickens. During the
weekend, small children stay at home while big children assist their parents with farm
work in the fields. Children in this village, as children in other the four villages, spend
most of their free time watching television, while reading books during their free times is
hardly seen. Other free-time activities include playing games with other children and
playing sports. After completing the sixth grade, Mien students can pursue lower
secondary education in the same school, they can attend a district secondary school
located about 15 miles away, or they can other schools located in neighboring districts.

Regarding their livelihoods, Duang Den villagers have engaged in cash crop
farming. In the past decade, they have grown different cash crops in different years as
demanded by the market. However, since five years ago, the villagers have raised corn,
which depends on rainfall and requires high levels of pesticides and chemical fertilizers.
However, in some years, when corn prices were high enough, some villagers were able to
generate enough income to buy motorbikes, pickup trucks, and household appliances
such as televisions, rice cookers, and washing machines. Before mono cropping of corn,
ginger used to be the major cash crop that allowed some Duang Den villagers to generate
income for their families’ needs. Even though cash cropping has become the major means
for income, the villagers continue to practice subsistence farming to some extent. They
still grow rice in dry lands for household consumption and raise livestock such as pigs
and chickens at home. Because the village is located in a protected national park area, the
villagers are not allowed to clear new lands for farming. Some householders, such as
Sorn’s parents, who came into the village later and did not have enough land for farming,
lease lands from earlier settlers who had a several fields.
In recent years, the livelihoods of Duang Den villagers have also changed as they have in other Mien or highland ethnic minority communities. The villagers sought alternative ways of making a living. Some villagers went to work in abroad while others engaged in business or trading. Working abroad, especially in Taiwan and Korea, was chosen as an alternative career by some young Duang Den Miens. It allowed them to obtain higher wages than working in the village or in Thai cities. When they earned enough, they sent money back to their families to support farming cost, to build new houses, or to buy vehicles. Young Miens, like young Akhas in Mae Nam village, learned about working abroad from Mien social networks and they mainly worked in the manufacturing sector.

In addition to working abroad, some Duang Den Miens set up soymilk businesses in large tourist cities such as Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, and Bangkok. Some young Mien couples moved their entire family, including their children, to live at the place where they had their soymilk businesses. They left their houses in the village empty and rented their lands for farming to other villagers who engaged in farming. Several families that succeeded in the soymilk business built modern concrete houses back home for their parents while they continued to sell soymilk and live in the cities. They came back to the villages occasionally, mainly during the Mien New Year, which falls at the same time as Chinese New Year. In these past few years, the lives of the villagers have been economically better off due to the cash crop economy, working abroad, or engaging in trading in the cities. However, since this village was founded, none of the villagers have secured government jobs such as teaching, nursing, law enforcement or medicine. Apparently, alternative careers such as working abroad and selling soymilk are not only
essential for the families’ economic mobility, but these careers also have effect on educational mobility and opportunities for the younger generation. Sorn, a native Duang Den, pointed out that the world is changing and Mien people have to adapt to the changes, as some of his relatives have been doing. He said most of his relatives left the village to work at other places or to sell soymilk in the cities. The village world was too small. If they lived in the village, they could only do farming. There were no other means for them to make a living or to make life better. But when they lived outside their villages or in the cities, they saw larger world. They saw and realized the importance and potential value of education for their children’s future. This made them want to support their children to acquire education. When their financial situation improved because of alternative jobs, they could afford to send their children to obtain higher levels of education. Sorn viewed that alternative occupations would enhance the educational opportunities of younger generations, but at the same time, he was also worried that eventually his village would have only older generations left and the Mien culture could disappear if most of the younger generation moved out of the village.

**Sai Jai Village (A Hmong village)**

“I am Hmong. I have to have very strong determination. That’s because during my seventh to twelfth grade years, my village still practiced bride kidnapping.”

Khac, a female Hmong student

Sai Jai village is the last and the farthest village I visited during the fieldwork. This village is a Hmong village located on a flat-topped mountain in the Muang District of Mae Hon Song province. This village was founded in 1978, when a pioneer Hmong family migrated from their Hmong village in the Pai district to settle in this new village. Over the years, more Hmong families from other Hmong villages in the same province gradually moved into the village. At present, Sai Jai village has about 80 households with...
600 people. Geographically, this village is situated in a remote mountainous area. It is 26 miles from the district office and about 162 miles from Northern University. A road from the highway into the village, about 5 miles long, is narrow, steep, and curvy, but it is well-paved with concrete. This village is in an isolated locale, but its people have access to electricity, education, paved roads, and political participation.

As an agricultural community, the villagers remain their simple ways of living and strictly maintain their unique language, clothes, culture, and religious practice. The villagers mainly speak the Hmong language, and they do not have much opportunity to speak northern Thai dialects or the central Thai language, since they are isolated from other Thai villages. A group of school teachers was the only group of outsiders with whom the villagers could interact in the northern or central Thai language. As many Hmong in Thailand converted to become Christian, Hmong of Sai Jai village still upheld their traditional belief of animism. They believed in spirits, worshiped their ancestors, and use shamans for guidance, healing, and other rituals.

Historically, the Hmong people in Sai Jai community were a patriarchal, patrilineal, polygamous society in which men had most of the authoritative power, were given the privilege to pass on the property and the lineage of the family, and were also allowed to have more than one wife. At present, the practice of patriarchy and patrilineality has still remained in Sai Jai village while the practice of polygamy has slowly disappeared, as monogamy emerged as the dominant custom. In addition, it is important to note that this village was one of the Hmong villages in Thailand that used to practice marriage by abduction. This kind of marriage involved the forceful abduction of a girl by a man and his assistants, such as male relatives or friends. A few days later, the
man would send his parents or other adults to inform the girl’s parent about their daughter’s abduction and, based on their tradition, the girl’s parents inevitably had to give their consent to marriage. The rejection by the girl’s parents became less possible if the boy were a relative or cousin. In most cases, the kidnapping took place when the girl disliked and rejected the boy’s marriage proposal. The Hmong highly emphasize the relationships between relatives and members of clans. This would partially contribute to the marriage-by-kidnap that existed in this village several years ago. Its geographical remoteness would be another possible factor adding to the past existence of such a marriage custom in Sai Jai village. Khae, a female student from this village, knew about this practice and realized how this could undermine her future in schooling, as indicated in her quote in the beginning of this section. Khae’s remarks about this practice and its impacts will be presented and discussed in Chapter Five. Nevertheless, with its rich in mountainous geography, simple way of life, and strong cultural practices, this village was popularized by the district office to become a popular tourist destination. The village was visited by Thai and foreigner tourists, mainly during the cool season from November to February. The week I was there, there were two groups of tours coming to the village. Both groups were led by Thai guides and the tour members were western tourists. The guides took his clients around the village and took some pictures of Hmong children who were playing games along the village street.

Sai Jai village, like the other four highland villages, is a farming community. The villagers participate in a cash crop economy in which they farm cabbages, tomatoes, carrots, and napa cabbages. Since it is located 1,000 meters above sea level, the weather is relatively cool and turns cold in November to February. The high elevation and cool
weather allows the villagers to raise vegetables rather than other kinds of major cash crops such as corn or bean. Since irrigation systems are not available; the farmers are highly dependent on rainfall for successful harvests. Before becoming part of the cash crop economy, Sai Jai villagers used to raise opium as their major source of income and they also practiced intensive subsistence farming. They grew rice in dry lands for consumption and engaged in multiple-cropping or mixed-cropping methods to produce enough food for their families. At present, San Jai villagers still produce rice for feasting and raise vegetables and livestock to feed their families, but at the same time, they increasingly buy food sold in markets. As in a cash crop economy, their farming demands substantial investments in seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides. The price of their crops is highly dependent on the market as well. The farmers’ means of income is not assured. It varies year by year. When the agricultural commodity prices were fruitful, the villagers produced adequate income for their families’ needs. But when the commodity prices were low, they generated only enough revenue to cover their investment costs. However, unlike the Akha, Lahu, and Mien villagers, the Sai Jai people mainly remain in their village rather than working as a wage laborers in big cities or abroad in Korea and Taiwan. Only a few of young people work as wage laborers in the big cities. Since Sai Jai is located in a national park territory, the villagers are not free to clear more lands for farming as they did in former times. In fact, the lands they have occupied for a long time have been slowly reclaimed by the Royal Forestry Department to become part of the national park or to be used for watershed conservation.

Regarding schooling, this village is in a remote area but it has a school named San Jai School. This school was founded in 1981 and is located on sloping terrain toward the
top of the village. The school implements the same curriculum and school administration polices set by the central government. In 2013 academic year, there were 122 students, including 23 kindergarten students and 99 students from the first to the sixth grade. The school also had 10 Thai teachers. The usual day at school for the village children are very comparable to that of children in the other four villages described earlier. Over the past many years, about ten to twelve students graduated annually from this school. But only a few of them pursued lower secondary school in Mae Hon Son or in other provinces. The majority of them chose to remain in the village as farmers and pursue lower secondary education through the non-formal education track. After a few years, the young people normally got married, had children, and engage in parental roles. Since the village and the school were founded, only five people have successfully obtained bachelor degrees. The first student to graduate from college obtained a bachelor degree in 2009. However, changes are taking place in Sai Jai village. For the past five years, due to changes in the socioeconomic situation for the village, the majority of students who completed primary school chose to continue lower-secondary school and then secondary school. The number of college students increased accordingly. At present, there are about twenty students who are pursuing higher education at various institutions. This is regarded as one of the most positive changes to have taken place in Sai Jai village since its establishment. In addition, more of the young people who completed lower or upper secondary school decided to work in the cities instead of returning to their home village. The uncertain and low price of the cash crops they raised is viewed to be one of the factors that contributed to the movement of young village workers to the cities. They chose to migrate to the cities with the hope of finding work with higher wages.
In conclusion, this section provided descriptions of the five villages I visited during the field work: Mae La village in Mae Hong Son, Mae Nam village in Chiang Rai, Pa Dee village in Chiang Rai, Duang Den village in Phayao, and Sai Jai village in Mae Hong Son. (See Table 3 and Figure 4 in Chapter Three). The settings, the history, geography, culture, livelihood, schooling, and ways of life in each community were described. The similarities and differences among the villages were highlighted and compared throughout the description.

These five villages had several common characteristics. One common feature was remoteness. Geographically, these villages were located in rural and mountainous areas. The majority were distant from Thai villages, the district office, and Northern University (NU). The road conditions from the closest highways to these villages were varied. The roads to the Karen, Akha, and Lahu villages were very rough and challenging and became worse during the rainy seasons, when dirt roads became muddy roads and landslides took place. The roads to the Mien and Hmong villages were better due to concrete-paved roads. Socially and culturally, the majority of the residents in those villages were either from the same ethnicity or a mix of highland ethnic groups. They spoke their ethnic languages at home and maintained their own cultures, traditions, and customs. Since there were no northern Thai residents in their villages, the villages had limited opportunities to use the northern Thai dialect or the central Thai language or to socially interact with mainstream Thais.

Lack of land ownership was the second common characteristic generally found in these villages. The villagers had built houses and had lived in their villages for several decades, but they still did not have the legal rights of landowners. This non-owner status
was also true for the lands that they occupied and used for farming. In some villages, lands they had long cultivated were reclaimed by the Department of Forestry to turn into national parks. Since the villagers did not have freehold rights to possession of their lands, they could not freely sell or mortgage their lands.

The third common characteristic found in the five villages was agriculturally based communities. Mae La village, Mae Nam, Pa Dee village, Duang Den village, and Sai Jai village have historically engaged in farming occupations. This traditional employment continues to the present. However, the nature of farming practices has changed over time from a subsistence economy to a market economy, in which villagers grow crops that they have always produced for consumption, such as rice, for marketing.

The fourth aspect shared by the five villages is that younger villagers have increasingly sought employment outside their home villages, which we call “sojourning.” Young people in all five villages left their villages to seek work in major cities such as Bangkok and Chiang Mai and also abroad in neighboring countries such as Taiwan and South Korea. Karen youths in Mae La village, who had primary or secondary school education, left their villages to seek employment in construction and service businesses in major cities. Youths and adult Lahus in Pa Dee village also went to work elsewhere, mainly in construction and services in Chiang Mai and in major tourist provinces in the south of Thailand. Hmong youths in Sai Jai village have also increasingly gone to work in the cities after finishing their primary or secondary education. Similarly, Mien youths and young couples in Duang Den village left their houses empty and engaged in selling soymilk in major tourist cities such as Chiang Mai and Bangkok. Besides working in major Thai cities, some young Miens chose to work in South Korea, as did other many
Thai Miens. Some young Akhas in Mae Nam village in Chiang Rai left their village and worked in the cities, but in the past few years, they have sought opportunities to work abroad, first in Taiwan and later in South Korea, with hopes for higher wages.

Lack of access to high-quality schooling was the last shared feature found in the five villages. The Karen, Hmong, and Akah villages had local primary schools. The Mien village did not have a school in the village, but village children attended a Thai school. The Lahu village historically had access only to a non-formal learning center, but after the center was closed down, Lahu children were bused to attend a primary school located in a Thai town. The schools the children attended implemented the same school curriculum used in all public Thai schools, its content quite foreign to the experience of these highland children. The village children’s access to primary school education was guaranteed, but the quality of education in content and teaching methods that the children received was not assured.

**Implications of the Shared Characteristics for Education**

While these villages had several features in common as previously identified, I want to highlight three key characteristics that were strongly related to college access issues and education: agriculturally-based communities, sojourning, and poor school preparation. These aspects will also contextualize the significance of the five key factors contributing to successful college access for first-generation highlander college students, which will be presented in the next chapter.

**Agriculturally-based communities.** As discussed earlier, the residents of the five highland villages have traditionally engaged in agriculture as their primary livelihood. The lives of these villagers and also their ancestors were deeply rooted in farming. They
spent most of their time in working in the fields day after day and most activities in their lives took place in the fields with few activities at home. As a result, over the years, the villager’s concepts of life course and success in life were greatly tied to or shaped by farming. The life course of the villagers in former times, when there was no existence of institutionalized education, was generally as follows:

Highland children aged as early as eight years old were expected to assist with household chores, to look after younger siblings, to assist with work in the fields, especially during planting and harvesting seasons, and to take part in cultural and social events. When the children became teenagers, they became involved in courtship relationships and then got married. During the time a young couple lived with either the husband’s family or the wife’s family, they obtained a participatory and informal education. They not only learned to run a household, but they also learned about cultural rituals, farming knowledge and practices, parenting roles, and other aspects that helped prepare them to later establish an independent family. Once they became an independent mature adult couple, they established and ran their own household, farmed their own fields, raised their own children, managed their own financial matters, and participated in social, cultural, and religious activities in their communities. When they became elders or grandparents, they became knowledge banks for the families and for the communities, ceased from farming work but performed household chores instead, and provided childcare to grandchildren. This was the nature of their life courses. Their perception of being a success in life meant to engage in farming as a source of food and income, to have a married life, to become parents and be able to raise children, to provide a means of making a living for future generations, and to be actively involved in their communities’
social, religious and cultural organizations. In these former times, institutionalized education was minimally or not available in those villages, so it consequently was not taken to be an important element in their life courses. Having formal education was not regarded as being important for getting success in rural life, which was deeply embedded in farming livelihood. Farm-oriented life, combined with lack of formal education in former times, would possibly explain why the educational status of the people in the five villages was very low.

Nevertheless, when institutionalized education was introduced and became compulsory for all individual highland children, the long-established elements of their life courses were changed. Formal education, especially primary education, became one of the key elements of their life courses. Formal education became a life event in which highland children were required to participate. Having formal education at any level meant having access to other advantages that education offered and keeping up with inevitable changes such as changes in the economy, politics, and technology. While primary schooling was largely viewed to be a key part of the villager’s life course college education or earned degrees were also gradually considered to be, not only a part of the children’s life courses, but also to define success in life. First-generation college students, such as Nat, Pam, Pla, Sorn, and Gaem and their parents, were leaders in this new paradigm. These students, and their families, began to view formal schooling as a valuable resource for their futures and for their families. They recognized college education as an option for their careers. For those parents, giving higher levels of education to future generations meant giving them resources that did not depend on agriculture. The idea of a college-going culture, which is defined as building the
expectations of postsecondary education for all children (College Board, 2006), had not yet become a norm or a dominant culture in the communities, but it had emerged in those villages to a certain degree.

**Poor educational preparation.** The second key aspect shared by the five villages was poor educational preparation. Education, either formal or informal, was introduced to the five villages about three decades ago. Compared to most rural Thai villages, these villages had access to education much later. Poor educational preparation was considered to be a key educational issue that the children and the parents in the villages faced for years. Some villagers complained that their children were unable to read and write well after graduating from primary school. College students from the villages stated in the individual interviews that the poor educational preparation they had received from their village schools created significant challenges in their pursuits of middle school, high school, and higher education. Poor school preparation was a critical issue. It greatly decreased the likelihood that village children would pursue middle school or would do well in middle school. The children’s success or lack of success in middle school, in turn, affected their decisions either to pursue high school, leading them to higher education, or to end their school lives to seek work in the cities or to become farmers like their parents. In the individual interviews, some highlander college students viewed receiving poor primary school education was in fact due to their ethnicity; because they were ethnic students, they unavoidably attended primary schools that were located in remote areas, had high turnovers of school principals and teachers, provided only a few hours of lessons, had limited educational facilities and technologies such as computers and materials for science classes, and provided little to no exposure to the broader world.
outside their schools, villages, and farms. Only a few individuals from those villages successfully obtained high school education or postsecondary education, even though the villages had had access to primary school education for several decades.

Several considerations contributed to poor educational preparation among the schools in the study, but I will highlight only two considerations: language barriers and school curriculum. Regarding language barriers, if we consider the student body, schools in Mae La, Sai Jai, Mae Name, and Pa Dee village served only ethnic students. For example, all the students in Mae La School were Karens and all the students in Sai Jai School were Hmong. Mien children from Duang Den village historically had attended a predominately northern Thai school. All teaching was conducted only in the standard Thai language, which is an official language, while Karen, Akha, Hmong, Lahu, and Mien students mainly spoke their ethnic languages at home. Children had little or no opportunity to learn and to use the central Thai language at home and in the villages, because their parents and the villagers mainly spoke ethnic languages, and the villagers were from the same ethnic background or from other highland ethnic backgrounds, not from northern Thai or other Thai backgrounds. Since their fellow students were also from the same villages, they ended up talking to each other in their ethnic languages. Having limited opportunities to learn and practice the Thai language led to Thai language incompetency, creating both short-term and long-term destructive consequences. Many studies have shown that lack of second language proficiency greatly undermines children’s academic performances.

Thai language incompetence also generated long-term effects. Some village children chose to pursue further education after completing primary school from their
villages. Some highlander college students indicated that their lack of Thai language competence in their early schools subsequently undermined their self-confidence in speaking Thai. When they attended middle schools located in Thai towns or cities, they felt unprepared to speak Thai in class or with other northern Thai friends. When the village children did not speak Thai fluently, they were teased and embarrassed by their Thai peers. Such teasing also concerned ethnicity. The students’ experiences in being teased due to Thai language issues will be detailed later in Chapter Seven.

For highland children, the standard Thai language was their second spoken language. However, the Thai language is an important form of cultural capital that had a significant influence on their ability to do well in school, to pursue higher levels of education, to socialize with mainstream Thais, to navigate institutionalized bodies such as school, and to secure career opportunities. In school contexts, the Thai language was principally assigned to be the medium of instruction. All Thai children, regardless of their ethnic backgrounds, were assumed to already have Thai language skills from their upbringing and were expected to understand school materials without difficulty. School policy makers and the basic core curriculum developers did not recognize that second language acquisition was a challenge for highland ethnic minority students, who grew up in completely different language and cultural setting in which the Thai language was a second language they learned after mastering their native languages. Officials also did not recognize the different outcomes that would come about as a result of mainstream Thai students speaking Thai as their first language and hill students speaking Thai as their second language. All subjects were taught and carried out only in the Thai language without any forms of assistance, such as bilingual or multilingual programs, to help hill
children not only to learn the Thai language better, but also to do well in other subjects that required more conceptual skills such as math and sciences. The English and Chinese languages, as well as financial and economic vocabularies, were regarded as a valuable and were extensively supported in Thai public schools, but the minority languages, which the children had learned from their earliest childhoods, were not supported or developed to teach minority children from ages 2 to 5 years at predominately highlander schools so they could develop language learning skills in their familiar native languages first and then shift to the Thai language.

Previously, a few state agencies involved with improving education for the highlanders had attempted to experiment with bilingual education for highland children. The Department of General Education (DGE) attempted to provide bilingual education for highland children (Hill Tribe Study and Research Committee, 1974). In 1971, the DGE created a Thai language book and teacher handbook in various ethnic languages by using the Thai alphabet, which unfortunately did not fit the sound systems of most of the highland languages. The materials were developed in the Karen language in 1971, in the Hmong and Mien languages in 1972, in the Lahu language in 1973, and in the Lisu and Akha languages in 1974 (Hill Tribe Study and Research Committee, 1974). From 1971-1974, the DGE also created projects that selected and trained highland youths to be become assistant teachers in order to address language barriers in teaching and learning. Unfortunately, after a few year of operation, these projects were gradually suspended due to lack of financial support. In 1967, the Department of Non-Formal Education founded the Hill Area Education Project (HAEP), where local language classes were taught in the slot of ‘local curriculum,’ but this project was not true bilingual education, and it mainly
targeted adult learners rather than school pupils.

In the past few years, with support of UNESCO, there has been a gradual movement towards mother tongue-based bilingual education in Southeast Asian nations, including Thailand (UNESCO, 2005). This kind of movement usually began with community and NGO efforts in adult and pre-primary education, and it was non-formal in structure. In the case of Thailand, private organizations, such as the Foundation for Applied Linguistic (FAL), which was founded in 1989, have made strong efforts to implement the Multilingual Education Project (MLE) in predominately ethnic schools. This MLE project aimed to help children not only learn their mother tongue languages, which were gradually disappearing or being devalued, but also helped them build language learning skills from native linguistics in order to better acquire the Thai language. However, the MLE project has been implemented only a small number of public schools throughout the country. The movement towards true bilingual education in pre-primary education has not significantly influenced the formal education system, nor has it changed the national language policy with regards to education for ethnic minority children.

The second major consideration adding to poor school preparation in the highland schools was a highly homogenous core curriculum. Historically, in the Thai basic education system, a nationalized curriculum that is standardized for all subjects at all levels has been employed in all schools, even though there are broad dissimilarities in languages, cultures, ethnic origins, geography, and customs. The curriculum is set to be the same for all the schools in Thailand because of the required examinations. With the same curriculum, the same subjects are taught with the same materials at almost all
schools across the country. Highland schools serve mainly ethnic minority students who have different languages, cultures, customs, and ways of living from mainstream Thai students, yet these schools are required to use the same standardized national curriculum. Most school materials have been created based on mainstream Thais’ ways of learning, living, and viewing the world. They are created based on mainstream Thais’ environments and society. The highland pupils who live in cultures and environments that differ from the mainstream society find little or no reference to their own ethnic ways of living and learning, culture, or history in school materials. They sometimes have only their imaginations by which to relate to the concepts taught in the textbooks, because the subject content, teaching styles, and learning conditions are not well suited to the highlanders’ settings. This situation creates difficulties in learning for highlander pupils who speak their ethnic language at home and have living settings that are very different from the mainstream students that are targeted by the standardized curriculum.

Since state agencies began to provide support education for highland children, most policies were made to focus on providing equal access to formal basic education for the hill tribe children. Historically, educational policies for highlanders have never been clearly planned or implemented according to the unique challenges and cultural differences found within the groups. The explicit policies and particular objectives that are intended to improve highlander pupils’ overall quality of learning and educational achievements have been hardly discussed at local, regional, or national levels. Consequently, culturally-based curriculum (CBC), which is especially designed for elementary-aged highland pupils and based on their culture settings, languages, and existing experiences in their homes and communities, has not really been developed by
state agencies. According to the National Indian Education Association (NIEA) (2008),

Culturally-based education (CBE) grounds high quality instructional practices in culturally and linguistically relevant contexts. CBE is more than teaching language and culture as special projects, it is a systematic approach fully incorporating and integrating specific cultural ways of thinking, learning, and problem-solving into educational practice.

The current Basic Education Core Curriculum (BECC) makes the core subjects account for seventy percent of the total curriculum and sets the local curriculum to account for thirty percent of the total curriculum. The BECC encouraged schools, principals, and teachers to create a local curriculum that suited their local communities by incorporating local cultures and wisdom. Community members, such as community leaders and elders, were also encouraged to participate in developing the local curriculum and in providing input to the teaching process. However, because the local curriculum was originally intended to strengthen Thai local identity and to offset pressures from globalization on the local cultures (Baron-Gutty & Chupradit (2008), it was less likely to be used in addressing the existing distinctive learning difficulties that many highland children had extensively confronted. However, this deficit does not mean that it is impossible for educators to take advantage of the potential strengths of the curriculum. A few non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have taken advantage of the BECC’s allowance for local curriculums to develop culturally based curriculums (CBC).

The Inter-Mountain Peoples’ Education and Culture in Thailand Association (IMPECT) is an indigenous-based organization working with various highland groups in four main areas: alternative education, cultural revival and conservation, environment and natural resource management, and rights of indigenous people. IMPECT, in cooperation with Mowakhi Karen villagers and the Chiang Mai Provincial Office of the Non-Formal
and Informal Education, founded an alternative school, named Mowakhi School, in 1992. The main goal of the school was to produce multicultural students. The school offered classes from kindergarten to sixth grade, and it implemented an integrated curriculum consisting of the core curriculum and a local curriculum. Teaching subjects in the core program was accomplished by connecting academic content and lessons to the highland students’ lives, backgrounds and experiences and to the historical, social, political, and economic experiences of the local communities. For example, in art classes, students learned about Karen music and in science classes, they learned about plants that naturally grew in their community forest. With respect to implementing the local curriculum, the Karen language was used as a primary language of instruction in the Mowakhi School. Karen culture, language, history, traditional belief system, knowledge, and ways of living were incorporated into the lessons. Elders and parents served as teachers for the local curriculum, and a participatory learning approach was emphasized in the Karen culture class, as students learned about their own culture by participating in the traditional rituals taking place in their village. In addition to the local curriculum that was culturally and linguistically grounded, two additional aspects made this school different from other Thai public schools. First, this school was owned and managed by the community with funding assistance from IMPECT. Second, all teachers were Karen who grew up in Mowakhi village and spoke the Karen language fluently. Since the school’s establishment, about thirteen classes of students have already graduated. Since Mowakhi School designed a curriculum that met both the academic and the cultural needs of its students, about sixty-two percent of all its graduate students pursued higher levels of education after completing the six grades. The Mowakhi students had more self-
confidence in their ethnic identities, were more knowledgeable about their own traditions and culture, and were actively involved in their community’s cultural events, which would contribute to the continuity of the Mowakhi Karen language, culture, and knowledge.

**Sojourning.** The last common characteristic to be discussed related to education and shared by those five villages, is sojourning. The term sojourn in this context means young villagers leave their villages to work and to live in Thai cities, but they do not disconnect with their home origins. In fact, they occasionally go back to their villages and are involved with their families and with village activities, such as New Year celebrations and religious events. Sojourning among village youths is neither an old nor a new phenomenon, but it has been more widely practiced in this current decade. In former times people leaving their homelands to work outside the villages was not common. Most of the young and adult villagers lived their lives in the villages and engaged in farming. Working outside their communities was also less possible for the older generations because they had little or no schooling, could not speak and write the Thai language, and were minimally exposed to lowland life styles or Thai societies. Obtaining employment outside the villages had always existed to a limited extent; however, in these past few years, seeking alternatives to leaving the villages has increased, especially among young people. Moreover, the practice of working aboard has also emerged in many highland communities. The question that needs to be raised is ‘what are some considerations that contribute to the emerging movement of young highlanders in working outside the villages or outside their home country?’
One of the reasons is education. Younger generations in highland communities had access in basic education, either through formal or non-formal school settings. The majority of them obtained at least a primary school education while some went on to middle or high school. Compared to the older generations, the young generations with basic or advanced literacy were also exposed to mainstream Thai’s ways of life from more sources than their parents or ancestors. These sources included exposure to outside influences: schooling, such as books and teachers; media, including television, magazines, newspapers; social media, such as Facebook; and entertainment, such as drama and music. Another reason influencing highland youths to seek cities and overseas jobs was the limited availability of land for farming. As described in the preceding section of this chapter, land for farming and housing became limited in the five villages as the village populations increased, and the national forest law prohibited them from obtaining new lands for farming. Moreover, it is important to note that the five villages were official registered villages, and although the villagers were given household registration books recording births, deaths, marriages, and longer-term tenants who were in the house, they were not given certificates or deeds proving property ownership. The lands the villagers used for farming had no land ownership certificates, either, so the villagers had no legal rights in their lands and their lands were subject to seizure by the state government.

These five villages and most of the other highland villages were located either in conserved forest areas or in national park areas, so the villagers could become landless at any time. Land limitations has become more problematic in modern times, as the Thai government has increasingly added restrictive land use regulations and nature
conservation measures to increase national parks or green areas. For example, in 1981, Mae La villagers moved from higher elevation areas to live in their current Mae La village, but the land where village had been located was claimed by the Royal Forest Department (RFD) to be part of forest conservation areas since 1963. The land use issue became a critical problem for the villagers in 1995, when RFD reclaimed forest conservation areas to become a national park, although the bill to convert the conserved forest areas into a national park had not yet been passed. As a result, some of the villagers’ farmlands where they had cultivated rice, beans, and other subsistence crops for several decades were claimed to be part of the new national park. Conflicts over the land rights between the villagers and the RFD officials took place on many occasions, and some villagers were arrested and charged for land encroachment. While I was writing this chapter, the Thai junta that came to power in May, 2013, issued a policy called “Return the Forest” that aimed to “reclaim” green or national areas that were previously occupied by the villagers. The junta claimed that the villagers had been exploiting valuable national lands. As a result, many rural villages all over the country, including many highland villages were affected by this strict order, which was enforced under martial law. Some villagers faced charges for land encroachment, some villagers were given orders to be evicted from their homes, and some villagers lost their farmlands as the lands were reclaimed by the government. When the villagers tried to protest and to voice their concerns, they were stopped or detained by the military. The junta’s policy on forest retrieval and preservation mainly affected marginalized and poor people (Areerat, 2014).

The last reason compelling the highland youths to leave the villages for employment in the cities was their desire for better living conditions for themselves and
for their families. As described earlier, the villagers in the five villages engaged in farming cash crops such as corn, beans, and cabbages, which were highly dependent on receiving adequate rainfall and on having good markets for crop prices. The villagers’ incomes from farming were uncertain. In some years, when they produced good yields and the crop prices were good, farming would be profitable. But in some years the farmers neither had good yields nor received adequate crop prices. In addition to the continuing uncertainty the farmers faced in obtaining good farm incomes, working in the field also required significant physical strength and demanded working under the hot sun and in drenching rains. Young people who went to school or who were exposed to alternative livelihoods with better income through their social networks chose to leave their villages and ventured to try different work that their parents had never imagined. They engaged in work outside of farming that required certain language capabilities, skills, education, and social and cultural adjustments. This new approach of working outside the villages showed its advantages in the upward social and economic mobility of several families in those villages. For example, a large number of young Akha in Mae Nam village secured jobs in Taiwan or South Korea as a result of recommendations from their social networks. When they began to earn money, they sent money to their families in the villages to build new houses, to buy motorcycles, pickup trucks, and household appliances, and to send other children in their families to school. Remittances became major supplementary sources of income and played key roles in mobilizing the families’ financial status. As a result, working abroad became fashionable. When young people in the villages saw the examples of the youths who had gained economic benefits from working abroad, they desired to do so also, and their parents accordingly supported their
children to take a risk. This trend has taken place in the Mae Nam village for a few years, and it will likely continue.

In short, seeking alternative livelihoods among highland youths was driven by education (especially vocational education), the limited availability of lands for farming, threat of losing the land they occupied, and strong desires for better standards of living. However, the lucrative revenue from working overseas also created challenges for higher education. As the promise of higher wages motivated young people to pursue middle school, it also drove them to pursue vocational school after middle school rather than high school, which channeled them toward college education. Vocational school was favored among highland youths since it helped to prepare them for greater opportunities in working abroad.

Conclusion

This chapter provides descriptions of the five villages I visited during the fieldwork: Mae La village and Sai Jai village in Mae Hong Son province; Mae Nam village and Pa Dee village in Chiang Rai province; and Duang Den village in Pha Yoa province. To contextualize the settings, the history, geography, culture, livelihood, schooling, and way of life for each community was described. The similarities and differences across the villages were highlighted and compared throughout the chapter. This chapter also discussed the three central characteristics shared by the five villages. The first aspect was the agriculturally-based community in which farming was historically and presently regarded as the major means of livelihood. Their livelihoods has been changed over the years from extensive subsistence economies with few cash crops to market economies in which they have engaged in raising cash crops with a
minimal carry-over of subsistence farming. The lives of the villagers had been deeply rooted in agriculture for decades. Therefore, their concept of life course and success in life was, in turn, highly formed and shaped by their farming-based livelihoods where institutionalized education neither existed nor was the individual or community norm. However, since formal education was introduced and became compulsory to these villages, their life courses have been changed, as formal schooling has gradually been taken into their account of life expectations.

The second aspect was sojourn, in which the village youths left their communities to work and to live in Thai cities while keeping in contact with their families at home and participating in village events as they could. In these past few years, working and living outside their home villages became much more possible and even popular among young people due to obtaining literacy and experiencing mainstream Thai ways of life from various channels. In these past few years, some youths in those villages, through their ethnic social networks, went to work abroad in countries such as Taiwan and South Korea with hopes for higher wages and for better lives for their families. This phenomenon became a “fashion” among young highland people and will likely continue in the near future. Youths who used to work or have worked in foreign countries showed the financial benefits of working overseas to other villagers. The lucrative revenues from working abroad became a challenge for higher education. As it motivated young people to pursue middle school, it also drove them to pursue vocational school, which helped to prepare them for working abroad after middle school, rather than high school, which geared them toward college education. Seeking alternative livelihoods among highland
youths was driven by education, the limited availability of lands for farming, and their desire for a better standard of living.

The third common aspect among the five villages was poor educational preparation. This issue has long been challenging, not only in those five communities, but also throughout other highland communities in Thailand. Parents complained about their children not being able to read and write well, while college students from those villages complained that the education they had received from village schools had imposed academic challenges when they continued their education in Thai schools. Among many other problems, language barriers and a highly standardized core curriculum were the major factors contributing to poor school preparation in the five villages. Highland students spoke their native languages at home and had limited opportunities to learn and practice the mainstream Thai language, which was used as the language of instruction. Assistance programs, such as bilingual program, were minimally developed to assist highland children to learn the Thai language better and to do well in other subjects that required Thai language competency. In addition, the highly standardized national curriculum was required for all students. This curriculum overlooked how highlander students’ existing experiences and circumstances such as ethnicity, ways of life, village settings, languages, and cultures could make different in their learning abilities and academic performances. If public education does little more than provide greater access to primary school education, highlander students in early childhood will still continue to face difficulties in learning. These difficulties will affect the students’ future learning success. The extended difficulty in learning will have an effect on academic preparation that may have significant impacts on the probability of highlander students pursing
middle and high school and also passing the national entrance examination in order to secure places in universities. Highlander students with poor academic preparations will consequently be excluded from enjoying the privileges of higher levels of education, especially college education.
CHAPTER 5

KEY DETERMINANTS FOR SUCCESSFUL COLLEGE ACCESS: MICRO-LEVEL FACTORS

This study focuses on first-generation highlander college students and their preconditions to college access. These twenty-three students had minority ethnic backgrounds and came from low-income families, but they beat the odds and successfully made it to college as the first in their families. (See Table 2 in Chapter Three for their background information). The analysis indicated five key determinants, or factors, contributing to their successful college access as shown in Figure 5. These key factors are grouped into two different categories: micro-level factors and macro-level factors. Parental support, significant others, and students resilience are micro-level factors. The other two key factors, student loans and college admission quotas (or the highlander quota) for highland ethnic minorities, are macro-level influences. However, this chapter will only present and discuss micro-level factors. The macro-level factors will be presented in the next chapter, Chapter Six.

Figure 5. Key determinants
Parental Support

Parents have significant influences in their children’s education, starting from early childhood. The parents’ education is especially regarded as a key that plays a vital role in the children’s obtaining education at any level and in the success of the children’s education. Part of this effect occurs because educational benefits accumulate to individuals and become obvious in subsequent generations (Choy, 2001). This suggests that the higher the parents’ educations, the better off their children are in terms of educational opportunities, access, and success. Parental education is viewed to play even more significant roles in terms of college access and success for students. However, the education of parents does not apply in the cases of the student participants in this study, since none of their parents had college educations. The majority of the parents had third grade education or less or had no education at all, while only one out of the forty-six parents had a ninth-grade education. The parents in this study could not advance their children with knowledge, experience, or credentials obtained from secondary school education or higher education. However, these parents made significant efforts in several ways to support their children’s education and to make college possible for their children.

Lament as an educational strategy. The first common approach used by the majority of parents from all five ethnic groups was lament in life as a strategy to encourage their children to pursue higher education. Most of the parents in the study were from ethnic minorities, had traditional farming backgrounds, and had either very limited education or no education at all. The parents’ laments about their hardships from being farmers and not having education were expressed in both in student and parent interviews. The stories of Gaem’s parents, Ranee’s parents, Sorn’s mother, and Mon’s
parents will illustrate how parents utilize lamentation as an educational strategy to make their children see the importance of education and to encourage their children to pursue education. Gaem, a female Hmong student from a Hmong village in the Mae Hong Son province, is currently a fourth-year student in science education. Gaem’s mother is about forty-five years old; she is a hardworking mother of six children. The first two children are studying at Northern University (NU), the third and fourth children are in high school, the fifth child is in middle school, and the last child is in primary school. Gaem’s mother is the oldest child in her family and finished only the third grade, which was the highest school grade that was available in her village at that time, while Gaem’s father finished the sixth grade. Gaem’s mother became a farmer like her parents at young age and helped with taking care of younger siblings. She also got married at young age. Gaem’s mother told the researcher that she wanted to study beyond the third grade, but she could not follow her desire. Her parents could not afford additional schooling and knew very little about schools and places outside the village. The village was also far from lowland villages where schools were located. Even thought she had very little education and had lived in the village, for most of her life, Gaem’s mother spoke the standard Thai language quite fluently. Gaem’s father was also the oldest child of a family with many children. He finished only the sixth grade and became a farmer like his parents at a very young age. Gaem’s father was a former village headman, and he went to Japan a few years ago with a group of Thai officers to learn about the Japanese governance system. Gaem’s father did not have the opportunity to pursue secondary school because his family was poor and they needed him to help them work in the field.
Gaem’s parents had very limited education, but they both emphasized the importance of education for their children. They wanted their children to go to school and obtain education at the highest levels they could achieve and not become farmers like them. Gaem’s parents tried their best to provide support to their children. When the children came back home during weekends or school breaks, the parents took the children to work at the farms, instead of allowing them just to stay at home. So, the children learned to work in the fields and learn how hard it was to be a farmer. Gaem’s parents also used this opportunity to tell the stories of difficulties in their past and present lives to urge their children to pursue higher education. As Gaem’s mother stated:

I teach them as a mother. If we don’t support them to get an education, they won’t have a future…I told my children, you go to school. Don’t become like me. I didn’t have a chance to go to school, so I have to work in the farms. When we planted vegetables at the farm, we looked up in the sky and there was only sun on the sky, no rain. We asked the rain to come, but the rain wouldn’t come. When we wanted to transport vegetables to sell in the lowland markets, the roads were bad because it was raining. We wanted the rain to stop and wanted the sun to shine, but the rain wouldn’t stop and the sun wouldn’t shine. You have to go school. You go to work in the private sector or work as a government civil servant, so you won’t get wet in the rain or exposed to the sun. And my children said to me, “Yes, it’s true. If we do as our mother said, we won’t become like her.”

The above passage shows that Kang’s mother pointed out the difficulty of being a farmer to her children: that farming was an uncertain occupation that depended entirely on uncontrollable rain and sun. On the one hand, the story was told to discourage the children from becoming farmers. On the other hand, the story was told to urge the children to pursue a higher-level education that would lead them to different occupations, and ultimately to better lives.

Ranee is a female Akha student in political science from Chiang Rai province. Ranee’s parents were also farmers who grew corn and other vegetables as well as coffee.
Neither of Ranee’s parents went to school. However, Ranee’s father knew how to write his name and could speak the northern Thai dialect, while his mother barely spoke either the central Thai or the northern Thai dialect. Ranee’s parents, like Gaem’s parents, helped to look after younger siblings and became farmers when they were young. Ranee’s father worked on a farm and sent one of his younger siblings to school until she acquired a bachelor degree. Similarly, as the first child in her family, Ranee’s mother cared for younger siblings and supported one of her younger brothers to obtain a college degree. This brother, in turn, gave assistance to Ranee while she was attending secondary school. Ranee’s parents had three children. The oldest child, who was slightly disabled, finished the eighth grade, and the second child finished middle school and then pursued a high school education through non-formal ways. Both of Ranee’s brothers lived in the village and helped their parents work on the farms. Raree’s father and mother wanted Ranee to obtain a high level of education. They repeatedly told her that they supported her efforts to go to school because they did not want her to have difficult life like them. Ranee helped her parents work at the farms whenever she returned home during weekends or school breaks. She acknowledged that the work her parents did was hard and demanded strenuous physical labor. In addition to learning how difficult farming work was, Ranee also learned how much or how little income her parents generated each year from farming. For many students, including Ranee, going to school or college seemed to be a way for them to escape from the hard, physical labor work on the farm.

The mother of Sorn, a male Mien student in political science, is another example of a parent who used the hardship in her life to inspire her child to value and pursue education. As stated earlier, the majority of highlander parents had third-grade educations
or did not attend school at all due to various reasons. Some of the parents said in the old times, there were no schools available in their villages or in nearby villages. Some parents said they were the first child in their families, so they had to help their parents work on the farms or give childcare to younger siblings. Also, for some women, they were not allowed to go to school because of their parents’ attitudes about women and education. As a Mien mother stated:

I did not go to school. My father told me it is useless for women to go study… In the old time, my family was conservative like the Chinese. They said women got education and didn’t know what to do with education. It’s useless to go get education. The school was also far away. I went to apply for school, but my family did not allow me to go to school. I sarcastically said to them, “You want my labor, you don’t want to lose my labor, you are afraid that I won’t help you work and afraid of starvation if I don’t help you work.” Nowadays, I still think about saying such sarcastic things to my father. My father did not allow me to go to school. That’s why I am silly until at present time. My husband told me, “Don’t say that. How meritorious it was that they gave birth to you.”

Sorn’s mother was a daughter in a Mien family with several children, and she is now a mother of four children. Her first child had a middle school education and became a farmer like her. The second child was Sorn. The third child was a girl who was attending middle school at a public school in Phayao province. The last child was a third-grade boy who was attending a primary school near the village. As shown in the above excerpt, Sorn’s mother wanted to go to school, but her father did not allow her to do so. She, like the majority of the parents of the student participants, pitched in and helped her parents care for her younger siblings, began to work at the farm at early age, and stayed in the village for most of her life. The passage also indicates that she lamented for not having the opportunity to attend even primary school. Sorn’s mother valued education. She wanted of all her children to acquire education and not become people who could not
read or write like her. She wished for her children to realize her unfulfilled dream and tried her best to support her children so they could be educated.

Similarly, Ming’s father used his past and present life circumstances to encourage Ming to pursue education. Ming was a male Hmong student from the Nan province. At the time of the interview, Ming was in his second year as an English major in the College of Humanities. Ming’s parents were farmers who generated limited income from farming corn, rice, and fruits such as lychee. His father finished middle school, while his mother finished only the fourth grade. Ming’s father and mother wanted to have additional education, but their parents’ financial situation did not allow them to pursue such dreams. Ming’s parents had limited knowledge and experience in school, but when Ming showed his interest and desire in pursuing further education after finishing primary school, his parents, especially his father, willingly encouraged Ming to follow his dream, even though Ming had to locate and apply for school by himself. Ming’s father regretted that he did not have the opportunity to attain more education. He often told Ming that he wanted Ming to have a higher level of education, and he also wanted Ming to have a secure occupation and not become a poor farmer like him. The father repetitively told Ming about his expectations for Ming to obtain an advanced education. His father’s sorrow for not having his own desired education and his father’s limited earnings from farming became the key encouragement for Ming not only to continue school, but also to work hard and succeed in school.

By and large, the stories of the parents illustrated above indicate that parents’ grief over their hard lives and their unfulfilled dreams in education, in turn, had effects on their children. These laments became the motivation that impelled their children to work
hard in school and do well in studying from primary school, secondary school, and then to college. Such internalized motivation made the students want to obtain college degrees, want to make their parents proud of them, and want to secure jobs with good salaries. The children had a desire to look after their parents and even help reduce the financial burdens of their parents by providing financial support to help their parents send other children in the family to acquire more education.

**Provide financial support.** The second common strategy that the majority of parents across different ethnic groups utilized was to provide financial support to their children, as their financial resource allowed. As stated earlier, the majority of parents were farmers who grew cash crops such as corn and vegetables on mountain slopes and their farming success relied heavily on unpredictable rainfall. Even though the students’ parents did not generate much income from farming, they were willing to supply money for school expenses to their children. Parental financial support was particularly significant during both secondary school and college.

Pla’s adoptive parents illustrate how ethnic minority parents help their children to acquire education. Pla, a second-year student majoring in home and community, is a Lahu student from a very small Lahu village in the Chiang Rai province. Pla was originally born in a Lahu village in Myanmar and was adopted by his aunt and her husband, since their two biological children had died from epidemics. At that time, there were frequent epidemics in the village areas and Pla was often sick. When Pla was about three years old, his foster parents decided to sell their land and cattle in Myanmar and migrate to the Chiang Rai province of Thailand to establish new lives. In addition to Pla, his foster parents had also adopted two other children from their relatives in Myanmar.
One child was a boy who attended middle school at one of the boarding schools in Chiang Rai, while the other child was a girl in the first grade who was attending a public school located in a northern Thai village.

Pla received his first- and second-grade education from a non-formal school in the village. With this setting, students from different age groups studied in the same classroom and students were taught only the Thai language and basic math. Pla outperformed the other students in the class. The teacher saw talent in him and wanted him to attend a formal school rather than a non-formal school. The teacher talked to Pla’s parents, helped locate a school, and managed the necessary paperwork to transfer Pla to a public school in a northern Thai village. Pla was placed in the third grade even though he had learned only Thai and math, not other subjects, and he hardly spoke Thai. Pla kept himself quiet and hardly talked to non-ethnic students. It took him a year before he became well adjusted to the new school, to new friends, and to studying. During his primary school years, Pla stayed at a dormitory near the school with other ethnic students, since travelling back and forth was less possible due to the long distance, poor road conditions, and lack of public and private transportation. During his interview, Pla’s adoptive father told the researcher that when Pla moved to the new school, he was very poor. He raised pigs and ginger for income, but the prices were very low, and the family hardly made living. As a result, Pla had only one set of school uniforms, since his parents did not have money to buy another set of uniforms for him. Pla said, “I had only one school uniform. I washed and let it dry in the evening and wore it again in the next morning. On some days, it was not dried well, and I wore it damp.” Pla’s father
remembered this story well because he accompanied Pla at the dormitory for the first few days. He said he really sympathized with his son.

Pla’s parents wanted their son to continue school. They did not give up supporting their son’s education even thought their financial status was very strained. They found ways to earn extra income to pay for Pla’s school expenses by collecting and selling pine sticks, which were used as fire starters, to Northern Thai buyers, as Pla’s father stated in the interview:

In the old times, we did not have enough rice to eat. We were very poor. We gave Pla about 20 baht ($0.62) per week. The money was from selling pine sticks. Collecting and carrying pine sticks (from the forest) were very hard. We had to carry pine sticks in the evening because there were police during the daytime. We could not carry pine sticks during daytime. Together, we (i.e., husband and wife), got 60 bahts ($2) from selling the pine sticks, and we gave 30 baths ($1) to him…when we had money, we helped him. But when we did not have money, he helped himself. We were very sympathetic to him.

Pla also remembered another story his father had told the researcher. Pla said when he was in primary school; his parents gave him about 60 baht ($2) or 20 baht ($0.62) when he came back to the village during weekends. If he did not come back home, there was no way for him to get money from them. Pla’s parents continued providing their little income from farming or collecting pine sticks to support Pla for his school expenses throughout primary and secondary school. Pla knew that his parents had very little money, so while he was in secondary school, he tried to reduce the financial burden on them by applying to stay at a well-established private dormitory founded by a Japanese philanthropist, which was located near his school. Pla’s father helped locate this dormitory setting, which he had learned about from other Lahu. This dormitory provided free meals and lodging, and the dormitory staff tried to help find scholarships for all student residents. The dormitory fees required the parents to contribute about 2,000 baht
($67) per semester. This cost was much lower compared to other settings. Pla’s parents helped Pla pay for the dormitory fee, even though they could not always pay it on time. When Pla was in high school, both of his parents began to have health issues that made them generate less revenue from farming, but they still continued to provide financial support to Pla as much as possible. Pla’s story is a striking example that shows one of the important roles that parents play in their children’s education.

Overall, the interview data from all the college goers and from their parents indicated that financial resources from parents played an important role in primary school, secondary school, and college. However, the financial burden on parents decreased slightly during high school and college, because student loans and scholarships were available for students at upper secondary and post-secondary schools. The majority of the first-generation college students in this study, except for one Lahu student, attended public schools throughout their primary and secondary school years. Most of them received primary education from public schools located in their village or nearby. The majority of students in their primary schools were also ethnic minority students from the same ethnic group or different ethnic groups. For middle school, some students attended nearby public schools, while others attended schools that were far away from their villages. Some of the students chose to attend boarding schools supported by the government and patronized by the Thai Royal Family or schools that provided free dormitories since their parents were poor. Attending public schools was one of the ways that made pathways to college for these first-generation students possible because the public schools cost much less than private schools, since the Thai government provided substantial funds for public schools. Nevertheless, the students were still responsible for
other expenses such as clothing, food, transportation, and personal items. So, the students still had to rely on financial resources such as their parents to pay for their school expenses.

**Preventive efforts.** The third way that parents of first-generation college students supported their children’s education was to minimize the possible impacts of early-age marriage that might have had negative influences on their children’s pathways to college. In Chapter Four I provided the context for the traditional customs of five different villages and also discussed the three key issues that were found across the five villages, according to the researcher’s home visits and the individual student interviews. One of the major issues was early-age marriage among young highlanders. This kind of marriage took place among youths during or right after primary, middle, or high school. There were two forms of marriage that appeared to be common, according to the data analysis. One type of marriage was when young people voluntarily agreed to get married with the inevitable approval of the parents. Some college students called this ‘a fashion,’ in which young people get married when their friends or other youths in their villages get married. The other type of marriage occurred when female youths involuntarily got married because of culture-specific marriage customs. The first form of marriage took place among young people across all five ethnic groups, but the latter form occurred only with the Hmong ethnic group.

All college students said in the individual interviews that early-age marriage was common in their communities. Some of them gave examples of their siblings, while others gave examples of their primary school classmates or other young people. Singh, a male Lahu student majoring in public administration, had experience with this issue.
Singh had two younger sisters who were nineteen and seventeen years old. Both of his sisters could not finish even primary school because both of them got married and dropped out of school during their last year of the primary school. The sisters became farmers. The nineteen-year-old sister lived at her husband’s house, while the seventeen-year-old sister and her husband lived with Singh’s parents. Singh said most of young people in his village got married at early ages. He also pointed out some teenagers in his village could not attend school because their parents were poor. They could not go to work as wage laborers in the cities since they were too young and lacked experience for working and living in the cities, so, they ended up living in the village, getting married, and becoming farmers like their parents. As stated in Chapter Four, living and farming in the village had become problematic because fewer lands were available as the village population increased, and the young people could not clear more land for farming as villagers did in the old times due to new land regulations. If they cleared land illegally, they would have been arrested and fined several thousand baht. This was true for Singh’s village. When some villagers were too poor, they turned to drug dealing for additional income. These individual dealers caused several highland groups to be blamed for drug trafficking by mainstream Thais. In addition, Pong, a male Hmong student majoring in business, said some of his primary school classmates got married right after graduation, while others went on to middle school, but got married along the way or right after graduation. Only Pong and another female classmate were not married and were attending college.

However, it is important to note that early-age marriage is not a new phenomenon among highland communities. In fact, it has existed throughout the history of highland
ethnic minorities in Thailand. Historically, early-age marriages were viewed to be a traditional way of life that was beneficial to the farming economy, since the marriage increased the number of laborers in either the male or the female household. However, many highlander parents and students feel the current changing economy and the new context of education are now driving early marriages to be one of the factors that constitute a barrier for continued education and other successful endeavors, as Singh pointed out. The early-age marriage fashion was seen to possibly undermine the likelihood that students from the villages would attend secondary school and high school and eventually go to college in order to gain social and economic mobility. In Thailand, attending formal secondary schools and colleges is not common among adolescents that are already married. Youths who dropped out of school to get married could pursue their studies through non-formal education tracks through weekend or evening programs, which charged little or no tuition and fees. Highlander parents who desired their children to continue beyond primary school education saw that early-age marriages would undermine their children’s pursuit of education. What most of the parents did was to regularly emphasis the importance of education to their children and family, to keep their children from socializing with young people who dropped out of school, and to encourage their children to consider marriage after they graduated from upper-secondary school.

The early-age marriage custom became even more critical when it was tied to cultural practices rather than just ‘a fashion’ among young people. This situation only occurred among the Hmong people. The Akha, Karen, Lahu, Hmong, and Mien had their own unique marriage practices, but what made the Hmong distinctive from other
ethnic groups was its practice of ‘bride abduction or kidnapping.’ The bride abduction involved the kidnapping of a girl by the prospective husband with assistance from his male friends or relatives, but without the girl’s personal consent or her family’s approval (Moua, 2003). The bride kidnapping took place while the girl was away from her home and alone by herself. The boy’s parents would then inform the girl’s parents about their son’s intention to marry the daughter. After receiving the news, the girl’s parents could demand for the abductor’s family to release their daughter immediately, or they could simply accept the abduction of their daughter as an alternative way for their daughter and her prospective husband to get married. This kind of acceptance would likely take place if the boy and the girl had already had sexual intercourse that may lead to the girl’s pregnancy. Moreover, although the girl’s parents could reject the marriage, the refusal was less possible if the abductor were a distant relative of the girl’s parents.

The alternative path of marriage is slowly disappeared in many Hmong communities in Thailand. However, this practice existed when Gaem, a female Hmong student from a very remote village in Mae Hong Son province, was in secondary school. Gaem and her parents expressed their concern over this marriage custom. This concern was especially serious when Gaem was toward the end of lower-secondary school and at the beginning of upper-secondary school, the time in which most young people in her village got married. Gaem’s parents had six children: five daughters and one son. Gaem was the oldest child of the family. Her parents hoped all their children would pursue education to the highest levels they could. Gaem’s parents knew about the ‘abduction’ marriage practice and had seen several examples throughout their lives. They were concerned about their teenager daughters, especially Gaem, over the bride kidnapping
practice that existed in the village at that time. Gaem’s parents also realized the consequences of such a practice on future of their children’s education. Gaem’s father said, “We, the Hmong people, get married quite early. There is a ‘chain’ too. If we don’t give our daughter to them, it is not good, right? Especially if that boy is our relative.”

One of the strategies Gaem’s father used in dealing with this issue was to make his children, including Gaem, attend schools that had fewer Hmong students in order to keep his daughters away from other Hmong students, especially Hmong boys. After completing the sixth grade from a school in her village, Gaem continued her studies at a school located in the district, which had a great number of Hmong students. Gaem’s father was concerned about the marriage issue that might possibly occur with his daughter. As a result, after her first academic year in secondary school, he decided to transfer Gaem to one of the well-known public schools that had very few Hmong students. Likewise, Gaem’s mother also expressed her concern over the bride kidnapping marriage as follows:

Hmong has a ‘chain.’ Our daughter is a good girl. If our daughter went out or did not stay at home, she could possibly get involved in the bride kidnapping. But if our daughter stayed at home, they could not kidnap her… A lot of young people got married during the summer (i.e., many school students come back to the village during summer break since it was a long school break). Our daughter was a good girl. If they wanted her, they could kidnap her. I was afraid of that.

Gaem was a smart, hard-working, pretty girl. It was reasonable for Gaem’s parents to be concerned about her. Gaem’s mother and father tried to avoid the incident happening with their daughter. What they did was take Gaem with them wherever they went, even taking Gaem and her siblings to the farms with them, instead of letting them stay at home alone. In situations when Gaem needed to stay at home, her mother told Gaem to only stay at home and not go out or wander around the village. Gaem’s mother
said, “If they saw her, they could kidnap her.” The story about bride kidnapping told by Gaem’s parents corresponded to what Gaem shared in the one-on-one interview and in the focus group interview. She acknowledged that young people in her village got married relatively early, as early as the seventh or the eighth grade. She, like her parents, was aware that bride kidnapping was one factor that might contribute to such early marriage among young people in her village. She viewed this alternative way of marriage as a forced marriage, as she stated, “It is like kidnapping a person, stealing a person, something like that.” Gaem thought that it was less possible for the girl who was kidnapped to prosecute the boy. If the girl did that, it meant the girl denied the cultural practice of bride abduction. She realized how such practice created threatening circumstances to her as a Hmong girl as she affirmed:

I think I am Hmong. I had to have very strong determination all the way from the seventh grade through the twelfth grade. That’s because my village had a custom about bride kidnapping. I was afraid of this practice since I was in the seventh grade until the twelfth grade.

When Gaem went back home during the summer, which was a time where many young people got married, she mainly stayed quietly at home and did not wander around the village, as she had been instructed by her parents. She did this in order to keep herself away from being involved in bride abduction. Gaem knew that this practice of this alternative path of marriage concerned her parents. She appreciated what her parents tried to do in order to keep her away her from such a marriage custom. She believed that having a good father and mother was a special opportunity that she had, which other children in her village did not have. Gaem pointed out that in her village people who had thoughts about sending children to school as her parents did were very few. She also denoted that most of the parents thought that their girls had to get married anyway. The
daughters did not belong to the parents; so the parents had to give the girls to others (i.e., their future husbands). Gaem believed that Hmong girls obeyed what the parents told them. Because the daughters had to obey to what their parents tell them, their futures depended on what their parents wanted their children to do. If the parents told the girl to get married, the girl would get married. If the parents told the girl not to get married, but go to study instead, the girl would then go to study. In more recent times the practice of bride kidnapping in Gaem’s village has considerably disappeared with changes in economic, educational, and culture. Kang’s parents, nevertheless, still told all their daughters to stay at home whenever they came back to the village to avoid being involved in the early-age marriage issue. The week that the researcher visited Gaem’s village, all of her siblings had returned home for the weekend. The researcher noticed that some of Gaem’s siblings went with their parents to work on the vegetable farms, while some of them stayed at home to look after the youngest child and do house chores. The ones that stayed at home mainly stayed inside the house. I did not see them, except the youngest girl, hanging out or playing with other teenagers in the village. When the daughters left the house, they only went to their relatives’ houses. Since there were six young people, they just played among themselves in the evenings or watched television together.

**Significant Others**

Significant others play important roles in facilitating college access for first-generation highlander college students. A significant other is a person who is influential in one’s life. The significant others who appeared in this study were diverse and included siblings, teachers, relatives, school staff, and non-profit organization (NGO) workers. It is
important to note that most of college goers in this study had more than one significant others more. They, rather, had a combination of two or three significant others, for examples, a sibling and a teacher; a teacher and a school staff member; or a sibling, an NGO worker, and a teacher. The combinations depended on the availability of the significant others and the life circumstances around the students.

**Who are the significant others?**

**Siblings.** Siblings play important roles in the successful college access and persistence of many highlander college students. College students who had siblings reported that they often received support, such as financial support and encouragement, from their older or younger siblings. I will demonstrate the role of siblings by using the case of Yong, a male Hmong student, and Nat, a male Karen student. Yong was a second-year student majoring in social science, and he was from one of the biggest Hmong villages in the Nan province. Yong’s parents did not go to school, and they were divorced when he was in the first grade. Later, each parent remarried and had new children. Yong and his three siblings from the same parents lived with his mother. Yong’s older brother, who had only a fifth-grade education, got married, had his own family, and worked as a construction worker in the Saraburi province. Yong’s younger brother dropped out during middle school and went to work at a restaurant in the city of Chiang Mai. Yong’s youngest sibling, a girl, was studying in the tenth grade at Yong’s former high school. Yong’s mother and his stepfather were farmers raising corn, lychee, and rice. Yong attended a middle school and a high school located near his village. During high school, he took out a student loan to pay for his tuition fees and related school expenses. However, there were some expenses that the student loan did not cover. So, in addition to
his mother and stepfather, Yong’s brothers, especially the younger brother, provided financial support to Yong. When Yong was short of money, he either asked for money or borrowed money from his parents and brothers. Yong said, “When I didn’t have money, I called him (i.e., his younger brother) on the phone to borrow money…this summer I called him to ask for money for summer school’s expenses.”

Nat’s case was similar to Yong’s situation. Nat was from a geographically and socially remote Karen village in the Mae Hong Son province. Nat’s parents did not go to school and they were farmers raising cash crops such as yellow beans and rice. Nat had three siblings, an older sister, an older brother, and a younger brother. His older sister had a sixth-grade education. She married a Karen man from a different village and had two daughters. Nat’s sister was a village headman. Nat’s older brother finished the fifth grade and left school for work. A few years before he got married, he went to a non-formal education program and completed high school, and then he went to work teaching basic literacy to remote Karen communities in Mae Hong Son. He also attended a community college during the weekend and hoped to pursue Bachelor degree. Nat’s younger sibling finished middle school and helped his parents work on the farm. A few years later he decided to pursue high school through a non-formal education program and obtained a high school certificate.

Nat, like Yong, acknowledged that his older siblings, especially his older sister, helped provide support for his education. Nat attended a middle school and a high school that were far away from his village, and he stayed at dormitory provided by the schools. Since both of the schools were largely funded by the Thai government, Nat was not required to pay tuition fees, but he was required to pay some other fees. Nat was like
Yong—when he was in high school, he took out a student loan to pay for his personal expenses. However, the student loan did not cover all related school expenses. So, his sister helped him pay for the expenses not covered by the student loan. Nat’s brothers could not help Nat out as much his sister, but they gave some portion of money they earned to their parents for household expenses. The financial support from his siblings became even more vital for Nat when he considered attending college. While Nat was applying for college, he was concerned over the cost of college attendance. He knew that a student loan alone would be inadequate to pay for all the costs, and his parents did not generate enough income from farming to fund his college study. Nat decided to discuss his financial concerns with his sister. She assured Nat that she would support him for his college education if he wished to pursue it as she did for Nat during secondary school. This assurance from his sister played important roles in Nat’s decision about whether to pursue college. He carefully considered which college he should attend while keeping in mind his two main financial resources: student loans and his sister. Nat’s sister kept her promise and provided Nat with financial support throughout his undergraduate study. Without assistance from his older sister, Nat would have faced considerable financial challenges in attending college.

During the NU semester break, the researcher traveled to Nat’s home village to interview his parents and siblings. One of the questions the researcher asked Nat’s older sister was why she supported him to pursue higher education. She quickly responded, “I wanted him to have a better future, have a better occupation, not to work in the farm, and be able to take care of himself.” The reasons she stated were very similar to the reasons that most highlander parents identified as shown in the section of parental support.
Another reason that Nat’s sister supported Nat to pursue college was because none of her family or relatives had gone to college or had secured college degrees. She wanted Nat to be a representative of the family in securing a college degree.

*Teachers.* Teachers from primary or secondary schools played vital roles in the educational journeys and achievements of many highlander college students. Teachers made a difference in the lives of students who were the oldest child of the family and younger children of the family. The story of Pam is used here to show the role of teacher. Pam, a third-year student majoring in social studies education was from one of the biggest Akha villages in the Chiang Rai province. The description of her village was presented in Chapter Four. Pam’s parents were farmers, raising corn, tomatoes, rice, and more recently, and coffee. Pam’s father had a third-grade education and could speak Thai to some extent, while her mother neither went to school nor spoke Thai. Pam was the oldest child of the family, and she had three sisters and one little brother. She received her primary and middle school education from a school located in her village. Pam had originally planned to continue vocational school after middle school as other youths in the village did. With the advice and support from a teacher at her village school, Pam continued her study at one of the renowned public schools of Chiang Rai. Pam’s acknowledgment of the important role of her teacher appeared both in the individual interview and in the focus group interview. In the individual interview, she stated, “The teacher is important. If there were not that teacher, there would be no me today.” In the focus group interview, Pam shared with other peers what the teacher meant for her and for her education:

The teacher is the most helpful person. The teacher made me able to continue studying. That was because my parents did not go to school and they did not
know things much. But the main factor that supported me was the teacher. The teacher was the one who helped me do paperwork (i.e., high school application) and other things that I didn’t know.

Pam had known the teacher for several years before the teacher really became her significant other. The teacher was a kindergartner teacher at her primary and middle school. When Pam was in the last semester of her ninth grade, she was thinking about continuing school beyond middle school. She initially planned to attend vocational school like most of the senior students who had graduated from the same school. However, Pam also looked for other alternatives. Pam personally knew a non-formal education teacher who came to provide classes in the village during the weekend. Pam expressed her ideas and concerns about going for more school to this teacher. This teacher knew most of the teachers at Pam’s school, and she decided to talk to the kindergarten teacher about Pam’s situation. The kindergarten teacher knew Pam, and she also knew that Pam was one of the students who had high academic achievement in the class, so she suggested Pam should take the entrance exam for one of the best public schools in the Chiang Rai province, and Pam should also apply for vocational school. Pam said she had lived in the village for most of her life. She did not know much about things outside the village, and she did not know how to use a computer to search the Internet for information about schools. Because of her lack of knowledge, Pam asked the teacher to get the school application form for her, since the teacher lived near the city. In addition to getting the application form for her, the teacher also helped Pam to fill out and submit the application form, gave her a ride to the examination location, and accompanied her on the examination day. Pam had been to the city, but she did not really know the area well. On the examination day, Pam said she was not sure whether she would pass the examination
and be accepted since it was competitive, but she wanted to give it a try. Luckily, Pam passed the test and was admitted to study at a school that had very few ethnic minority students. Pam’s new school was far from her village, and it was not possible for her to commute back and forth. Her teacher realized about this problem and helped her find a moderately priced and safe female dormitory located next to Pam’s school.

For Pam, the teacher became as her parents. When Pam had problems, she mainly talked to the teacher rather than her parents. She said her parents knew little about the city and school, and they also had to take care of her younger siblings. When Pam could not talk to the teacher for some issues, she turned to her friends instead. While Pam was in high school, her teacher gave birth to a child and needed someone to occasionally help her with taking care of the baby. Pam volunteered to help the teacher look after the baby as her schedule allowed. When Pam graduated from high school, Pam took her younger sister, who was attending a vocational school at that time, to live with the teacher. The teacher provided free housing, meals, and transportation to Pam’s younger sister. Pam’s sister, in turn, helped the teacher look after the baby and do housework. Pam’s parents also acknowledged the important role of the teacher in their daughters’ education. They appreciated the opportunities and assistance the teacher had given to their daughters.

**Relatives.** In addition to siblings and teachers, relatives, either close or distant, also shaped educational opportunities for some student participants. The students who had relatives with college degrees and who worked in the lowland areas were likely to receive support from their relatives. Gaem and Pong are examples. Gaem, a Hmong student, had three relatives with bachelor degrees. One relative was her father’s younger brother, while the other two relatives were her mother’s younger sisters. When Gaem was
in middle school, her parents brought her to stay with her aunt, who had a reasonable income. Gaem’s aunt allowed Gaem to stay at her place, which was close to Gaem’s school, and she also provided meals and some daily expenses to Gaem. In addition to providing safe housing and meals, Gaem’s aunt also gave her advice about school and shared her college story with Gaem, which inspired Gaem to dream about college.

Pong, a Hmong student, provided another example that showed the role of relatives in facilitating educational opportunities for students. Pong was from a Hmong village in the Mae Rim district of Chiang Mai province. Pong’s parents were farmers who grew vegetables such as cabbages and carrots. Pong’s father finished the fourth grade while his mother finished only the second grade. Pong had three siblings. His older brother finished middle school and worked in the city of Chiang Mai, while his younger sister studied in the twelfth grade at Pong’s former high school. Pong’s parents did not have a high level of schooling, but they had worked to support their younger siblings to obtain college degrees. Pong had six relatives who already had earned bachelor’s degrees: two people from his mother’s side and another four people from his father’s side. Even though he had several relatives with college degrees, only two of them, an older cousin and uncle, were willing to assist him with continuing his pursuit in education. These two relatives became important resources for Pong, since his parents had limited knowledge and experience with the higher educational system. One of Pong’s relatives was an older cousin from his mother’s side. This relative mainly assisted Pong with information about high school and university admission after middle school. When Pong was in middle school, he planned to go on to high school, but he did not know where to go for high school. So, he talked over about this issue with his cousin, who was studying
at NU at that time. His cousin recommended for Pong to study at Mae Rim Witthayakom School, which was a public district school. In addition to giving advice, the cousin also took him to the school to fill out the application form and also accompanied Pong on the day he took the school entrance examination. While attending high school, Pong consistently kept in touch with his cousin. When Pong was in the last year of high school, he planned to pursue college and considered possible academic majors and higher education institutions that he wanted to attend. Pong knew that his parents could not provide him with guidance on how to select a major or apply for college, so he turned to his cousin, as he had done when he was in middle school. Pong learned from his ethnic friends about the highlander quota program at NU and he wanted to apply for it. However, before he made a final decision to apply for the quota, he talked the matter over with his cousin and asked for advice. His cousin was very familiar with the quota program. He encouraged Pong to apply, since the quota program offered scholarships for four consecutive years of study. Pong’s cousin also offered Pong a study guide for the examination. Consequently, Pong applied for this quota. He passed the examination and was admitted to study at NU through the highlander quota admission program.

The second relative who became a significant other for Pong was his uncle, who was a younger brother of his father. Pong was admitted to study at a high school recommended by his older cousin, but the school was far away from his village. He needed to find a place to live that was closer to the school, so his parents decided to talk to Pong’s uncle, who was a math teacher at a small public school near Pong’s high school, about the possibility for Pong to stay at his home. Pong’s uncle was willing to assist Pong. He not only offered Pong free housing, but he also provided free meals and
advice about school, as well as counseling on personal problems. Pong, in exchange, helped his relative do household chores, including cleaning the house, washing the dishes, weeding the garden, and watering plants.

**School staff.** In addition to siblings, teachers, relatives, and NGO workers, school staff members were also regarded as significant others who contributed to the successful educational journeys of several highlander students. The stories of Pam and Ake can illustrate this strategy. In addition to her middle school teacher, Pam also had another significant other who was a female staff member at the dormitory where Pam lived while attending high school. Pam called her ‘Mae Baan.’ Mae Baan is defined as a housekeeper or a housewife. In Pam’s case, it means a housekeeper. Pam regarded Mae Baan as a respectable and supportive person. Pam had left the dormitory three years earlier, but she still occasionally visited Mae Baan. During the field work, the researcher traveled with Pam to visit Mae Baan in the city of Chiang Rai. A day before the visit, Pam called Mae Baan to let her know about the visit. Around noon of the next day, Pam and the researcher arrived at the dormitory. Pam and Mae Baan were happy to see each other again. During lunch, Pam and Mae Baan talked about their good times in the old days and several things they used to do together at the dormitory such as cooking and gardening. Mae Baan also told Pam that she was very glad that Pam had successfully made it to college and that she very proud of Pam. Mae Baan told Pam that she looked forward to seeing Pam accomplish much in her studies and looked forward the day that Pam graduated. Mae Baan knew Pam’s family quite well. She asked Pam about her parents and siblings. Mae Baan said she visited Pam’s village for a few times. She dated her first visit back to when the road to the village was an unpaved dirt road and how hard it was to
go up to Pam’s village during the rainy season, especially since there were only a few pickup trucks in the entire village. While Mae Baan talked about how nice and helpful Pam was and how smart she was, Pam talked about how much Mae Baan cared for her and other students. Pam remembered that Mae Baan had attended a parent–teacher conference for her. Pam’s parents lived in a remote mountainous village and only came to the city when it was necessary. Traveling to the city, especially during the rainy season, was difficult because of the road conditions and lack of public transportation. Her parents also knew very little of the standard Thai language. So, in addition to caring for Pam, Mae Baan attended parent-teacher conferences on behalf of her parents. For Pam, Mae Baan was friend, counselor, and caregiver.

Ake, a male Akha student, was another person who had a school staff worker (i.e., a school cook) as a significant other. Ake, a freshman majoring in economics, was from one of the biggest Akha villages in Chiang Rai province. Ake’s parents had not gone to school. Ake’s mother was a farmer, while his father worked in a factory in Taiwan after being in jail for six years due to drug trafficking. Ake was the oldest child of the family. He had three younger siblings, all of whom were attending school. After Ake finished primary school near his village, an older youth in the village suggested that Ake continue middle school at a welfare boarding school in Mae Jan district of Chiang Rai province. Ake originally wanted to go to other public schools, but he decided to attend the boarding school because his parents could not afford tuition, and he did not have Thai citizenship at that time. This boarding school’s goal was to provide free education to disadvantaged students, such as ethnic minority students. At the boarding school, Ake received a free education and free housing. When Ake first attended the boarding school, he faced social
adjustments because he had to live with students from different ethnic backgrounds, follow the dormitory rules, take charge of his own life, and adjust his way of studying.

Ake was a student who liked to assist teachers in many activities at school. He became a favored student among the teachers. One-on-one relationships with teachers at his school allowed him to gain assistance from the teachers that other students in the same school did not have. In addition, Ake also established a close relationship with one of the people who cooked meals for students at school dormitories. Ake called her ‘Mae Krua,’ which means a female cook. Mae Krua became a supportive person for him as he stated,

When I had problems, I went to talk to Mae Krua. I was very close to this Mae Krua. I went to see her whenever I had problems. I always was with her. I felt that she became like another mother. I consulted with her for almost everything. She was quite old…she helped me with the things where she could help.

Ake, when he was twelve years old, left his family and village to go to study and live at the boarding school. During the six years when Ake studied and lived at the school, Mae Krua was his informal mentor. This form of informal mentoring helped reduce Ake’s feelings of isolation during critical stages of his school life, supported his day-to-day challenges in living away from his family, and increased the likelihood of his middle and high school persistence. At the time of his interview, Ake still kept in touch with Mae Krua and occasionally talked to her on the phone.

In addition, as stated earlier, the college goers in this study tended to have more than one significant other. For examples, Pam had a teacher and Mae Baan, Yong had a teacher and siblings, and Gaem had a relative and teachers. To illustrate, in addition to her aunt as explained earlier, Gaem also had a few teachers as her significant others. Gaem was very close to several teachers, including a Hmong teacher. For Gaem, those
teachers were her mentors and counselors. When Gaem did not feel well or had personal or other problems, she talked to those teachers. She said the teachers always helped her to solve the problems she had faced. During high school, when Gaem was thinking and planning to pursue a university education, she needed someone to give her opinions and help her make decisions about the academic major she wanted to pursue and the educational institution she wanted to attend. Gaem knew that her parents wanted her to go to college, but they could not assist her with knowledgeable information and opinions about colleges and academic majors, so she sought advice from the teachers who knew about colleges, academic majors, and college life to make a final decision about her college plan.

**Significant others and support schemes.** The significant others assisted the students in several ways, including providing information about schools and colleges; building college-going aspirations; offering spiritual support; and providing financial support.

**Providing information and advice.** Providing information and advice about school was a way for significant others to assist college students. It is important to note that not every significant other could provide this kind of assistance. Significant others who had knowledge or experiences in educational systems, such as teacher and relatives who already held college degrees, could provide this form of assistance rather than a school cook or sibling who did not have college experiences. The information provided to college students includes choices of schools; school and college admission requirements; and information about tuition, fees, and other costs for attending college. Sometimes, students obtained information about school and college by themselves from other
sources, but they still needed opinions from their significant others to make their final decision. Pong’s case is an example. Pong learned about the high school he attended from his cousin, who was a college student at that time. When Pong was in his last semester of high school, he thought about applying for the highlander quota at NU. But, before he did so, he asked for advice from his older cousin to make sure that the quota system was one of the best college admission approaches for NU and whether Pong should try this approach.

*Providing financial assistance.* Providing financial support was another way that significant others assisted first-generation highlander college students. Significant others, such as teacher, siblings, and extended relatives, who had resources, assisted the students through financial means. The cases of Gaem and Pong are examples. Both of these students had relatives who had already graduated from college and worked in the cities where Gaem’s and Pong’s schools were located. Their relatives provided free housing and meals to both of them while they were attending school. The support from the relatives made a big difference for their chances to pursue high school, and later, opportunities that led them to apply for college. The help from relatives eased the financial burden on Gaem’s and Pong’s parents, who had only very uncertain and limited incomes from farming.

*Offering spiritual support.* In addition to providing information and financial support, the significant others also contributed to the success of college access for the students by giving encouragement or spiritual support to students. Encouragement is a form of emotional support. Receiving strong encouragement to pursue their education from middle school to high school and then to college was very important for students
from ethnic backgrounds and cultures that were distinctly different from the mainstream Thais and whose parents had very limited education and few resources to offer. Compared to the children of educated, well-to-do parents, the highlander children were at a disadvantaged position in terms of knowledge about school and educational opportunities. In addition, throughout their pathways to college, students face several kinds of difficulties along the way. These challenges include social adjustments, academic adjustments, financial obstacles, and even being teased about their ethnic backgrounds. The students faced these difficulties especially during their middle school years. Middle school was the period where some student participants left their families and their ethnic villages for the first time to attend middle schools located in the cities or in lowland Thai villages, which had different languages, ways of living, worldviews, and social and cultural settings. Students in this study worked hard to adapt to the new settings and made adjustments to live in the new environments. They overcame the obstacles and managed to make their way to college, while some of their friends decided not to make the greater effort. They dropped out of school and returned to their home villages instead. Thus, encouragement or spiritual support on various occasions from significant others helped to support and sustain their determination and efforts in pursuing education.

The story of Singh exemplifies the way that significant others provide spiritual support to highlander students and its positive impacts. Singh, a freshman student majoring in public administration, came from a remote village in the mountainous region of the Chiang Rai province. He was the only person out of the 400 people in his village who pursued college education. The parents of Singh were farmers and did not go to
school. His father could minimally speak the standard Thai language and northern Thai dialect, while his mother could speak neither the northern nor the central Thai dialects. Singh was the second child of the family. He had an older brother who had finished primary school thought non-formal education, and two younger sisters who had dropped out of primary school because of early marriages. Singh was the first person in his extended family to go to college. None of his close or distant relatives had college education. Singh left his village when he was a child to attend a primary school located in the lowland area near the city of Chiang Rai. While attending school, he lived with other ethnic students at a dormitory sponsored by a Korean church foundation. After finishing primary school, with the support from a Korean missionary, Singh applied for admission and was accepted to study at a private secondary school, under the jurisdiction of the Church of Christ in Thailand, in the Chiang Mai province. There, Singh lived at a dormitory founded and operated by the Korean church-based foundation. Living far away from his family and village as early as the first grade for school was a huge sacrifice Singh made for his future and for the future of his family. Singh encountered social adjustment challenges and had lonely, nostalgic feelings during his primary, middle, and high school years, but he was fortunate to have access to trusted adults at the schools and dormitories he attended. When Singh lived at the dormitories in Chiang Rai and in Chiang Mai, he was close to dormitory staff members. The dormitory staff members became his mentors. He talked to them and sought help from them when he felt homesick, felt discouraged, faced financial problems, or had difficulty in school. The dormitory staff members at both places even taught Singh social manners and how to properly approach adults or teachers when he needed to ask help from them.
In addition to the staff at the dormitories, Singh also established a supportive relationship with a high school principal, who was a trusted adult at the institution. Singh liked to voluntarily assist the teachers and the school personnel, and thus he became well-known among the teachers and got acquainted with the school principal. Singh said the principal was another person to whom he could talk or even ask for advice when he had problems. Singh especially remembered two encouraging messages the principal gave to him. One of the messages was, “For the ninety percent, we have to depend on ourselves in doing things and in studying. For the other ten percent, we can depend on others, we can ask help from other people surrounding us.” Another message the principal gave to Singh was, “You should not feel small about your being an ethnic person. Your parents can’t help you. But you have to build your own future.” Singh regarded these messages as powerful and encouraging messages. Singh attended a secondary school at a private school dominated by Thai students from middle-class backgrounds and there were only a few hill tribe students. There, Singh, like other college students in this study, experienced being harassed by other Thai students about his hill tribe background and his lack of fluency in the Thai language. Such adverse experiences made him feel inferior and hurt his feelings. The two messages Singh received from talking with the principal encouraged him to give his best effort in studying and not to feel disappointed about who he was or where he was from. Having informal mentors who listened to and respected his background not only promoted Singh’s self-esteem, but also helped him to sustain his determination in pursuing education. The passages excerpted below obviously indicated the advantage of having significant others:

I was close to a school principal and also a missionary at my dormitory. I consulted with them for many things. We had good relationships. They would say
things to encourage me about studying and gave me advice. This made me have encouragement to study.

In conclusion, the significant others discussed in this study significantly influenced college pathways of first-generation highlander college students. In order to understand the role of significant others, it is important to recognize that the parents of the student participants in this study had very limited education and did not have college experience in navigating educational system. The parents did not know how to assist their children in navigating extended college pathways, complex school and college systems, and complicated college admission processes. They had very limited knowledge about what their children needed to do before they could actually be admitted to college. Significant others, such as teachers who had had college experiences and knew college systems well, or relatives who had college experiences, supplemented the roles that the students’ parents were supposed to fulfill, but could not fulfill due to life circumstances. In other words, the significant others partly supplemented the roles and assets (e.g., knowledge about college or college experiences) that the students’ parents lacked. In addition, the significant others assisted or made contributions to college access for first-generation highlander college students in several ways, including giving information and advice about schools and colleges, giving encouragement or spiritual support, and providing financial resources. The significant others, in most cases, provided more than one kind of support to the students. For example, earlier I talked about Yong and how his brothers provided supplemental money to Yong for his educational expenses and also provided emotional support by encouraging Yong to pursue college study and by counseling Yong when he had personal problems. In Pam’s case, a teacher not only recommended a school that she could attend, but also helped Pam with filling out the
school application form, accompanied Pam on the day she took the entrance examination, helped locate a dormitory where Pam could live, and provided counseling for school and personal issues.

**Student Resilience**

Student resilience is regarded as another key determinant that contributes to college access for highlander students. Lazarus (2004) defines resilience as the ability to overcome obstacles and difficulties by using adaptive coping strategies in order to maintain an effective level of adjustment and functioning. Johnson (2008) states that resilience involves the interplay between the internal strengths of the individual and external supporting factors in the individual’s social environment.

In addition to receiving support from other factors, the highlander students in this study themselves also played important roles in making their college dreams possible. In order to understand their resilience, it is important to note that all twenty four-student college students in this study shared three fundamental characteristics. First, they shared minority ethnic status. The students came from five different ethnic backgrounds (i.e., Hmong, Karen, Akha, Lahu, and Mien), but they all shared ‘hill tribe’ status, even thought each ethnic group had its own distinctive language, culture, and social structure. Second, they all were the first in their families to attend college, and some of them were even the first in their communities to study at the college level and plan to secure college degrees in the near future. Third, the students came from families with low-socioeconomic status, whose parents were farmers with little or no education. Ethnic background, low-socioeconomic status, and the first-generation status imposed additional burdens upon these historically underrepresented students and their pathways to college.
As students moved through the educational system, most of them faced adversity or challenging social, academic, or financial issues at one time or another. Some of the students also became discouraged about pursuing education at various points in their school lives. Nevertheless, these students beat the odds and managed to gain entry into renowned public universities. The question raised here is how these individual students overcame obstacles and difficulties that were detrimental to their pursuit of college pathways. In other words, in what ways did they remain engaged and sustained in their pathways to college? The analysis of interview data and students’ life histories indicated that individual resilience played a key role in their determination and persistence in education. Resilience discovered in this study is composed of two elements, individual quality and coping strategy (i.e. changing obstacles to become motivations).

**Individual quality.** Individual quality refers to individual effort and talent. It plays a vital role in students’ engagement in their college pathways. It is said that the Thai higher education system is theoretically open to any Thai citizen with no articulated racial barriers (McNabb, 1993). However, college access has been challenging for ethnic hill tribe students with distinctive languages and cultures compared to mainstream Thais. College access is even more challenging for hill tribe students who live in remote mountainous areas, and whose parents have limited educational experience or financial resources. The analysis indicated that individual students who successfully gained access to NU used their talents and worked hard along the way in order to make college possible. Naak, a fourth-year student majoring in social studies, was an example.

Naak was a Karen student from a remote village in the Mae Hong Son province. His village was located along the border between Thailand and Myanmar, where there was occasional fighting between the Myanmar army and the Karen army. Naak’s village was also near a Karen refugee camp. Naak’s
parents were farmers who had only fourth-grade education. Naak had two younger brothers. His first younger brother was studying at NU, while the second younger brother was attending high school in Mae Hon Son. Naak obtained his primary education from a small school located in his village. He finished his primary school in 2004 with fourteen other students. However, only four male students, including Naak, decided to continue their education at a middle school located thirty-six miles from his previous school. Commuting to the new school became a major problem, especially during the rainy season, for Naak and his friends because of flooded dirt roads, mountainous geography, and lack of vehicles. To resolve this problem, Naak and his friends stayed at a teacher housing complex, since the school did not have a student dormitory. Naak said at that time he and his friend traveled to the school and asked the school principal to admit them to study in that school. He told the principal “We want to study. We beg you, the principal. Please give us the opportunity to study.” Fortunately, Naak and his friends were admitted to study for middle school. At the initial stage, they stayed at the teacher housing. With efforts from teachers, from donors, and from Naak and his friends, a student dormitory was built a year later, as Naak said, “We are the first group that initiated and pioneered the school dormitory project.” A few more school dormitory buildings were built over time. At the time of Naak’s interview, about 200 students (about 70 percent of the total student population) stayed in the dormitories while attending school. During his middle school years, Naak and other students at the dorms raised vegetables and animals for food. For rice, the teachers asked for donations from a temple, from a Mae Sod customs official who confiscated rice, and from a refugee center. Naak and the other students at the dormitory developed a task schedule to prepare meals. During school breaks, Naak also worked at a part-time job to earn money to be used during the school semester. Because of his ethnic status, low-economic status, and outstanding record in extracurricular activities and in GPA, Naak was selected to receive about 4,000 baht ($133) per semester by the International Support Group Foundation (ISGF) throughout his middle school. Naak said this scholarship significantly helped reduce the financial burden on his parents.

Naak was a student who had fallen in love with extracurricular activities. During primary school, he was the class president for several years and assisted teachers with school activities. From the seventh to the ninth grades, he was the student head of the dormitory for three consecutive years. In the eighth grade, he also won the first-place award for project-based learning in science at the provincial level and won the second-place award at the national level. Naak was also involved in student council. As the result, in the ninth grade, he was elected to be the student government president and also selected by the school to participate in the Child and Youth Council at provincial, regional, and national levels. During the interview, the researcher asked Naak why he liked to do such activities. Naak rapidly replied, “Extracurricular activities are life skills. They are

---

11 The Child and Youth Council (CYC) was founded in 2005 by the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security. CYC aims to promote the roles of children and youth in social development and acts as a coordinating body for child and youth development efforts.
all about life skills in working with people and learning about people.” Naak was substantially involved in extracurricular activities, but those activities did not undermine his studying. He performed well academically throughout his middle school. In the seventh grade, he earned a 4.00 grade point average (GPA), in the eighth grade, a 3.80 GPA, and in the ninth grade, a 3.80 GPA.

With an outstanding history in extensive extracurricular activities and with high GPAs, Naak was admitted to study at the best secondary school in the district. There, he decided to study in a science track. He pointed out that his formal school and the new school was very different. The new school had about 2,000 students and was very competitive, since it was a district-level school. Naak was one of the only six Karen students in the class. During his high school years, Naak wanted to do extracurricular activities as he did in middle school, but he could not do as many because he had to adjust his study to stay competitive. His high school GPA was not as high as his middle school GPA, since the school was very competitive. Nevertheless, he graduated with a 3.08 GPA. During high school, Naak continued to receive about 6,000 baht ($200) per semester from ISGF. Additionally, his outstanding record in extracurricular involvement and in volunteer work not only allowed him to learn about life skills as he stated, but they also provided him with other funding opportunities. The director of the school selected Naak to be a school representative to compete for a scholarship for outstanding students in morals and ethics by The Government Savings Bank, the Office of Basic Education Commission, and the Office of Vocational Education Commission under the Ministry of Education. Naak first won the competition at a provincial level and then won the northern regional competition. Naak was very delighted when he was informed that he was one of the four students who won the regional competition and was awarded a 40,000 baht ($1,333) scholarship. He used this scholarship to fund his high school study along with supplementary scholarships from ISGF, while his parents provided money for his transportation expenses for home visits. In addition, just before Naak graduated from high school, he was honored with another prize called the Royal Award, which provides a 10,000-baht scholarship ($333). The Royal Award was founded in 1963 by Ministry of Education, in accordance with the wishes of the King of Thailand to strengthen the morale of students and educational institutions that engaged in good deeds. All student applicants have to be well-behaved students and have outstanding grade point averages (GPAs), while schools must have proven outstanding performance in education administration. In each year about 200 outstanding students (including primary, secondary, and college students) and about 120 outstanding schools from all over the country are given the Royal Award. The amount of award that the students receive varies based on school level, ranging from 13,000 baht ($433) for primary school level to 20,000 baht ($666) for college level. Nop received the Royal Award again in 2010, 2011, and 2013.

Naak had had a dream to attend college since he was young. As his dream became closer, he had to plan, navigate, and manage all necessary work before getting into college. During high school, he did research on colleges and made preparations for pursuing college as well as saving money to be used for
application fees and other expenses that might occur during the first semester in college, with help from teachers at this school. When he planned and applied for college, he did not consult his parents about the institutions or academic majors that he should consider, since he knew that his parents did not have knowledge or experience about colleges. Naak applied for college, took the entrance examination, and was accepted to both the College of Political Science and to the College of Education at NU, but he decided to pursue a major in social studies in College of Education. He viewed that teachers were needed more than political scientists, especially in remote areas like his province.

At NU, Nop continued to be involved in various extracurricular and volunteer activities. In his freshman and sophomore years, he served as a student leader in his major, as the president of the College of Education’s student cohort, and as the president of Mae Hong Son students’ association. At the time of the interview, Naak was a junior, and he was even more extensively involved in extracurricular activities than he had been in the previous two years. He served on a committee for the NU student council, on a dormitory board, and with an NU co-operative. In addition to engaging in activities on campus, Naak had also actively participated with off-campus organizations such as the Democratic Youth of the Thai Parliament. As a result, he received various honors: National Outstanding Youth in 2011 by the Office of Promotion and Protection of Children, Youth, the Elderly and Vulnerable Groups; Outstanding Honor Student in 2012 by NU; and the Children and Youth with Outstanding Protection and Promotion of Human Rights award in 2012 by Office of the National Human Rights Commission of Thailand. Naak engaged in various extracurricular activities, but the activities did not undermine his determination to study hard and to do well in college. In fact, he excelled in both extracurricular activities and studying. At the time of the interview Nop’s GPA was 3.70 and he said, “I am satisfied with my grade.”

Naak’s story indicates that the combination of individual talents and effort could make college possible.

Coping strategy. In addition to individual talent and effort, the majority of students in this study also used the obstacles they faced to become motivations for success. They used their life circumstances as strategies to push them to pursue and sustain their educational determination. As stated earlier, the intersection of ethnic status, low-income student status, and being the first in the family who wanted to pursue college posed difficulties for the students and their pathways through college. These difficulties were imposed by family conditions, home village expectations, or even educational
institutions such as schools. The students encountered these struggles, especially during their middle school and high school years. The stories of Ake, Fang, and Singh illuminate how individual students from different ethnic background could change or turn negative circumstance around to become motivation in order to sustain their extended college pathways and eventually to make to college.

Fang was a Mien student from the Nan province who majored in political science. Fang’s parents divorced when he was in primary school. Fang and his older sister lived with his father and grandmother, while his three siblings lived with his mother, who passed away soon after the divorce. Fang’s father was sent to prison due to drug trafficking when Fang was in the fourth grade, and his father was released when he was in high school. The stigmatization from his father’s being in the jail and lack of financial resources posed difficulties both in Fang’s life as a young boy and later on in his teenage years. Fang was the only person among six primary school cohorts who attended college. The rest of his former primary school classmates married and became farmers. After graduating from primary school, Fang attended a social welfare and boarding school in the Nan province for middle and high school. This school provided education to disadvantaged students such as hill tribe children. Fang said at that time he did not have many choices of school that he could attend, since his family was very poor and he did not even have Thai citizenship. The boarding school, about sixty-two miles away from his home village, was the most promising school for him, since the school provided for most of his school expenses and also provided free housing.

In addition to the issue of difficult family circumstances, Fang also faced the issue of not having Thai citizenship. After he was born, his parents did not register a birth
certificate for him. Not having legally recognized Thai citizenship prevented Fang from pursuing educational and other opportunities. Fang said, without help from a primary teacher, he might not even have had a chance to attend middle school and high school due to the limitations of his stateless status. This status also limited him from having the chance to apply for scholarships offered to ethnic minorities or low-income students from Thai and foreign agencies. Nevertheless, Fang ended up navigating the bureaucratic system and began applying for citizenship starting in the fourth grade. It took him about five years before he was finally granted the Thai citizenship. So, during the seven years that his father was in prison, Fang heavily relied on his personal strengths, along with emotional support from his grandmother, his sister, and his teachers. During his middle school years, his father was in jail and his grandmother could not really work on the farm. Fang realized that his family could not provide him with financial support, and he could not apply for scholarships due to his stateless status. To remedy the lack of funds, he began to generate revenue to pay for his personal expenses that the school did not cover by growing and selling vegetables at his school with support from his teachers. Fang lamented about his life circumstances, but he did not allow such circumstances to undermine his hopes for a brighter future. In contrast, he used such circumstances as an instrument to make his own life better through educational pathways as shown in the following statement:

My family is helpful. It’s not helpful in term of financial stuff. My family is something that is challenging for me. I want to overcome this challenge. My family was disparaged and looked down by other villagers. I wanted to change that image. I looked at the positive side of it (i.e., family circumstances) and used it as a positive device to make me ambitious and to move my life on. My family does not have things to offer me. I want to study and when I graduate, I want to do something that makes my family situation better.
The story of Ake was similar to Fang’s story. Ake, a freshman student in economics, was from one of the biggest Akha villages in the province of Chiang Rai. The majority of the people in his village were Christians, and the main occupation was corn and rice farming. There were only a few individual villagers who had college degrees or were attending college. Lack of Thai citizenship was a major problem for many villagers. Ake’s family was financially poor. When he was in the fourth grade, the family situation worsened when his father became involved in drug trafficking and was later arrested, and all assets in the house were seized. Ake’s father was imprisoned for about six years. As a result, his mother had to take care of four children alone. When Ake finished primary school, he wanted to attend a public district school, but because of his financial circumstances, he decided to attend a welfare boarding school instead. At that time, Ake had three younger siblings who were also attending school and needed financial support from his mother. Ake, like Fang, viewed the welfare boarding school, which provided free education and housing, as the best choice of schools he could attend. While his father was in the prison, Ake tried to help his mother as much as he could. For example, when he went back home during weekends or school breaks, he went with his mother to work on farms as a wage laborer. At school, Ake studied hard and was involved in extracurricular activities such as serving as the manager of a school-based saving bank for three consecutive years and participating in youth cultural conservation program. He also tried to assist teachers in various activities, which, in turn, helped him to establish positive relationships with teachers.

Not long after being released, Ake’s father became addicted to gambling and accumulated a huge amount of gambling debts. At that time, Ake had just finished middle
school and considered working to help his father pay off the debts and not pursue high school. However, he finally decided to continue high school at the same school since studying was what he really wanted to do. Ake’s father decided to go to work as a factory worker in Taiwan in order to earn money to pay off the gambling debt, and he worked in Taiwan for four years. When Ake graduated from high school, his father asked him not to pursue college. Ake was very shocked to hear such a statement from his father. But he told himself “I graduated from the math and science track. I finished the high school track. If I did not pursue college education, why I did bother to study for high school? If I graduated from the vocational track, I might be able to make living.” Ake was very stressed and worried about his life, but he tried to be positive and told himself that every cloud has a silver lining. He kept what his father told him in mind, but he decided to apply for college on his own and used money he had saved in the past two years to pay for all expenses related to the college application. When asked about what made him to reach such a decision at this point, Ake replied,

The thing that made me come all the way to this point might be my social environment, the social environment I have had since I was a child. The social setting I was born in is very different from other social settings. When I turned my head to the right or to the left, I saw only people who were addicted to drugs, met only drug addicts. Since I remembered things, even since I was two or three years old, since I remembered things, I saw drug addicts wherever I looked. The social setting was like that. I grew up with that kind of social setting. I was resistant to such a setting.

In Ake’s village, children as young as seven years old smoked cigarettes, and many youths were imprisoned due to drug issues. Many adults, like Ake’s father, were involved in drug trafficking and were imprisoned as well. Ake’s village was about thirteen miles away from the Thai-Myanmar border where drugs were smuggled across, and the villages and the people along the border were vulnerable to becoming involved in
illicit business. Ake was born and lived in a social setting that could potentially undermine children’s and youths’ interest in education or take them away from gaining social and economic mobility through education. The passages excerpt above clearly indicated that he faced undesirable circumstances posed by his family and by his village. However, he did not choose to become a victim of such adversities as some youths in his village did. In contrast, he chose to be resistant to his difficult environment and to not become like his father, as his mother told him. In his early years, Ake made a decision not to smoke cigarettes, not to drink alcohol, and not to get involved with drugs. He turned the adverse circumstances into a positive mechanism to motivate him to attend school, to do well in school, and to desire and pursue a college degree. In fact, he used education as a means to get away from a seriously detrimental setting and to make his life and his family’s lives better. Ultimately, he also wished to use his education as a means to help change his community to be a better place, as he stated:

I believe that although candlelight is very small, it is still valuable in the darkness. I think this small light could be the light that gives light to other people who still have no light. Even though the (village’s) social setting is like that, I believe that one day it will be better. I think there are other youths in the village who also think like me. I want to be part of the change—change for our social setting. And my desire in the change will be an entity to enlighten other people.

In addition to Fang and Ake, Singh is another example of a student who changed his life’s difficulties into motivation. Singh, a Lahu student from a poor family, received his primary and secondary school education with support from a Korean Christian church-based foundation. Singh told the researcher that he knew that he was an ethnic person and his way of life was different from that of mainstream Thai students at his schools. He wanted to socialize with them, but he did not have the necessary goods or skills to facilitate his desire for socialization. In addition, he could speak central Thai
well, but he could not pronounce some words accurately, due to differences between his native Lahu language and the mainstream Thai language. So, Singh, like other students in this study, was teased by some of his friends about being inarticulate in speaking the standard Thai language. However, when the researcher asked Singh what made him able to come all the way to the university, he quickly responded that coming from a poor family inspired him to attend college. Singh often thought that one day he would improve his quality of life and not work on a farm like his parents. He wanted to have a better and more secure occupation with a reasonable salary.

By and large, undesirable circumstances were considered to create drawbacks for individual students, but some students such as Ake, Fang, and Singh viewed such circumstance differently and made use of difficult life situations. They turned the drawbacks of their life circumstances around to become motivations to support and maintain their willpower in pursuing education and in beating the odds against them. However, it is important to acknowledge that not every highlander student in Thailand views and uses their life circumstances as a positive way such as the group of the students in this study did. In individual interviews, some students revealed that some of their friends from same or different ethnic background decided to drop out of school or to disengage from further education because they surrendered to the negative circumstances in their lives.

**Conclusion**

This chapter present micro-level factors that include parental support, significant others, and student resiliency. Regarding the first factor, parental support significantly contributed to successful educational journeys and college access for highlander students.
These parents played supportive roles by utilizing the difficulties or laments in their lives
as instruments to inspire and to encourage their children to pursue secondary school
education and then college education; by providing financial support as their financial
status allowed; and by engaging in preventive efforts to minimize or eliminate the
possible impacts of early-age marriages that could undermine their children’s pathways
to college.

Significant others were another micro-level factor that played an important role in
contributing to the success of highlander students. Significant others identified in this
study included siblings, teachers, relatives, and school personnel. The data analysis
indicated that highlander college students usually had a combination of two or three
significant others, and the combination depended on the availability of significant others
surrounding them. In addition, significant others assisted highlander students in several
ways. First, significant others who had school or college experiences provided
information and advice about school and college. Second, a group of the significant
others who had financial resources provide students with monetary support.

Lastly, they provided encouragement or spiritual support to students throughout
their way to college. The parents of the students had very limited education and did not
know how to assist their children in navigating the educational system. Significant others
who had college experience or resources supplemented the roles that their parents could
not fulfill. The last micro-level factor influencing progressive college access for
highlander students was student resilience that consisted of individual efforts, talents, and
coping strategies. The first-generation highlander college students in this study were
exceptional. They used their talents and put much effort into making their dreams for
college happen. They used their undesirable life circumstances set by their family conditions, ethnicity, and financial status as crucial strategies to drive them to desire and to pursue college education. The next chapter will present macro level factors: student loans and college admission quotas for highland ethnic minorities.
CHAPTER 6

KEY DETERMINANTS FOR SUCCESSFUL COLLEGE ACCESS: MACRO-LEVEL FACTORS

This chapter is a subsequent chapter on research findings. It will present the macro-level key determinants that positively promoted college accessibility and opportunities among first-generation college students of highland ethnic minorities. These macro-level factors are student loans and college admission quotas for highlander minorities.

Student Loans

In addition to micro level factors, macro level factors also play important roles in making college access possible for highlander students. These macro level factors are student loans and a college admission quota for highland ethnic minorities. In this section, I will first provide a brief background of the history and different types of student loans. Next, I will present the importance of student loans for highlander students and their college opportunities. I will end this section by talking about this question: how do highlander students manage their limited available funds to pay for their college attendance?

History of student loans. Student loans are regarded as another key factor that contributes to college access for first-generation highlander students. The majority of the highlander students in this study depended on student loans to pay for tuition fees and expenses related to school and college attendance. The Thai higher education system provides limited student financial aid at higher educational levels. National student financial aid programs, such as work-study programs or need-based grants for low-
income students, are few. The only student financial aid that is available nationwide is student loans. Student loans are operated under Student Loan Fund (SLF) program, which was founded in 1995, but officially began operations in 1996. The Act of Student Loans Fund was promulgated in 1998. The objective of SLF is to provide loans to needy students at the high school, vocational school, and undergraduate level of education to pay for their tuition fees, expenses related to their field of study, and the necessary costs of living during their time in school. The SLF is used as a vital mechanism to increase educational opportunities for Thai students. The SLF is operated principally by the Ministry of Finance. The government allocates funds to the SLF, and the SLF then allocates and distributes funds through Krung Thai Bank, a state-owned bank, to educational institutions and to students according to special rules and procedures. Historically, the SLF has offered only one type of student loan program, called a traditional student loan. (In order to avoid confusion, the term ‘traditional student loan’ will be used to refer to the original student loan program in the Thai higher education system). In recent times, another type of loan, the Income Contingency Loan (ICL), has become available.

**Traditional student loans.** Traditional student loans, implemented in 1996, are available to students in high school and tertiary education on the basis of means testing of family incomes: family income must be equivalent to or less than 200,000 baht ($6,000) per year. In principle, this type of student loan is designed to assist students from low-income families. The loan will cover tuition fees, cost of living, and other expenses related to education. The student loans carry low interest rates and long repayment periods. Students who take the loans have to begin repayment after a two-year period
following their graduation. Collection takes the form of former students repaying directly to Krung Thai Bank, which is a government agency, when their income reaches 56,400 baht ($1,693) per year or 4,700 baht ($141) per month. Students can make loan payments either monthly or annually. They are given fifteen years to repay the loans at an interest rate of one percent of the total loan, calculated after the first repayment.

**Income contingency loans.** The income contingency loan (ICL) program was initiated in 2006, but it was not fully implemented until 2010. ICL is an adaptive loan system based on the Australian model of the Higher Education Loan Program (HELP), which has been widely adopted in many countries such as New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Chile, Malaysia, and Indonesia (Chapman, 2005). The ICL is available for students who are in tertiary education, regardless of their families’ income. The ICL is designed particularly for students who are not qualified for traditional student loans and is reserved only for vocational school students and undergraduate students. Even though the ICL is provided for students regardless of family income, the ICL gives priorities to students who are in academic programs that the nation needs and which correspond to the production needs of the private sectors. The ICL mainly provides students with funds for tuition fees, but students can apply for cost of living and other expenses concerning education if their family annual income is less than 200,000 baht ($6,000). The loan amounts that ICL allocates per student are slightly less than those of traditional student loans. Regarding repayment parameters, the collection of the debt depends on the borrowers’ future capacity to pay. Students are required to repay a debt when the level of their future incomes reaches 192,000 baht ($5,760) per year. While traditional student loans maintain a maximum interest rate of one percent, ICL is a zero-interest-rate loan,
but the amount of repayment varies, based on a consumer index. ICL borrowers are obligated to repay 5 percent of the total loan if their income is between 192,000-360,000 baht ($6,400-12,000), 8 percent if total income is between 360,001-840,000 baht ($12,000-28,000), and 12 percent if total income is above 840,000 baht ($28,000). The repayment contract is invalidated if the student’s age reaches sixty years old. In terms of debt collection, the Revenue Department is appointed to collect repayment from borrowers through deductions from their income thresholds. At present, traditional student loans are limited only to former borrowers. Any new borrowers are required to take ICL. The ICL is expected to slowly replace the traditional student loan. By and large, student loans have proved their value in promoting college access for many low-income students. From 1966-2011, approximately 3.9 million students took student loans to pay for their college costs. The majority of highlander college students were included in the 3.9 million students who secured student loans to pay for tuition fees and other college expenses. About seventeen out of the twenty-three student participants relied on student loans to pay for their college attendance, while the remaining seven student participants who did take student loans relied on their parents, a 30,000-baht scholarship from the Ministry of Interior, which will be discussed later, or scholarships from private sources.

**Student loans and highlander college students**

*Student loans make college possible.* As stated earlier, a large number of highlander students relied on student loans to attend upper-secondary schools and colleges. Among highlander students who took the loans, some began taking student loans when they were in high school, because their parents could not afford their school
expenses. Chati, a third-year Hmong student in economics from the Tak province, is an example. Chati’s parents did not go to school, and they were farmers who grew corn and rice. Chati grew up in a big family and he had seven siblings. Chati was the fifth child of the family and had highest level of education. Only one of his siblings finished middle school, while the majority of them finished only primary school. Chati received his primary and middle school education from a school located near his village. From the first to the ninth grade, Chati was among the top three students in his class who had the highest grade point average (GPA). He liked mathematics and he was good at it. After graduating from middle school, he had planned to continue high school at the same school, but his friends asked him to apply for one of the best public schools in the Tak province. This school was about seventy-four miles from his home village. Chati and three of his friends were accepted to study in a mathematics-science track while one other friend could not pass the examination. The majority of students in the school were students from mainstream Thai backgrounds. When Chati studied there, there were only seven ethnic minority students in the entire school. Since the school was located in the city and distant from home, Chati did not have any relatives who lived in the city, so he rented and shared an apartment with another Hmong student. In a general way, Chati knew ahead of time that the cost of high school attendance, such as tuition fees and room and board would cost more, and his parents could not fully provide financial support for him. Chati decided to take a student loan during his first year of high school. Chati used the student loan to pay for tuition fees, school-related expenses, rent, and meals. At the same time, his parents and sister provided supplemental financial assistance for the expenses that were not covered by the student loan. When his family came to the city to
do business, they also visited him and brought him rice and vegetables from the villages. Chati regarded the student loans as the main source of funding for his high school expenses.

Saving student loans for college. Among students who took student loans during high school were some whose parents were able to afford their child’s high school expenses. However, several students decided to take student loans when they were in high school because they wanted to save money from the high school student loans in order to pay for college expenses such as college application fees, college interview expenses, and tuition and fees for the first semester. It is imperative to note that high school students could continue to take student loans when they studied at college, and they would receive a larger amount, which would be suitable for college attendance costs. However, the students filled out the loan application form during the first month of their semester at college, but they did not receive the student loan until the end of the first semester or the beginning of the second semester. So, some students who had already planned to go college and had realized that their parents might not be able to fully assist them with the coming expenses decided to save money during high school from various sources in order to pay for all expenses taking place during the four- or five-month period without student loans. Euuy, a second-year Karen student in economics, and Ming, a third-year Hmong student in the humanities, are examples.

Euuy is from a Karen village in the Mae Hong Son province. Her parents divorced from each other and immediately remarried other people when she was young. Euuy’s mother, who only had a fourth-grade education, and her stepfather, who had a middle school education, brought her up. Euuy’s parents were garlic farmers. After
finishing primary school near the village, Euuy went with her friends to study at a welfare boarding school in Mae Hong Son for middle school. The boarding school offered education without charging tuition fees and also provided free housing and meals. At the boarding school, Euuy was one of the students who had outstanding academic performance. After graduating from middle school, Euuy and seven other students decided to apply for admission to a provincial school in the Mae Hong Son province that was regarded as one of the best schools in the province. However, only Euuy and another student passed the entrance examination and were admitted to study there. Since the school was close to her village, she lived at home and went to school by a school bus. Because Euuy was the only child in her family, her parents were able to provide most of her school expenses. Euuy had thought about going to college since as early as in the fifth grade. During high school, she planned to attend college right after high school. Because Euuy knew that she would have substantial expenses before she entered college and right after she entered college, she decided to take a student loan when she was in the eleventh grade and save the loan money to be used for college application fees and for college expenses during the first semester.

Ming, a Hmong student in the humanities, is another example of a student who took a student loan in high school in order to save money for college. Ming received his primary education from a school located in his village. He then continued his middle school at a welfare boarding school where the majority of students were Hmong, followed by Mien, Lahu, and Malabri. The school was primarily funded by the Royal family. After middle school Ming attended a high school run by a Buddhist temple in the Nan province. The temple paid most of his school expenses. Ming, like Euuy, was
determined to pursue college after high school with encouragement from his father and from his monk teachers. A school counselor told Ming that it would be more difficult to apply for a student loan after entering to the university, so he decided to take a student loan during his last year in high school to secure the funds he needed beforehand. Ming, like Euuy, saved money from the student loan and paid for college application fees, transportation fees, and required expenses for a freshman student. As a former borrower from high school, he could automatically continue the student loan when he was admitted to study for the undergraduate program at NU.

A few students who did not take student loans during high school or college were the first children in their families, or they received financial support from their parents and from scholarships. However, their younger siblings who attended high school or college did take student loans. Gaem and Naak are examples. Gaem, a female Hmong student, was the oldest child in her family, and she had five younger siblings attending schools. Gaem did not need to take a student loan during high school because she received a scholarship from the Majesty Queen. In college, she relied on an annual 30,000 baht scholarship from the Ministry of the Interior (MOI), along with financial support from her parents. Nevertheless, two of her younger sisters who were in high school took student loans, while another younger sister who had just become a freshman at NU also took student loans in high school and in college in order to reduce the financial burden on her parents. As described earlier, Naak was a student who had outstanding academic performance and had been extensively involved in extracurricular activities since primary school. With these two important qualifications, along with being a low-income student, he had received different types of scholarship since middle school.
For example, Naak had received a need-based scholarship from International Support Group Foundation (ISGF) since middle school. He had relied on scholarships rather than student loans to pay for his high school and college expenses, while his parents provided a modest amount of financial support to pay for expenses that were not covered by the scholarships. However, Naak’s two younger siblings took student loans to pay for school expenses.

**Financial coping strategies**

*Combining financial recourses.* Financial aid such as student loans has enhanced college access for highlander college students. Student loans pay for tuition and provide a small monthly stipend for costs of living. However, other college expenses, such as educational fees, books and supplies, and meals, are not covered by student loans. Having only student loans, without other forms of financial aid, may make college access less possible for the highlander students, since the costs of college attendance are high and rise every year. The data analysis shows that college highland college students have to supplement the student loan with a 30,000-baht scholarship from the highlander quota if they have one; from family contributions; or even from working part-time jobs off campus. Nat, a Karen student, is an example. He secured his college expenses from three different sources: a student loan, a 30,000-baht scholarship from the highlander quota, and family contributions (i.e., help from his older sister). Poom, a female Hmong student, is like Nat. Her major source of income came from student loans and a 30,000-baht scholarship from the highlander quota, supplemented by a financial contribution from her parents.
A few students, who had received scholarships from private foundations that restricted them from taking student loans, had to either work at part-time jobs or ask for additional money from their parents. To illustrate, Fang, a Mien student, had received a need-based scholarship from the Damrongchaitham Foundation, a philanthropic organization founded by the chairman of the board of directors of GMM Grammy Public Company Limited, one of Thailand’s leading music entertainment companies. During his secondary school years, Fuey knew that his grandmother did not have enough money to pay for some of his personal expenses at a welfare boarding school. With the support from a teacher, he decided to spend his after-school time and weekends to grow vegetables and raise chickens and frogs to generate income. Fang had earned income to support his educational expenses from the eighth grade up to the twelfth grade and had also saved some money in advance for college. By the time he finished the twelfth grade, Fang already had 30,000-baht ($1,000) in savings from selling vegetables and chickens. The financial circumstances that led Fang to farming in order to generate income also created other advantages for him. For example, when he was in the eleventh grade, his reputation in agricultural skills made it possible for him to be elected as the head of the Young Farmers’ Clubs, first at his school level and then at a provincial level. He then was honored with the third rank youth farmer award for a northern region level. Fang’s project also directed him to study in agricultural education program in College of Education at NU. At the time of the interview, Fang still earned some income from agricultural related, part-time jobs to pay for expenses that were not covered by the scholarship stipend. At the same time, he also did volunteer work related to agricultures.
**Economizing expenses.** In addition to combining different sources of financial support to keep up with the college attendance expenses, the students in this study also tried to save on expenses as much as they could by several means. One of the common ways to save money was to stay at the university’s dormitory. NU, like other major Thai public universities, provides dormitories and other facilities on campus. Each dormitory provides reading rooms, computer rooms, laundry service, and activities rooms, which give students a chance to get together. Each room provides basic needs such as beds, desks, and closets. The cost of staying in the university dormitories is much less than that of private dormitories. Dormitory fees for a regular semester at NU cost about 1,800 baht ($60) per semester, while average room costs at private dormitories were more than 2,000 baht ($66) per month. While a student at private dormitory has choices to live alone or with other, a student at NU dorm has to share the room with other two students.

NU also has a tradition where it requires freshmen students to stay at the university dormitory. If any student wishes to continue staying in the university dormitory after his or her freshman year, he or she has to apply for residency and has to participate in a certain number of the volunteer activities organized by the dormitories. Poom, a female Hmong student, received an annual 30,000-baht scholarship ($1,000) from the highlander quota and took a student loan. At the same time, she tried to minimize expenses by continuing to live in a female university dormitory after her freshman year. Poom said the dorm was cheap, safe, and close to the school buildings where she had her classes. She did not need to pay for transportation expenses since she lived on campus and commuted around campus by walking. She stated that if she would have stayed at a private dormitory off campus, she might have had to buy a motorbike.
and also to pay for the gas needed for commuting back and forth between the private
dormitory and the campus.

Sorn, a Mien student, also struggled to minimize expenses as much as possible. Sorn
had received an annual 30,000-baht scholarship ($1,000) from the highlander quota
and also took a student loan. To reduce the expenses, he continued to live in the
university dormitory after his freshman year. He lived in the dorm for four years. Sorn
preferred living in the university dormitory instead of moving out to live with friends off
campus. He, like Poom, pointed out the advantages of living in university housing. He
said the rent for the university dormitory was much cheaper compared to the rent for
private dormitories. He further stated that staying in the university dormitory helped him
save money for rent, transportation, and utilities. Sorn, like other dormitory residents,
was required to follow curtain rules. For example, he had to be at the dormitory after 10
pm. If he returned to the dormitory after 10 pm, he would be marked as late and this ‘late
return’ would affect his points and his eligibility for staying at the university dormitory in
the subsequent academic semesters.

**College Admission Quota for Highland Ethnic Minorities**

A college admission quota for highlander students, administered by the
Department of Provincial Administration (DOPA) under the Ministry of the Interior
(MOI), in partnership with Northern University (NU) is another significant factor
contributing to college access for first-generation highlander college students. (The term
‘highlander quota’ will be used to refer to ‘a college admission quota for Thai highlander
students.’). About nineteen out of the twenty-three student participants in this study were
admitted to study at NU through this quota program. In this section, I will first provide
brief background of the highlander quota, its recruitment procedure, and its annual scholarship award ceremony. Next, I will talk about the importance of the highlander quota for highland ethnic minority youths. Lastly, I will talk about the limitations of this quota program.

Background

**Brief history.** Historically, the admission quota for Thai highlander students was established in 1994 by the Department of Provincial Administration, under the Ministry of the Interior, as part of a model scheme for community development, environmental protection, and narcotic plants control on highland areas. This quota program, along with other two programs, was placed under the section on general development activities aiming to encourage people in highland communities to participate in political development and to take active roles in preventing and solving narcotic problems. The quota program set its goals to support hill tribe students from fifteen provinces in the north, northwestern, and upper central regions to pursue bachelor degrees at NU, and at a later time, at another major public university located in the same province. The overall objectives of this quota program were (a) to enhance the educational level of highlanders to be equal to that of mainstream Thais; (b) to support highlanders to gain knowledge and ability and then utilize such knowledge to develop their local communities; and (c) to support highlanders to enhance the development of their quality of life and their participation in society.

---

12 Historically, the model scheme was issued as a special scheme to address the issues concerning highlander populations, formally known as hill tribes, over citizenship, social and economic development, and control for narcotic plants. There were three model scheme plans: the first model scheme was from 1992-1996; the second scheme was from 2000-2004; and the last scheme was from 2005-2009. Over the two decades, some of issues concerning highlanders were addressed, but other issues such as citizenship, still remain unresolved up to the present time.
Students who want to apply for this quota must meet the following qualifications:

a) Must have Thai citizenship.

b) Must come from one of the nine ethnic groups including Akha, Karen, Khamu, Lahu, Lisu, Lua, Hmong, Mien, or Mlabri.

c) Must live in one of these fifteen provinces: Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Mae Hong Son, Lamphun, Lampang, Nan, Phrae, Phayao, Kamphaeng Phet, Kanchanaburi, Tak, Phetchabun, Phitsanulok, Sukhothai, or Uthai Thani.

d) Must have at least a cumulative 2.25 grade-point average (GPA) from high school.

Recruitment procedure. This quota program is part of the government bureaucratic system, so the recruitment and admission process is more complicated than that of other quota programs offered by higher education institutions. It is a top-down process that runs from the Department of Provincial Administration (DOPA), to the provincial office, to the district office, and then to the university. Students who wish to apply for this quota program and who meet the qualifications can fill out the application at the district office and submit all required documents to the district office. He or she must also ask a village headman and the chief district officer to sign off the application form in order to verify his or her nationality and residency status. The district office then sends a list of applicants, along with their application forms to NU. NU then conducts the college entrance examination to select and admit the nineteen most-qualified highlander students to study in seven academic majors. These majors include education, political science, law, business administration, social sciences, economics, and humanities. About
two to three students are annually admitted to each major. Students who are admitted to study at NU through this quota program are provided with an annual 30,000 baht ($1,000) scholarship for four consecutive years, and the scholarship is granted for five consecutive years for students majoring in education. Originally, the scholarship allocation was 20,000 baht ($666), but it was increased to 30,000 baht ($1,000) since 2006 to be compatible with the rising cost of living. In 2010, NU also allocated additional academic majors to the program. As a result, the choice of academic majors was expanded from three to seven academic majors by adding business administration, social sciences, economics, and humanities. Since its establishment in 1994 to the year of 2013, about 365 highlander students have already benefited from this quota program. In 2013, there were about 94 students supported by this quota: 22 freshmen, 24 sophomores, 23 juniors, 22 seniors, and 3 fifth-year-students in teacher education programs.

**Scholarship award ritual.** Each year, the Department of Provincial Administration (DOPA) under the Ministry of the Interior (MOI) holds a seminar and scholarship award event. For the 2013 academic year, the event was held on July 17-18 at a private hotel located in downtown Chiang Mai. The award event was a two-day event. The first day of the event was mainly focused on activities and games that allowed students and staff members of DOPA to get acquainted. The second day of the event was more formal. The event began around 9 am when the director general of DOPA arrived and greeted students, faculty members from NU and another university, and DOPA staff members. Then, a group of students in their ethnic costumes performed a show on the stage to welcome the director. Right after the performance, a DOPA staff member presented a brief history of the highlander quota program and reported the performance
of program. The director general then gave speech to students on various topics such as the importance of education, the importance of ethnic identity, and the MOI’s expectations for students. The director general shared his story as being the first in his family to obtain a college degree and his success in his career. After the speech ended, the director general awarded a scholarship to each student. A student representative then gave a thank-you speech to the MOI and the director general for their generous support. The rest of the event was an academic seminar in which the MOI staff talked about college adjustment, ethnic pride, and citizenship issues among ethnic minorities.

**The importance of the highlander quota.** Before I talk about the advantages that the highlander quota program provides for highlander students, it is important to briefly talk about the university entrance examinations, named the Central University Admissions System (CUAS), and related issues in college access. As stated in Chapter Two, the CUAS system is used by the first-tier universities as an admission instrument. In general, the majority of students who were admitted through this system were the best-educated group of high school students, were from the best private and public schools, and were from middle- or upper-income families. Only a few highland minority students were able to secure access to the universities through this system. Part of the reason for their lack of success was the highland students had less rigorous academic preparation, since most of them attended public schools in rural areas or welfare boarding schools. They also had little to no likelihood of receiving testing preparation from expensive private tutoring schools.

In order to do well in the examination or to score higher in university entrance examinations, exam-testing preparation is very imperative for students in the Thai
educational system. Tutoring schools have become a third home for students, especially students who are in schools located in the city areas. Students go to tutoring schools either in the evening or during the weekend. They go to tutoring schools during the regular school semester, during the summer semester, and before the entrance examination period. Going to tutoring schools almost becomes one main duty of many students across the country, and the tutoring business is a lucrative business. Highlander students, unlike most lowland Thai students, have very limited access to the highly expensive tutoring schools. Part of this because most highlander parents are farmers who earn income once or twice per year from crops, and the majority of their income levels are at the lowest income quintile or even under the poverty line. So, sending their children to attend tutoring schools, which are located in distant cities and which charge high tutoring fees, is much less possible. Therefore, the highland students have very limited opportunities to obtain testing preparation at tutoring schools, which are viewed to increase the test score and widely popular among Thai middle school and high school students, who can afford such expensive tutoring fees.

Gaining access to higher education institutions through the national entrance examination system is challenging for highlander students, since the examination is very competitive and only a few highlander students receive assistance such as testing preparation to enhance their test scores and improve their likelihood to be admitted to the university. Policies and projects that favor providing assistance to highland minority students or increasing their likelihood to gain access to higher education institutions have been very few. The college admission quota for highlander students by Department of Provincial Administration (DOPA), under the Ministry of the Interior (MOI), and
Northern University (NU) is one of the few programs that particularly aim to increase the enrollment of highlander students in higher education institutions. The highlander quota provides advantages to the highlander students in several aspects as follows.

*Increasing the probability for gaining college admission.* The examination for the highlander quota is held at the same time as the Northern quota entrance examination and students take the same set of tests used for the Northern quota. The Northern Quota Entrance Examination (NQEE) was established to diversify the student admission system and to increase the enrollment of regional students. NQEE requires NU, as a regional university, to recruit and admit students from the seventeen provinces of Northern Thailand. The number of ethnic minority students who gain admission to NU based on this quota annually accounts about 50 percent of the total admitted minority students.

With the highlander quota, high school highlander students compete only with other highlander students instead of competing with mainstream Thai students. This suggests that the pool of competitors is smaller, since the competition is limited only to highlander students. If highlander students take the Northern quota examination, they have to compete with a larger pool of exam takers, and the competition become even tougher when they have to complete with students who come from private schools or well-known public school in the region. This imbalance possibly impacts the probability that highlander students will successfully make the high scores needed to be considered for admission.

*Providing free scholarships.* The highlander quota provides a 30,000 baht ($1,000) scholarship to all nineteen students admitted to undergraduate study at NU for four consecutive years. The majority of the student participants in this study revealed that
the scholarships provided by this quota program made college possible for them. To illustrate, Ake, a male Akha student in economics, firmly stated, “I am able to pursue a university education because of the scholarship from the Ministry of the Interior. My father has to repay debt and my mother can’t really work. It’s like I have no one to financially support me to study.” For Ake, the scholarship from the highlander quota program was regarded as the major source of his college funding, since his parents could not assist him. Ake’s mother was often sick and could not work on the farm, while his father had to take all income he earned from construction work in Taiwan to pay off the gambling debt he created before he went to jail for seven years due to drug trafficking.

**Facilitating the college decision-making process.** College decision-making is regarded as one of the most important life choices for highlander students. Making the decision to attend or not to attend college has significant impact on their lives. This one decision determines their futures. In making up their mind whether or not to attend college, highlander students take several factors into consideration. One of the factors is the availability of college scholarships. Knowing that scholarships are available makes students have stronger determination to pursue college. Sorn, a Mien student, is an example. When he was in his last year of high school, he wanted to study for college, but he realized that his family did not have enough money to pay for his college. “My family was not prepared. We did not have money. My father and mother did not have money to send me to college, so I thought, “It’s better not to go for further studying. If I went on, I would create a financial burden on my family. I would be a burden on my family,” said Sorn. However, he learned that that if he were accepted to study at NU through the highlander quota, he would be provided with an annual 30,000-baht scholarship. Sorn
had already taken student loans since the beginning of high school. He thought if he continued to take student loans and also received a scholarship; he would have sufficient money to pay for his college expenses.

The availability of scholarships also has important impacts on students’ decision-making not only with respect on whether to pursue college or not, but also in selecting a college or a university. Yong, a male Hmong student, is an example. Yong originally wanted to major in education at Uttaradit Rajabhat University, and he was admitted. However, he eventually decided to pursue a major in social sciences at NU because of a 30,000-bath scholarship offered by the highlander quota as he states:

Actually I wanted to study for a teaching major, but I did not have money. My mother told me that it would be better for me to study at NU, because the scholarship was available there. My mother told me that she did not have money to support me.

**Contributing to the establishment of ethnic students’ association at NU.** As stated earlier, in each year about nineteen students are admitted through highlander quota to study at NU. In the first few years, students occasionally got together for socialization. But, as the number of students increased, a group of them decided to form an ethnic student association at NU to go beyond socialization. As an association, they regularly assemble several times throughout the academic year to do various social and meaningful activities together. The main activities the club organizes in each year are a freshman welcome event, a byenior or Thai prom event, volunteer activities for a rural development camp, a college counseling field trip, and participation in ethnic minority-based events such as Indigenous Peoples' Day in Thailand.

During the individual interviews, I asked all the participants about their thoughts and feelings about the association. The answers are grouped as follows. First, they
viewed that the association provided them with the opportunity to learn and gain firsthand experience and knowledge about other ethnic groups. Some highlander students expressed in the interviews that they knew that there were several ethnic groups in Thailand, but they only knew the names of the groups or had very limited knowledge about the groups. Some of the students reported that they had made friends from other ethnic groups during secondary school, while some said they had only northern Thai friends and friends from the same ethnic groups. So the association became an important place for them to meet students from other ethnic groups and to learn and to exchange information and knowledge about different ethnic groups. Ming, a male Hmong student, had been an active member of the association since he came to NU. Ming expressed that if it were not for the association, he might not have known students from other ethnic groups. For Ming, the association was a place where he could find best friends who truly understood him. He pointed out that only people who are in the same situation could truly understand each other. “Hmong students and students from other ethnic groups can sincerely talk to each other because we are similar,” said Ming. This implies that ethnic minority students understand other ethnic minority students better than non-ethnic-minority students. In short, the association became a place where highlander students shared their ethnic status, learned about other ethnic groups, and sincerely talked to each other. Puu, a female Karen student and a former vice president of the association, thought that the association was important for her. Puu’s following statement indicates why and how the association was significant.

It makes us know more people; know people from different ethnic groups. It’s a kind of socializing. If we socialize with city people, we have to be a little bit exclusive. City people are a bit more egocentric. But at the club, we sympathize
with each other. When we are together, we don’t pretend to be good; we are sincere to each other.

Sai, a male Karen student, is an example. He had been an active member of the association for three consecutive years. He even viewed that the association acted as a surrogate family on campus. By family, he meant that the student members do activities such as volunteer camps together, and those activities made them know and learn from each other and help each other. Sai thought that it was easy for students who share the same ethnic status to communicate with each other and to understand each other more than non-ethnic students.

It is interesting to note that the highlander students, including Ming, Puu, and Sai, considered the association to be a safe way for them to find friends who understood them without talking much, to sincerely talk to each other, and to freely disclose who they were. Students in the third and fourth year who had been in the association a longer time had even stronger thoughts about this point.

Second, for many highlander students, the ethnic students’ association became more than just a social organization. It became an information resource, especially for newcomer ethnic minority students. Newcomers could get help from senior students in the association on matters such as how to apply for student loans, what courses to take, how to adjust socially and academically to university life, and how to get involved with student organizations. They could even ask for tutoring help for some courses that they found difficult such as mathematics and English.

Third, the group of highlander students felt that the association made their ethnic identities becomes visible. Ranee, a female Akha student in political science, noted that when ethnic students collectively came together, it made other people see and understand
the group of ethnicities better. She stated, “If we are alone, we don’t have power. If we come together, we will have power.”

Limitations of the highlander quota program. The highland quota program has proved to increase access to college and offers several advantages, but it also has a few limitations.

The choice of academic majors is limited. Originally, the highlander quota recruited students to study only three academic majors: education, law, and political science. In 2010, the Ministry of the Interior (MOI) made an effort to diversify the choice of academic majors by adding four new majors to the list of major choices. The new majors were business, social science, economics, and humanities. However, the expansion did not include majors in sciences such as medicine, engineering, mathematics, biology, and other fields. At present, only seven majors are offered to highlander students and all these majors are in the field of social sciences. Most of the students who were admitted to NU through the highlander quota were in the mathematics and science tracks in their high schools. But when they came to study at NU, they ended up studying in social science disciplines rather than in scientific or mathematical disciplines. The highlanders ended up studying for majors that they did not intend to study for because of the increased likelihood of being admitted and the availability of scholarships. In the interviews, the researchers asked student participants about their thoughts on this topic. Most of the students thought the program would be better if the highlander quota could expand the choice of academic majors to include hard sciences such as engineering, medicine, and nursing. Sai, a Karen student, favored the idea of expanding the number of
academic majors to include majors in medicine and nursing so that ethnic students could
go back to their villages and provide healthcare to their own people. Sai reflected that
some doctors and nurses often insulted hill tribe people when they went to a hospital.
Having doctors and nurses who come from minority ethnic groups and who could speak
ethnic languages would lead to better communication, better understanding, and better
healthcare services. The director general of the Department of Provincial Administration
(DOPA) gave a speech to highlander quota students at the scholarship award ceremony
on July 17, 2013. He acknowledged that the choice of academic majors offered by the
highlander quota was limited, as shown in the following statement:

At present, the nine majors are too few. We need doctors, we need public health
workers, and we need scientists. Our nine majors have to be majors that create
changes and address social problems. We have lawyers, public administrators,
agriculturalists; we have teachers. These are helpful, but, of course, the society
needs doctors, needs public health workers, needs scientists, and needs mechanics
to create new tools or utensils in the villages.

The director, like Sai and other highlander students, viewed that there was a need
to expand the choice of academic majors. However, in his entire speech, he did not once
mention whether there was a possibility for the highlander quota program to add majors
in hard sciences to the existing list of majors in the near future. Some highlander students
asked the staff who were in charge of the quota about the possibility for adding more
academic majors into the program. The answer given to them was that majors in science
such as medicine, engineering, and nursing required higher tuition fees and related
expenses. The same amount of money used for supporting one medical student could be
used for supporting two students in social-science-related fields.

The number of quota seats is limited. The limited number of students is regarded
as another constraint that the highlander quota has faced. As discussed earlier, in each

192
year only nineteen students are recruited and supported by the project to study at NU, even though, in each year, there are many high school highlander students who apply for this quota. Yong, a Hmong student, pointed out that the quota gave hill tribe students the opportunity to study at the university, but this opportunity is too small compared to the number of high school highlander students who would like to attend college. He illustrates that only 19 out of 4,000, 6,000, or 7,000 highlander students can gain access through this quota. “It’s less than one percent of the total high school highlander students,” said Yong. Ming, a Hmong student, also stated that it would be better if the program could increase the number of students. He pointed out that there were more students who needed this kind of opportunity because ethnic minority people did not have much money. Only a few people in his village became rich from farming. He also said the huge number of examination takers in each year already indicated how many more highlander students wanted to receive this kind of opportunity. This is parallel to what Sorn, a Mien student, reflected. Sorn pointed out that the hill tribe students were also good at school, but they did not have the money or the opportunity to pursue higher education. Right after the scholarship award ceremony on July 17, 2013, the researcher informally asked the staff the same question. The answer she was given was the same as the answer given to the students—the funding for this program was limited, the program could annually support only nineteen students for undergraduate programs at NU.

*The choice of higher education institutions is limited.* The highlander quota was originally established by collaboration between the Ministry of the Interior (MOI), a funding provider, and NU, an educational service provider. Both MOI and NU has a long history of involvement in ethnic minorities in the north of Thailand, beginning in 1954,
when the Thai government declared the integrated policy to address so called ‘hilltribe problems.’ In the early years, the MOI issued and implemented the integrated policy and NU was selected to contribute knowledge from its personnel in addressing ‘hilltribe problems.’ Over four decades, the role of NU on ethnic minority people fluctuated up and down (Buadaeng, 2006). At present, NU is the only university in the north that offers programs in ethnic studies, and it has a great number of faculty members whose research interests focus on highlander people. NU’s history with highlanders and its commitment in improving educational equity made NU become the higher education institution that was designated for providing admission seats to highlander students. From 1994-2005, the highlander quota was implemented only at NU. The quota was proved to increase the enrollment of highlander students at the university level. Consequently, in 2006, the quota program was expanded to include Lanna University (LU) (psydonym), which is a public university located in Chiang Mai province. LU provides education to highlander students, while MOI provides scholarships as it does with highlander students at NU. At LU, about six highlander students are annually recruited and admitted to undergraduate studies in agricultural majors including fishery, agronomy, agricultural chemistry, soil science, plant protection, and horticulture.

The highlander quota is implemented only at NU and LU: nineteen students are admitted to study at NU and six students are admitted to study at LU. This quota certainly increases the number of highlander student in the Thai higher education system. However, it would be better if the highlander quota could be expanded and implemented at other public universities located in the north or central region of Thailand. If this
expansion could take place, highlander student would have more choices of higher education institutions they could attend.

In summary, the highlander quota is the only government-based scholarship program that specifically aims to increase college access for highland ethnic minority students in Thai higher education system. The highlander quota, unlike other key factors, affected college access of the students in this study in the final stage of their college access rather than in earlier stages such as primary and secondary school. Since its establishment, the quota program has proved successful to some extent in addressing the issue of educational accessibility for highlander students, who are historically disadvantaged students, by increasing the likelihood for their admission to college and by providing scholarships. About 365 highlander students have already gained benefits from this quota. However, this quota program has a few limitations. The choices for academic majors and higher education institutions are limited, and only a few highlander students can take advantage of the benefits of this quota. These limitations are mainly set by the Thai government’s insufficient funding for the program.

The highlander students are selected from several thousand students and are financially supported to study at NU. When these students graduate, they are likely to utilize their educational credentials to gain lifelong personal and financial benefits. But they are also expected to return benefits to taxpayers and to society. This group of students is especially expected to use the knowledge they gain to provide benefits to their communities, to Thai society, and to the nation at large. The director general of Department of Provincial Area (DOPA) confirmed this in his speech at the scholarship award ceremony as follows:
If education is just a certificate that allows you to get a job, that’s completely wrong, and the Ministry of the Interior has miserably failed. The Ministry of the Interior wants our scholars to become intellectual leaders for society and for local communities. This is our true intention. This project was not founded to support you to only attain Bachelor’s degrees, but also to use your knowledge to lead the society, because you are the intellectuals of your community. To speak frankly, you all are intellectuals of ethnic minorities people…for example, a third-year student who is studying in law school can go back to your community and look at injustice issues in law, in human rights, and in the status issues that your people face and also look at the kinds of government services that the people in your community still lack.

The director general went on and stated that, compared to other students funded by taxes, highlander quota students have a more substantial responsibility to society because they received an additional 30,000 baht ($1,000) from tax money. This additional 30,000 baht is a spiritual bond and social commitment: it is a social responsibility that reminds them that they have an obligation to help their communities and their society, to make contributions to the nation, and to be good productive citizens of the society. The director general repeatedly stated that these students should return and assist their communities, their relatives, and people in their communities who needed help or who still did not have access to state welfare programs.

**Conclusion**

This chapter provides additional empirical evidence for college access. It presents the two macro-level factors that contributed to positive college access for first-generation highlander college students, who were from historically and socio-economically underprivileged groups. The first of the two-macro level factors is student loans. Student loans were officially established in 1996 by the Thai government. The student loans are regarded as the single largest need-based financial resource for upper secondary and post-secondary education in Thailand. There are two types of student loans: traditional student loans, established in 1996, and income contingency loans (ICL), established in 2006. The
first type is available to students at high school and tertiary education on the basis of means testing of family incomes. Highlander students frequently apply for this type of student loan. The ICL loans are for students who are not qualified for traditional student loans and are granted regardless of their families’ incomes. Student loans, especially traditional student loans, have significantly contributed to college access for highlander students. A large number of highlander students rely on student loans to attend upper-secondary school and then college, since their parent have little or no financial resources. Without financial assistance such as student loans, their ability to attend college would be less likely or impossible. Some students who planned to go college obtained student loans during their high school years, not only to pay for high school expenses, but also to save money in advance in order to pay for college expenses. In addition, financial aid such as student loans has enhanced college access for highlander college students. Although student loans covered tuition and provided small amounts of monthly stipends to cover the costs of living, other college expenses were not covered by student loans, so different students found different financial coping strategies. A majority of students combined money from various sources such as student loans, scholarships, and parents to pay for college expenses. A group of students who obtained scholarships from private foundations were restricted from taking student loans, but they either worked at part-time jobs or ask for additional money from their parents to cover expenses. In addition to combining funding from available sources, some students economized by living at university dormitories that were cheaper and located on campus rather than living at private dormitories that charged higher rent and utilities. The university dormitories were mainly reserved for freshmen students. If any non-freshmen students wished to stay in the
dormitories, they had to participate in a certain number of the dormitories’ volunteer activities.

A college admission quota program for highland minorities, also called the highlander quota, is another macro-level factor that played a supportive role in college access for first-generation college students. The highlander quota was founded in 1994 by the Ministry of the Interior (MOI), a funding provider, together with Northern University (NU), an educational service provider. It supported highlanders to attain higher levels of education and to gain and use their knowledge to enhance the quality of life and the participation of minorities in Thai society. Each year, nineteen students from nine ethnic groups in 15 provinces in north, northwestern, and upper central Thailand pursue undergraduate studies at NU. Admitted students are provided with a 30,000-baht ($1,000) scholarship for four consecutive years (five years for students in education majors). Regarding its crucial role, the highlander quota is the only government-based scholarship program that particularly aims to enhance college access for highland ethnic minority students in the Thai higher education system.

Since the quota program’s establishment, 365 highlander youths have already benefited. In the 2013 academic year, there were ninety-four students supported by this quota. This quota program has helped enhance college accessibility for highlander students in four ways. First, it increased the likelihood of admission to college. High school highlander students only competed with other highlander students, instead of competing with mainstream Thai students. This made the pool of competitors smaller, since it was limited only to highlander students. A larger pool of examination takers, including mainstream Thai students, meant that the competition would have been more
difficult to overcome, because the highlanders would have had to compete with students who came from private schools or well-known public schools in the region and who had also obtained expensive tutoring to prepare for the examination from private tutoring schools. Second, the quota program provided a 30,000-baht ($1,000) scholarship. Third, it facilitated the college decision-making process. The availability of the scholarships not only had important impacts on students’ decision-making with regard to whether or not they would attend college, but also in choosing which college to attend. Lastly, the quota program contributed to the formation of the highlander students’ association, in which highlander students who were admitted through the highland quota regularly assembled through the years to do various activities together. This association provided an important space that allowed highlander students the opportunity to gain knowledge and firsthand experience about other ethnic groups. The association provided a safe environment where highlander students could share their ethnic identities, sincerely talk to each other, and help out each other with classes, tutoring, and other issues. When the highlanders assembled and built solidarity, they were able to make their highland ethnic minority identity become known to non-ethnic students.

The highlander quota program has enhanced college accessibility for highlander youths, but it also has a few limitations. One of the limitations is that the highlander quota supports students to study only in seven disciplines in the field of social sciences, not in hard sciences. The other limitation is that the quota annually recruits only nineteen students to study at NU and six students to study at LU. In fact, there are more highlander high school students who wish to pursue and secure college access through this quota. The last limitation is that this quota has been operated at only two higher education
institutions, NU and LU. The majority of highlander college goers expressed that it would be more beneficial if the quota expanded the choices for academic majors, increased the number of recruited students, and implemented this quota program at other public universities. To conclude, the successful college access of this group of first-generation college students was influenced by multiple key factors rather than by a single factor. These key factors combined or intersected to contribute to the success of this particular group of highlander students.
CHAPTER 7
ETHNICITY AND COLLEGE ACCESS

This chapter explores the connection between race/ethnicity and college access. The chapter first examines how highlander students perceive and understand the role of ethnicity in their educational experiences and college access. In other words, what role does their ethnicity play in their educational experiences and in shaping their college trajectories?

Students’ Perspectives about Ethnicity

All student participants were individually asked their viewpoints about the role of ethnicity in the context of education and also in their educational experiences. The majority of the students perceived that highland ethnic minority status or hill tribe status provided them with both advantages and disadvantages. The advantages included having greater opportunities for obtaining financial aid and for learning resilience and life skills. The disadvantages included being teased about their ethnicities and receiving inferior primary school education.

Advantages

Greater opportunity for scholarships. As stated in Chapter Six, in general, hill tribe children are from low-income families, and their parents are farmers with limited or no education. Some students live near Thai towns where they have access to electricity, clean drinking water, paved roads, health care, schools, and other amenities, while other students live in very remote mountainous areas where paved roads, electricity, health stations, and good quality schools are not available. A large number of highlander students in this study perceived that their poverty and ethnic minority status attracted
donors to assist them. For example, Pam, an Akha student, noted that hill tribe children have better opportunities in obtaining scholarship support from NGOs than children from non-hill tribes. Pam pointed out that the mainstream Thai society viewed mountain people as disadvantaged people. This perception of deprivation caused NGOs and other agencies to pay more attention to hill tribe children rather than non-hill the tribe children, even though some urban Thai children were poorer and needed more help compared to some of the hill tribe children in certain areas. Naak, a Karen student, who emphasized the positive aspect of ethnic minority status, also agreed with Pam. He said, “NGOs came to help us and opened up our minds.” Naak illustrated his view by using his own success in obtaining financial aid as an example. Naak received need-based scholarships for low-income and ethnic minority students from the International Support Group Foundation (ISGF) from the time he attended middle school through his college years. Naak was awarded about 4,000 baht ($133) per year while he was in middle school, 6,000 baht ($200) per year during high school, and 12,000 baht ($400) per year during undergraduate study. Naak’s parents generated very little income from sustainable farming. Without support from ISGF Naak’s dream for school and for college would have been less possible or more challenging. Sorn, a Mien student, noted that college admission quotas for highland ethnic minorities (also called the highlander quotas), aimed to support college admission and scholarships for highland ethnic minorities from ten different groups. Sorn said if a high school student was not from a hill tribe, he or she could not apply for the highlander quota and gain its benefits. Sai, a Karen student, confirmed Sorn’s experience. He remarked that he was able to study at Northern University (NU) because of his ethnic background. Sai also stated that if he were not
from a highland ethnic minority group, he would not have qualified for the highlander quota. Another Karen student, Euy, also said “If I were not Karen, I would not have been admitted to study at this place (i.e., NU). My ethnic minority status gave me this opportunity.”

In the Thai elementary and higher education systems, different types of scholarships, such as merit-based scholarships, need-based scholarships, and criteria-based scholarships are available to different groups of students. Need-based scholarships are offered to K-12 students and college students who come from low-income families, regardless of religion, gender, race, or ethnicity. Need-based scholarships are mainly provided by Thai or foreign private organizations and foundations. Examples of such providers include the Thai Government Lottery Office, the Education for Development Foundation (EDF), the International Support Group Foundation (ISGF), the Foundation for Children, the Mirror Foundation, the TISCO Foundation, Thai banks, and others. Merit-based scholarships, on the other hand, are primarily offered for upper-secondary school programs, undergraduate studies, and advanced degrees, and they are based on the students’ academic performances as well as extracurricular activities such as volunteer commitments. The major government agencies providing merit-based scholarships include the Office of the Civil Service Commission (OCSC), the National Science and Technology Development Agency (NSTDA), and the Development and Promotion of the Gifted in Science and Technology Project. These national-level scholarships are very competitive and awarded to a very limited number of students. Criteria-based scholarships are awarded to students based on specific criteria for eligibility, such as religion, ethnicity, and special needs. For example, the Islamic Development Bank (IDB)
offers scholarships to Islamic students in Thailand for study in secondary and post-secondary schools. The College Admission Quota for Highland Ethnic Minorities by the Ministry of the Interior also offers criteria-based scholarships, which are reserved only for students from ten specific ethnic minority groups (i.e., hill tribe students).

The majority of the college students surveyed in this study thought that having highland ethnic minority status meant having greater opportunities for obtaining scholarships. Their ethnic backgrounds helped increase their chances for being awarded scholarships from the Thai government and from NGOs. However, if one compares the number of available merit- and need-based scholarships with the number of hill tribe students from all regions, one may find that the number of needy hill tribe students overwhelms the number of available scholarships. In fact, there are many hill tribe students who are left out of the educational system due to lack of financial support, because the number of scholarships awarded from each source is very limited.

A few student participants touched on this issue in their individual interviews. Nan, a Karen student, said that some of his middle-school and high-school Karen friends could not continue their studies because their parents did not have enough money to support them and they did not receive any form of academic financial assistance.

**Resilient life skills.** The student participants also expressed the view that growing up in ethnic minority cultures gave them advantages in terms of applied life skills. Generally, highland ethnic minorities live in remote highland areas of Thailand. The main occupation of highlander populations is farming, both swidden agriculture and subsistence agriculture, while wage employment provides a secondary source of income. Historically, farmers in the highlands have relied heavily on human labor. Manual
laborers were very valuable and important, and this dependence on farm workers is still true today, even though farmers have begun to use agricultural machines such as tractors and agricultural chemicals such as fertilizers and pesticides to increase crop production. Children provided valuable labor for the households. Children as young as eight years old were expected to give child care to younger siblings, either at home or at the farm. When the children were a little older, they were expected to do household chores such as cleaning, laundry, and feeding livestock. When the children were over eleven years old, they were expected to do farm tasks such as weeding, planting, and harvesting. Before the 1980s, only a few schools were built in the areas where the majority of the highlander people lived. Even in places where schools existed, the schools faced the issue of frequent and extended student absences because the parents needed labor from their children on the farms. As the schools became more broadly established and compulsory education became legally required in highlander communities, most highlander children were required to attend primary school in or near their home villages, but they still helped their parents do household chores and farm work during weekend or school breaks.

Most of college students interviewed in this study have assisted their parents with housework and farm work at some point in their lives. However, the participants who attended primary schools and middle schools located near their villages fulfilled such expectations more than students who attended welfare boarding schools or schools located a great distance from their home villages, partly because students who attended such schools only went back home during long weekends or school breaks. When these students went back home, they helped their parents do household chores. If time allowed, they also went to the farms with their parents and helped work as much as they
could. For example, Nat attended middle schools and high schools located far from his home and stayed at the school’s dormitory. While living in the dormitory, Nat and other Karen students learned to cook, to raise vegetables and pigs, to farm, and to do construction work. During semester breaks, Nat went back to his village and helped his parents and siblings do housekeeping and farm work. During secondary school, Nat occasionally worked as a wage laborer at other farms to earn money for his personal expenses. Nat helped his parents work even after he entered to college. He stated, “This past October I went to help them (i.e., his parents) harvest rice, harvest corn, and thresh rice. I did whatever they did. I harvested rice until my face got burned. The weather was very hot, too.” When Nat went to work in the field, some villagers told him, “Oh, you are a university student, you can’t work in the field. The field is far. You have to walk about three or four kilometers to the field. You don’t need to come to the field.” He responded to them “I can do it. I am also a human.” During a summer break, the researcher traveled with Nat to his village. While the majority of Thais were celebrating the Songkran (Thai New Year) festival, Nat’s village was hosting a Karen Christian youth camp. Ninety-nine percent of the households in Nan’s village practiced Christianity. The youth camp was held in April, which is a hot month in Thailand. Most villagers stayed at home or went fishing, since they were in a season break for agriculture. About one hundred fifty Karen youths from several villages in Mae Hong Son gathered, did activities, and prayed together at the church located in the middle of the village. Nat’s older sister managed a small grocery store. During the youth camp, Nat and other family members helped his sister sell candies, snacks, and other products. He also helped her prepare, pack, and sell various types of meatballs and soft drinks to the youths.
Pam is another student who helped her parents with housekeeping and farm work. Pam is the first child of the family and she has four younger siblings. Pam attended primary and lower secondary schools in her village. During the school week, in the mornings and after school, she helped her parents cook meals, feed pigs and chickens, clean the house, do laundry, and give care to her younger siblings. During the weekend she went to work at the farm if another sibling could care for the youngest ones. During high school, Pam stayed at a female dormitory near her school, which was located in the city of Chiang Rai. Her school schedule and the distance made her less able to return home during weekends to assist her parents. When Pam was not at home, her younger siblings who still lived at home helped her parents instead. However, during semester breaks, Pam went back to stay at home and helped her parents work at home and at the farm as she had done in her middle school years. After becoming a student at NU, Pam, like Nat, continued to assist her parents with housework and farm work whenever she went back home. Pam’s college schedule did not allow her to visit home often. She mainly went back home during long school breaks such as the New Year’s holidays or during semester breaks.

The researcher traveled with Pam to visit her parents and her village. During the research period, Pam’s parents asked her to stay at home to provide company for the researcher. In Pam’s home, her younger sibling, who was studying in the eighth grade at the school in the village, went to help the parents cultivate rice and pull weeds at coffee farms during the weekends. But, at home, Pam cooked meals, did laundry, cleaned the house, fed pigs and chickens, and gave child care to a three-year-old sibling. But when Pam did not have guests, she went to work at the farm with her parents.
Students who lived most of their early teenage lives in welfare boarding schools learned different set of life skills compared to the students who lived at home, did household chores and worked with their parents on farms during weekends. The students who lived in such boarding schools learned vocational skills. To illustrate, Fang attended a welfare boarding school during his secondary school education due to family circumstances. The boarding school provided education, school uniforms, educational materials, housing, and meals without charge. At the school’s dormitory, Fang had to follow a schedule and rules set by the dormitory. He had a set routine as follows:

5:00 am: wake up, make bed, and work out.
5:30 am - 7:00 am: perform cleaning tasks at the dorm as assigned, take a shower, and have breakfast.
8:00 am - 4:00 pm: attend classes.
4:00 pm – 5:00 pm: go back to the dorm, perform cleaning duties, work at a vegetable garden, occasionally play sports with his friends.
6:00 pm – 8:00 pm: have dinner prepared by the cooks, enjoy free time, and do homework.
8:00 pm: gather together with other students to say required prayers to Buddha, and go to bed.

Fang’s schedule was the same from Monday to Friday during the entire six years that he attended the boarding school. Fang raised vegetables to generate income for his personal expenses, so he spent most of his weekends working on his vegetable garden. While living at the boarding school, Fang learned to get along with other students from different ethnic backgrounds since the school was a community of peers. He also learned
to be responsible for himself, and to be independent. The life lessons he learned at the boarding school laid a solid foundation for his college life. Other minority students who lived with close relatives such as aunts and uncles while attending schools also helped with household chores. For example, Gaem and Pong lived with relatives who held college degrees and worked in the city during their high school years. Gaem and Pong helped their relatives clean houses, do laundry, mow the lawns, and other tasks, while their relative provided free housing and meals.

Ake, a former-boarding school student, stated that learning life skills is one advantage that many highlander students have over non-ethnic minority students. According to his views, highlander students have greater life skills training, and they could live in any circumstances or any social settings. Highlander students can live and survive even though they do not have money because they know how to work and can adapt to hardships. Highlander students are fine if they have more difficulties in life, unlike people who has never experienced any hardships. “They are lowland people and they are socially and economically accepted. They are not viewed to be disadvantaged people. We, ethnic minorities, are viewed to be more disadvantaged than others. But I think we have more advantages in term of life skills,” said Ake. Pam, like Ake, pointed out that ethnic minority people have their own way of life. Highlander children learned to work when they were very young by helping their parents. She said, “In our home, everyone knows how to work. Everyone in the house has to do his or her duties.” She went on and stated that children being trained to help parents work is something that made highlander children become tough and diligent people. In school and in college, Pam learned that some of her northern Thai friends did not know how to do laundry and
other common tasks because their parents did most of the work for them. “They really can’t do things by themselves,” said Pam, as she compared the cultural differences in child rearing practices between highlanders and lowlanders.

In short, highlander college students perceived that their ethnic status provided them greater opportunities in obtaining scholarships because of the fact that hill tribes are poor and donors perceive hill tribes as being socially and economically challenged. This group of students also perceived that the life skills they voluntarily and involuntarily learned from home, from boarding schools, or from close relatives were another advantage given by their ethnic circumstances.

**Disadvantages**

**Being insulted about ethnic background.** Although highlander college students felt that their ethnicity status provides some financial and life skills advantages, they also felt that their ethnicity status gave them several disadvantages. The main disadvantage they experienced as ethnic minorities was being teased about their ethnic cultures by mainstream Thai students. This kind of teasing usually took place in secondary school settings, and the teasing also occurred to a lesser degree during college. The stories of Singh, Pla, Poom, and Nat demonstrate the issue.

Singh experienced being teased for being from the Lahu tribe. Singh had attended a primary school in the Chiang Rai province, which had predominately highlander students (i.e., Karen, Akha, Lahu, Lisu, and Tai Lue). With financial support from a Korean church-based foundation, Singh was accepted for study for middle and high school levels at a private school under the Church of Christ in Thailand (C.C.T.) in the Chiang Mai province. The private school was a large K-12 school, and the majority of the
students were northern Thai students. When Singh entered the tenth grade, he was a few years older than his classmates because he began school late. Singh’s native language was Lahu, while standard Thai was his secondary language. Although Singh spoke standard Thai fluently, he could not pronounce some of the words with accuracy, because of the nature of the language differences between the Thai and Lahu dialects. Some of the students in Singh’s class teased him, not only because of his ethnic background, but also because of his age and his Thai language pronunciation. Some students in his class called him ‘MuSer,’ ‘Dek Doi’ (i.e., mountain child),’ and ‘old MuSer man.’ The term ‘MuSer’ is an impolite name used by Thais to identify the Lahu people, while Lahu people prefer to call themselves ‘Lahu.’ ‘Mountain child’ means someone from mountainous or highland areas. The term ‘MuSer’ and ‘Dek Doi’ both have negative connotations. They indicate that the person is from a hill tribe, or is poor or dirty, and denotes that the person is from a rural, remote, or uncivilized area. Singh said he had felt offended when the other students called him with those terms. In his thoughts, Singh would have liked for those students to be punished for bullying, but he talked over this issue with the senior ethnic students in his school, and they told him to ignore the bullies. Singh studied hard in order to make good grades, and he also participated in several extracurricular activities. His academic achievements and his reputation in extracurricular activities showed the bullies that he was as smart as they were. As the result, the bullying students stopped teasing Singh about his ethnic background, his speaking skills, and his age.

Pla, a Lahu student from Chiang Rai province, also experienced being teased about his ethnicity by his friends during secondary school. Pla attended a district-level
school for his secondary school education. The school was dominated by northern Thai students with few Lahu, Karen, or Hmong students. Pla said:

The teachers did not tease me, but friends did. They said ‘MuSur,’ and ‘Maew,’ something like that. They mainly said to me ‘Maew.’ They misused the word ‘Maew’ and called me ‘M Sae.’ At first I did not know what they said to me. It turned out ‘M Sae’ was the word they used to insult me. I was just tolerant and made no response. I thought about responding to them, but just in my mind, though. I thought in my mind that we are what we are. Why would they verbally insult us?

‘MuSur’ is the term Thais use for the Lahu people, whereas Lahu use the term ‘Lahu’ as described earlier. The term ‘Maew’ has two different meanings. First, ‘Maew’ is the word created by Thais to identify the Hmong people, while Hmong people prefer to be called ‘Hmong’ rather than ‘Maew.’ Second, the word ‘Maew’ is used informally by mainstream Thais as a name for all ‘hill tribes,’ regardless of their particular ethnic origins. The mainstream Thais assume that all ethnic minorities who live in the mountainous or rural area are ‘Maew.’ The term ‘Maew,’ when used to refer to ‘hill tribes’ has a stereotypical connotation which means alien people, poor people, people with peculiar religions practices and beliefs, illiterate people with limited fluency in the Thai language, and people who were involved in illegal drug trafficking and deforestation. Pla felt hurt when the students at his school insulted him about his ethnicity. Pla chose to respond to the offensive behavior in his mind rather than through outward verbal or physical actions. He said he allowed them to verbally insult him because he thought they would eventually become exhausted and stop insulting him. At the same time, he also cheered up himself by telling himself, “We are what we are like this. That’s our uniqueness. It’s unique. We are not like others and others are not like us.”
Poom, a Hmong student from Tak, is another example. Poom attended both primary and middle school in a school located near her village. The school was demographically diverse with an enrollment of northern Thai, Hmong, and Karen students. After middle school Poom attended a district school. Poom’s new school was larger than her previous school, and the majority of students were lowlander Thais with a few highlander students. At her high school, Poom was teased by non-highlander students about her ethnic background. The students did not tease her directly, but they did when they saw her walk by. They said to her that she was not articulate with the Thai language. The soil where Poom’s village is located is red soil. The bottoms of the shoes she wore around the village turned red because of the soil she stepped on. Frequently, the shoes she wore when returning to the dormitory located in the city or to the school also turned red. So, the students at her school teased Poom about her shoes. They said to her “‘Teen Daeng. She must come from the mountains.’ ‘Teen Daeng’ means red feet. Poom said she accepted the fact that she was from the mountains. Poom said she was annoyed, but she dealt with the teasing by ignoring it. Nat, a Karen student in political science, is another student who was insulted on the basis of his ethnicity and language proficiency. Nat received his middle school education from a school located in a northern Thai village. The majority of students at his school were northern Thais. Only a few students were from Shan and Karen ethnic groups. When Nat first entered the school, he could not correctly pronounce either the northern Thai dialect or the central Thai language. So, his non-highlander friends often teased him for his inability to speak Thai accurately and fluently. Nat said being teased about language was tolerable, but he was upset when they called him and his Karen friends ‘Yang’ instead of ‘Pwa Ka Nyaw.’ ‘Yang’ was the term
Northern Thai people used for the Karen group, while the Karen people call themselves ‘Pwa Ka Nyaw.’ The Karen people regard the term ‘Yang’ as a disrespectful word because it has a negative connotation. The term ‘Yang’ in northern Thai and in central Thai means sap or rubber. Nat said he felt upset whenever the other students called him ‘Yang,’ but he did not respond to the insults. Rather, he kept his disappointed feelings in his mind and did not report the name-calling to the teachers. Nat said, “They teased me, but I was smarter than they. I kept my chin up. When they asked me to copy my homework, I did not give it to them. Sooner or later, they stopped teasing me.” Nat continued on and stated that this kind of incident happened every year when new Karen students from the villages came to study at his former middle school.

In addition to the representative stories described above, the collective conversations in the focus group interview of five students (Nat, Sorn, Pla, Pam, and Gaem) confirmed their common experiences in being insulted on the basis of ethnicity and the consequence of such insult as shown in the following excerpt:

Pam: But, one of the drawbacks is that some of them are embarrassed about the fact that they are ethnic minority.
Sorn: It is normal.
Pam: They conceal their ethnicity. Honestly, other ethnic people can tell that you are ethnic person. We can tell. We use our ethnic minority intuition to tell or indicate whether they are ethnic minority. Even if they pretend not to be ethnic minority, we can still tell.
Nat: It takes one to know one.
Pam: I think they should be proud of themselves because they can stand at the point where northern Thai people stand. But they, instead, hide their ethnic backgrounds. From my view, I think it is not a good value.
Sorn: It is usual. We have to look at their past experiences, too. They might have experiences in being teased. They might have had bad experiences.
Gaem: Like me, I mainly studied with northern Thais. I think if we don’t look down on ourselves, no one will look down on us.
Sorn: I agree.
Gaem: If we tell other people that we are ethnic people from a particular ethnic group, they will not say anything (i.e., no teasing or no verbal insults about being
an ethnic person). If they know later that you are an ethnic minority person, they might feel bad or upset.
Pam: Because you cover it from the beginning.
Kunking: Yes.
Sorn: Sometime they don’t know how we are. Sometime, they just went ahead and looked down on us. Like a student in law school, he knew that I am an ethnic minority. He asked me “Hey, when you went back home, did you take off all your clothes? Did you wear only leaves when you went hunting?” Something like that. I don’t know. It’s too much, I think. I was supposed to get angry with him. I just felt funny.
Researcher: How about you, Pla?
Pla: I had similar experiences.
Gaem: My friends liked to tease me “when you go back home, you walk back home, right?”
Sorn: I think now Thai people don’t look at ethnic minority people in a negative way as much. It’s unlike the past. They now view us better.
Pam: I think honesty is important. If you are brave to tell them (i.e., non-highlanders) who you are, I think they might feel truthful in making friendship. If you pretend to be ‘northern Thais,’ but later they happen to know that you are not, they might feel bad about you. If I were them, I would not want to make friends with those kinds of people anymore. I think ethnic minorities have charm. The ways they think and view about way of life are different (from mainstream Thais). That is one kind of charm.
The researcher: It sounds like you all had experiences in being teased about your ethnic backgrounds.
Pla: I had the experience of being looked down. The worst one was when I went for tutoring at Rachabhat Chiangrai (a former teaching college). There was a tutor who was a nationally well-known tutor. How could he say that? Teacher Rily, do you know him?
Sorn: I know.
Pla: He tutored Thai language. He said, “you are better, you are better, you are better than people who live in the mountains in the forests like Maew (i.e., hill tribes). He did not realize that there were ethnic minority students at SaMakKhi school, (the school where he gave tutoring sessions on Thai language).
Sorn: There are many highlander students at SaMakKhi School.
Pla: SaMakKhi School, mountain students.
Sorn: It is normal. This kind of incident also took place at the university when the instructors called the ethnic minorities’ names.
Pla: People like a nationally famous tutor should not say things in a negative way like that.
Gaem: It’s like my case. When I went to the class and an instructor said something that looked down on us, I did not feel anything, but my friends (i.e., northern Thai friends) reacted and responded, “Why do you say like that. They are also human like us. They are people in our country like us.” My friends responded on behalf of me.
Pla: It’s normal among Thais.
Sorn: It’s not a problem among friends. Each friend knows that I am from an ethnic group. They all know. They did not say anything.
Pla: But he is a nationally well-known person.
Sorn: I think, our friends care about us more if they know that we are ethnic minorities. They are more considerate. They don’t talk about it. They are considerate when someone says things like that to us.
Pam: The instructors said these things because they do not truly know about us.
Sorn: Yes.
Pam: Sometime the instructors may face difficulty. We spend our whole life in being ethnic minorities. The instructors said things based on what they read, but they did not really speak based on what they had personally experienced. The instructors should learn it again. The culture they talked about was from how many years ago? I have spent my life as ethnic since I was a child. The instructors don’t know (i.e., how can the instructor know more than her, who grew up as ethnic person and lived as ethnic person?).
Pla: Sometimes, they were stupid, they cursed us without knowing what was what. If they don’t know, they should just say they don’t know. And it’s never mind. It’s funny.

The above passage indicates that each of the highlander students had direct or indirect experiences in being teased about their ethnic background. Such incidents took place both inside and outside the classroom. Such incidents might have been caused by stereotypes or outdated and inaccurate information about highlanders. However, the students felt that being sincere in revealing their ethnic backgrounds was more valid than hiding their ethnicities and pretending to be non-highlander people. As Pam said, other ethnic students could tell whether a student was from an ethnic group or not. In instead of hiding or being embarrassed about ethnicity, students should feel easy to let others know about their ethnic backgrounds and be proud of themselves because they are as capable as lowland Thais.

In addition, more students who attended predominately northern Thais schools experienced being teased about their ethnicities compared to students who attended predominately highlander schools such as welfare boarding schools. Fang, Ake, and Yong, who attended at secondary schools where the majority of students were highlander
students, did not experience being teased about their ethnicities. Fang and Ake attended welfare boarding schools with predominately highlander student populations, while Yong attended a predominately Hmong school in Nan province. However, this general observation does not mean that they never experienced being teased. In fact, some of them faced such teasing later on at college. To illustrate, Fang was irritated by his college friends about his pronunciation. Fang said, “I pronounced the words accurately, but they still teased me.” Fang pointed out that this teasing occurred because of stereotypes about hill tribe people not being fluent in speaking Thai. When one hill person could not speak Thai fluently, the mainstream Thai students assumed that other hill tribes also could not pronounce Thai words correctly. Fang firmly stated that this misconception was a big issue. The mainstream Thais assumed that hill tribe people grew poisoned cabbages, destroyed forests, and had many children. Sometimes, lowlander Thais would even asked Fang how many wives his father had. Fang said sometime the insults made him want to find out why the mainstream students said such things and to give them more accurate information about ethnic minorities. Yong has also experienced being teased about his ethnicity at college. Yong stated that he does not hide who he is and where he is from. He is willing to tell anyone who asks him or wants to know about his ethnic background. Yong still uses his Hmong nickname, which is unknown to non-Hmong people. He was often asked to tell the story of his nickname. His nickname means opium in the Hmong language. Yong said his parents might have given him such a name because in former times, they grew opium in the mountains. Yong’s parents saw that opium flowers had beautiful blossoms, and they gave him a Hmong name, which means opium. However, it turned out that his explanation produced unintended consequences. His friends teased
him for being named after opium. In addition to teasing Yong about his name, his college friends also teased him about his articulation in speaking the standard Thai language. Some of his friends pretended to pronounce words inaccurately when they talked to him. When his friends did that, Yong let them know that he was annoyed with such behavior. If a person persisted with the teasing, he avoided talking to him or her.

As stated earlier, insulting others on the basis of ethnicity still takes place at the college level, but less frequently than at the secondary school level. Some students expressed the view that such insults should not take place in college. Pam, an Akha student majoring in social studies, experienced being teased during her time in high school, but not during her time in college. She stated that offending others on the basis of ethnicity should not be problematic at the college level, because people in higher education look at one’s abilities rather than one’s ethnicity. The highlanders’ presence in college already signifies that highland students have the ability to study and succeed in college. Kaeo, a Lahu student majoring social science, had views similar to Pam’s. She pointed out that student demographics at college level are diverse in terms of ethnicity, gender, age, and geographic locations. College students were not concerned whether other students came from hill tribes or not. Rather, mainstream college students were often interested in what highlanders could do and what knowledge they had. In addition, Sorn, a Mien student in political science, stated that it was not necessary for any highlander students to hide his or her ethnicity. In his department, for example, everyone knew which students were ethnic students and which were not. For Sorn, when other students asked him about his ethnic background, he was willing to tell them. If his friends did not ask him, he waited until the situation allowed him to tell them about his
background. Typically, his friends asked him whether he could speak the Hmong language or not. He explained to them that he could not speak the Hmong dialect because he was from a tribal different group and spoke Mien, a different language from Hmong. Once his friends knew that he spoke the Mien language, they then showed interest in learning more about the Mien people and culture. Sorn used this occasion to give accurate information about his ethnic group to friends who had incorrect information about Mien people.

In summary, all college students in this study experienced microaggression or racism in social institutions such as schools. They were teased or insulted by Thai peers about their ethnicity and their low proficiency in speaking Thai. The majority of students encountered such experiences during secondary school, while a few confronted such experiences during college. The students who were enrolled at predominately northern Thai schools experienced being teased more than the students who were enrolled at predominately highlander schools. When teased or insulted by Thai students for being of a minority ethnicity and for having low levels of Thai language proficiency, the highlander students were upset or angry. However, they did not verbally or physically argue against the students who teased them. Instead, they preferred to ignore the rude behavior until their friends stopped insulting them. At the same time, some of those college students had successfully overcome such discrimination by studying hard in order to obtain higher GPAs and by proving to the students who had insulted them that they were also academically capable. The highlander students showed the bullies that, even though they were mountain students, they were also smart and good at schoolwork. As a result, when highlander students demonstrated proficiency in their school performances,
the bullying students stopped insulting them and changed their perspectives about highlander students.

These experiences of being insulted based on their highlander ethnicity corresponds to what Matthew Juelsgaard (2013) found in the study of lived experiences of students who were ethnically Lahu at Banrongrian Secondary School in Chiang Rai, Thailand. The study revealed that ethnicity was a significant matter in the students’ experiences of being Lahu in a predominately Thai school. The study found that all Lahu students reported that they were treated as inferior and were teased for speaking the Thai language incorrectly by Thai students because of their ethnic status of being Lahu. Lahu students also had difficulty in making friends with Thai students since their Thai peers had little or no desire to befriend Lahu students. Consequently, such experiences in being disparaged and insulted made the Lahu students feel different and not part of the group. Such experiences created negative consequences, making Lahu students feel inferior about being Lahu, lose their confidence in classroom participation, and feel different or alienated due to the lack of Thai friends. The study also found that the experience of Lahu students in being insulted took place when they first moved from mountain schools to lowland schools or during their lower secondary school attendance. They were less insulted about their Lahu background as they went up to higher levels of schooling. This is parallel to what highlander college students revealed.

**Inferior primary school education.** In addition to being insulted about ethnicity, college students in this study also noted that having poor backgrounds in primary school education was another disadvantage resulting from their minority ethnic status. Ake, a male Akha student, stated, “We, ethnic minority people, are disadvantaged. Even though
we are Thai, we are still an ethnic minority.” This limitation set an educational issue on highlander students, because most of highlanders live in mountainous or peripheral areas, not in the lowland areas or in the city areas.

Gaem, a female Hmong student in a science teaching program, pointed out that poor quality of teaching and learning was an important issue that most of schools located in highland communities have faced. For instance, she pointed out that teachers at her former primary school did not care about mountain children. They did not pay attention to how well students learned, and they were not interested in thinking about ways to help their students learn better. The school also hardly taught the English language. “I remember, when I was in the seventh grade, I knew only the English alphabet, A-Z. This lack of exposure has made me dislike English ever since. Now, I still hate English. My primary school education had huge impacts on my English skill.” Gaem did not have a strong background in English in her primary school, so when she pursued enrollment in a lowland middle school located in the city, she faced much difficulty with her classes in learning the English language. Gung felt frustrated because she only knew the English alphabet, while her Thai classmates who had received their primary school education from lowland schools were good at English. Gaem called attention to the fact that her classmates had been learning English skills since they were in kindergarten. She firmly stated that the curricula of the lowland schools were much better than those of the mountain schools.

Pam, an Akha student, agreed with Gaem, because based on her experience, she felt that schools in the highland areas offered low-quality education. Pam compared the quality of teaching and learning of highland schools with that of lowland schools. She
said the quality of teaching and learning of these two school settings was very different. The schools in the lowland areas provided rigorous math curricula and also offered tutoring classes, while the schools in the highland areas could not even deliver all of the required elementary-level arithmetic lessons. Pam reflected that students who graduated from schools in the highland areas had very poor math and English backgrounds. She illustrated the point by using her own experience. Pam said her former school could not teach all of the necessary math lessons by the end of each semester. Pam’s poor background in math became problematic for her when she pursued a science-track high school education at a secondary school located in a city in the Chiang Rai province. Her high school was a well-known public school in the province, and the majority of the students had strong primary and elementary education backgrounds. Pam had to struggle in order to catch up with her classmates. In addition to problems with math, she also had difficulties with the English language. Pam said teachers who taught English at her primary school were not trained in teaching English as a second language. They had only fundamental English skills, but they were assigned to teach English. Pam said her poor English background has continued to have an effect on her studies even now at the college level. “It’s like if your school background is poor, you will continue to face problems when you go further,” said Pam.

Pam pointed out two key reasons that contributed to the poor quality of teaching and learning, especially for math and English language, in her school. Firstly, she pointed out that teachers in her primary and middle schools had huge workloads. For example, one teacher taught three subjects and had to fulfill non-classroom duties at the same time. These duties included tasks such as preparing for classes, preparing meals for children,
attending meetings, completing paperwork, and supervising students. Pam thought that the excessive workload had a negative impact on teaching and on students’ learning. Teachers could not fully engage in teaching and in helping students learn. Secondly, she pointed out that, from her view, most teachers at highland schools took those positions as temporary measures to gain experience so they could transfer to more desirable lowland schools in the future. “Whenever they have the opportunity to make transfers, they would do it”, said Pam. In addition to high rates of teacher turnover, the school principal often changed every year. The new principals came in not long after the former principals left. As a result, teaching and learning objectives were not consistent, and the quality of the students’ learning was adversely affected. Chaem, a male Hmong student, agreed with Pam’s point. He added that teachers in the highland schools taught only when they felt like teaching, and they often did not make any effort to teach anything.

Nat, a male Karen student, reflected on the issue of the inferior quality of education found in many highland schools. Based on his experience, he pointed out that the limited number of teachers was another factor contributing to poor-quality education for ethnic minority students. Nat clarified this issue by telling about his own experience. Nat studied at the primary school in his village until the third grade and then he transferred to another school located in a northern Thai town. During Nat’s three years, his village school only had a few teachers and a few buildings and classrooms. Students from different grades were placed in the same classroom. For example, children in the first, second, and third grades were placed in one classroom, and children in the fourth, fifth, and sixth grades were placed in another room. Nat, like other many students in this study, faced the issue of receiving a poor background in English. He said the teachers at
his first primary school hardly taught the English language at all. This lack of English background from his early school years had a negative impact on Nat’s continuing to higher levels of education: middle school, high school, and college. In college, Nat was required to take four different English courses. Nat earned grades of D for three of the English courses. When asked why he did so poorly, Nat said he disliked English and his English background was poor. He said these reasons combined to make him earn the low grades. In addition, Nat’s school was located in a remote, mountainous area. The dirt road to his village was very curvy and narrow, so it was difficult for Nat’s teachers to travel during rainy season. The teachers spent the entire day on Mondays to travel from their homes in the lowland areas to the school in the village. The teachers then spent the entire day on Fridays to travel back to their homes. As a result, Nat and other students had classes for only three days per week instead of five days, since the teacher used Monday and Friday for commuting. Nat said this was another reason for the lack of rigorous teaching at his former school.

Nat left his former primary school about sixteen years ago, but he said the quality of education is still a major problem for the school even at the present time. Some parents in his village complained that the teachers did not teach children well; the teachers did not give homework to students; and the teachers liked to go back to their homes in the lowland areas. The parents also said that the teachers did not fully teach their children. The teachers rather preferred for the students to do other work, such as gardening, rather than studying. So the students who finished the sixth grade and went on to continue studying at schools located in lowland areas, still could not read or write well. In addition, when Nat went back to his village, he asked teenagers who had already finished
the sixth to read some words, and most of them read the words incorrectly. Nat was
surprised that these young people could not read well, even though they had already
finished the sixth grade.

Poor educational backgrounds, combined with lack of financial resources and the
limited education of their parents forced some highlander students to attend welfare
boarding schools or less competitive public schools rather than private schools or well-
known public schools. For example, Sorn, a male Mien student, attended a school near
his village from the first grade to the third grade. After finishing the third grade, he
transferred to a welfare school located in the Aung Thong province, which is in the
central region of Thailand. The school he attended was a public school supported by a
famous Thai temple. This school provided free education, housing, and meals to
disadvantaged students such as poor children, hill tribe children, and orphans. After
completing primary school, Sorn moved back to his village due to health issues. He
attended a middle school located near his village. Sorn was the only Mien student in his
class, while the majority of students in the school were northern Thai students. He lived
at home and traveled to the school by a school bus, while his parents provided financial
support for all of his school expenses.

However, attending the new school made Sorn realize that the quality of teaching
offered at his former school was very different from that of the new school. Sorn said his
new school had very good teachers and advanced educational technology. In his former
school, Sorn was regarded as one of academically excellent students, but at the new
school, he was placed in the lowest performance class. When Sorn moved back to the
school located near his village, he was again one of the top students. After middle school,
Sorn pursued his high school education at a welfare boarding school located in the Lampang province. As a boarding student, he spent most of his life at the school and went back home during long school breaks. From Monday to Friday, Sorn woke up at 5 am, made his own bed, lined up for roll call, and then did a morning workout. After the workout, he cleaned the dormitory as assigned, took a shower, got dressed, and then had breakfast with other students. After the breakfast all students, including Sorn, queued up based on their school levels and walked to school buildings. The class ran from 8 am to 4 pm. After school ended for the day, Sorn went back to the dormitory and performed assigned duties. At 6 pm, he had to line up for dinner. At 8 pm, all students were required to gather in order to participate in Buddhist evening prayers. After completing the eleventh grade, with the help of the school principal, Sorn transferred to another welfare school located in his province.

Sorn attended five different schools before entering college. He attended three welfare boarding schools, mainly due to the limited financial status of his family. Sorn acknowledged that the welfare boarding schools were very different from the non-welfare boarding schools. He said the welfare boarding school emphasized vocational knowledge and life skills rather than academic skills. Sorn also pointed out that rural students and city students were different. City students went to tutoring schools in the evenings, on weekends, or during summer breaks, and they attended high-quality public or private schools. These students were more advantaged than highlander students. Sorn stated that when highlander students competed on the academic skills tests and university entrance exams with city students, the highlander students could not compete with them because the city student had obtained tutoring lessons. Nat agreed with Sorn’s argument. Nat said
most highlander students could not complete academically with students in lowland areas or cities.

In short, highlander college students acknowledged that receiving poor primary schooling was a disadvantage that frequently occurred because of their ethnic minority status. Based on their experiences, they identified several issues regarding poor schooling. These issues included poor teaching practices by indifferent teachers, teachers’ excessive workloads, lack of learning English at an early age, high rates of teacher attrition and lack of educational supplies. Such issues subsequently created academic challenges for the highlander students during secondary school and college. The highlander students also had to work much harder in order to keep up with their studies and with their Thai classmates. Due to lacking strong academic and financial backgrounds, some highlander students were forced to attend welfare boarding schools or lesser-known schools.

The issues of poor primary schooling described by Gaem, Pam, Nat, and other students were very comparable to what Judith Pine (2002), Matthew Juelsgaard (2013), and Tracy Johnson (2005), found in their studies. Pine (2002) examined the value of Lahu literacy and its social and political implications. During her field work in a Lahu village in Chiang Mai, Thailand, Pine discovered the issue of inferior quality of schooling among highland schools, as she states, “… the Thai teachers I met in rural Lahu and other upland village schools were either romantically idealistic or, more often, deeply aware of their having arrived in a sort of purgatory. Most teachers left the village on the weekends. School often did not start until Monday afternoon and closed for the week early on Friday, as teachers arrived late and left early” (p. 138). In addition, Johnson (2005)
encountered the same experience as Pine (2002) while conducting ethnography work in a Thai public school located in a Hmong village in Chiang Mai. Johnson’s study scrutinized the curricula used in the Hmong school and how concepts of history, ethnicity, and culture were presented in such curricula. One of the facts Johnson discovered was that the teachers at the village school had poor scores on teacher certification examinations, so they were placed to work at highland or peripheral schools such Hmong schools. A full program of teaching and learning hardly took place at the school on any given day. In general, the teachers devoted very little time to structured classroom lessons. For many days throughout the year, the students were in class for only two to three hours. “This was the case at times because the teachers were absent (there were not substitute teachers), engaged in completing administrative work, catching up on gossip about personal business ventures with colleges, or just taking naps in the small house set aside for the teachers’ personal use” (p. 190). When the children were not being taught, they just played in the schoolyard, did cleaning chores, or helped prepare school lunches. Some Hmong parents also complained to Johnson about the teaching practices of the Thai teachers. They said the teachers hardly engaged in a full day teaching. The teachers arrived at school late, spent a great amount of time resting, and left school early. Some Thai teachers had undesirable attitudes toward Hmong students. They viewed Hmong students as being dirty, lazy, and unintelligent. The teachers expected Hmong students to work as farmers after finishing school rather than pursuing higher levels of education that would help them gain social and economic mobility. The poor quality of the teaching practices put Hmong children at a disadvantage when they continued their studies at lowland Thai schools. They felt they were behind their studies and had to work
twice as hard to keep up with the Thai students. In the Lahu students in Thai schools, Juelsgaard (2013) found that the majority of the Lahu students complained about their primary school education in the highland areas. At these mountain schools, they received poor quality of schooling, they endured poor teachers, they were taught little or no English, and they had fewer educational opportunities. When they pursued secondary school in the lowlands, the Lahu students were in a disadvantaged position. They revealed that they were not academically well prepared compared to their Thai peers and faced difficulties in keeping up with their studies. The Lahu students noted that having poor primary school education was one of their disadvantages of being Lahu. They attended mountain schools and received inferior education because of their Lahu ethnicity.

**Conclusion**

This chapter focuses on the relationship between the ethnicity and college access. The chapter presented highlander students’ viewpoints on and interpretation of their ethnicity in relation to their school experiences and to college opportunities. They viewed that their status of highland ethnic minority provided them both favorable circumstances and difficulties. On the one hand, ethnicity provided highlander students with opportunities in financial aid and also life skills they developed from their ethnic way of life. On the other hand, because they were ethnic persons, they experienced being teased or harassed by non-highlander students about their ethnicity and acquired poor primary school preparation from highland schools located in their mountainous villages.
CHAPTER 8

This chapter focuses on two different but related topics. The chapter first describes the pride and the pressure experienced or perceived by highlander students as the first college goers in their families or in their villages. The chapter then presents and discusses how highlander students viewed the importance of college education.

Pride and Pressure

All twenty-three-highlander students were asked about their impressions with respect to being the first in their families or even in their villages to attend college. As stated in Chapter Four, it could be said that the idea of going to college was neither an old nor new phenomenon among these students’ communities and other highland communities. However, going to college had not become a core part of their livelihoods and college had been minimally taken into account for their plans for success in life. So, on the one hand, the first-generation highlander college students remarked that they were proud that they became the first in the family or in the village to go to college. On the other hand, they stated that they experienced heavy, even excessive, emotional pressure to complete their studies and to secure jobs with respectable salaries after graduation. The pressures placed on them were derived from their families and from people in their villages and ethnic groups rather than from mainstream outsiders.

Euuy, Chati, and Fang described their experiences as first-generation highlander students. Euuy was a female Karen from the Mae Hong Son province. Euuy’s parents were farmers with limited education. Euuy was the first person in her family to attend college. She was very proud of herself as the first in the family to attend a university, especially a renowned university like NU. However, she also felt pressure to do well and
to complete her college study, as she stated, “If I could not complete the study, I must be very ashamed…ashamed to face the villagers. My parents sent me to study for college. I would be ashamed if I could not graduate from college.” Chati’s case was similar to Euuy’s. Chati was a male Hmong student from the Tak province. Chati’s parents were also farmers with very limited education. Chati said he was proud to be the first person in the family to attend the university. As the first college goer of the family, Chati’s family and relatives set high expectations for him to graduate from college and to represent the family. This made him feel pressured in the sense that he must complete his college study by any means and should not fail to fulfill their expectations. In addition, Fang, a male Mien student from Nan province, was glad that he was able to study at college. His family and former schoolteachers, who had provided support to him, expected him to succeed and graduate from college. Fang said this expectation placed stress and pressure on him to some extent. However, such expectation created positive effects rather than negative effects for him. It encouraged him to persist with his studies and to desire to obtain a bachelor degree even more. “I personally want to be successful. I will try my best to get to that point (i.e., to graduate) to make them and me proud of myself. I don’t want to disappoint them. They have been giving support to me,” said Fang.

Highlander college students such as Euuy, Chati, and Fang felt pressure because of the expectations from their families or their supporters. But there was also a group of students who felt pressure not because of encouraging expectations, but because of jealous or doubtful judgments from negative villagers. Sorn, a Mien student, was the first person in his whole family to attend college, and he was also one among a very few people in his village to pursue a college education. Sorn, like other highlander college
students, was pleased that he was able to study at NU. A majority of the youths and villagers in his village went to work in the cities in Chiang Mai or even in Bangkok after finishing primary or secondary schools. They went to work and earned money, while some students who pursued secondary education dropped out of high school or college during their studies. So, when Sorn was informed that he passed the entrance exam and was accepted to study at NU, some villagers asked him whether he was capable of successfully studying and graduating from NU. Sorn regarded such questions as insulting because they were asked in a way that doubted his ability to succeed in college. “I was offended. They asked me ‘could you study all the way through and graduate?’ I heard that ‘smart people don’t like to talk a lot, but silly people like to talk a lot.’ ‘ Pretentious people are very pretentious.’ They did not go to university, how could they know how the university looks like; how college study looks like…they are… they act like they already know everything.” Sorn further pointed out that those villagers did not only ask him rude questions in a way that discouraged him, but they also kept an eye on him to see whether he could pass his courses and secure a college degree. Sorn chose not react to the rude questions. Instead, he turned such pressure into a constructive force to drive him to persist in his college studies.

Pla, a male Lahu student, also experienced being discouraged by some people in his village about pursuing a college education. Pla was the first person in his family and the third person in his village to attend college. In his village, the majority of teenagers did not pursue secondary or college education. A few teenagers had pursued secondary school, but most of them had dropped out of school, had gotten married, and then went back to live as farmers in the village, while some of them went to work as laborers in
restaurants or construction sites in the cities of Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai. Pla was in a
group of the very few people who attended college. When some villagers encountered
him during his home visits, they asked him why he studied and also told him that it was
worthless to study. In addition, Pla’s parents were poor. His parents could not buy a
motorbike or a cell phone for him when he first entered to NU, and when he went back
home to visit his parents, some villagers insulted him about his pursuing a college
education, but not having expensive amenities “They liked to insult me, for example, they
said, ‘See, you are studying, but you don’t have a motorbike to ride and you don’t have a
cell phone to use.’ They liked to insult me when I went back home because I did not have
a cell phone to use and had no a motorbike to ride. They liked to insult me. They said
they worked and they had a motorbike to ride”, said Pla. Students who had begun
working at an early age or who had dropped out of school and worked on the farms were
able to buy luxury items such as motorbikes and cell phones because they earned money
from their jobs, while Pla did not earn money as he was attending college. In fact, he
needed money to pay for his college expenses rather than earning money. His inability to
earn money to buy expensive items caused some villagers to insult him.

Concern over college completion commonly appeared among first-generation
highlander college students. They remarked that their failure to obtain college degrees
would not only create humiliation and disparagement, but could also possibly have a
negative consequences by discourage other parents in their villages from sending their
children to secondary school and then to college. Examples of failures to complete school
and college could make other parents think that they should not risk using their very
limited income from farming to send their children to high school or to college, when
their children could possibly drop out along the way and then come back to the village and become farmers like them.

Most of the highlanders are farmers. Highlander farmers do farming on the hill and slope areas without having irrigation systems, unlike their lowlander neighbors, who do farming with irrigation systems. Highlander farmers depend entirely on unpredictable seasonal rains, and they usually don’t produce crops and earn substantial income every year. If their crops get enough water from the rain, they might produce good yields, but if there is drought or the crops’ prices are low, highlander farmers gain almost nothing from their crops. They usually deduct the fees for fertilizers, chemicals, and pesticides from money they earn from selling their crops, but not labor costs, which for each family consist of the labor of at least two people. In addition, for many low-income families, private expenditures in education take up large portions of their total income compared to wealthier households (The World Bank Group, 2010). Sending children to school represents a significant financial burden for poor and low-income families. So, with once-a-year harvests and low incomes, many highlander parents find it difficult to send their children to attend secondary schools or to college. Sending children to pursue upper secondary school and post-secondary becomes even less possible if highlander parents are discouraged by the examples of students in their villages who drop out of school or fail to complete college study.

Moreover, the pressure from being the first in the family or in the village did not only exist during the students’ time in college, but it continued to have an effect after the students completed college. Several highlander college students expressed this concern during the interviews. Nat was one of them. Nat was admired by some villagers for his
successful access to college. At the same time, some villagers kept an eye on him to see whether he could graduate or not, and if he graduated, whether he could secure a job with suitable salary. Nat expressed his worry as shown in the following passage:

Like in my case, when they (i.e., villagers) sent their children to pursue education, like me, I am the first in the village who went to college and I am an example. People think, if I finish at this high level education, I must have a good job and have a salary above 15,000 baht ($500). So, if I go back home and I don’t have a job yet, other parents might not want to send their children to pursue education. When we pursue higher education, we know how much money we have to spend for that. After you graduate, the job you get might not be a good job or the salary might not be good enough. When they (i.e., the villagers) see this kind of example, they might not want to send their children to pursue higher education.

The above excerpt clearly indicates that Nat was expected not only to obtain a college degree, but also to secure a ‘good’ job with a reasonable salary. If he failed to do so, his failure would possibly discourage other parents in his village from sending their children to pursue secondary school or college because they would not be able to justify the risk of spending substantial amounts of time and money for an uncertain investment.

The expectations from the highlander students’ families and supporters and contempt from villagers are pressures. However, they utilized such challenges in a positive way by turning the pressures to become forces that drove them to succeed, first in their studies at NU and then in securing respectable jobs.

**The Meaning of College Education**

The twenty-three students interviewed in this study are successful highlander students who had completed secondary school and went on to gain college admission. Throughout their pathways to college, they encountered obstacles, but they managed to overcome the challenges. Their success was fundamentally influenced by the key determinants discussed in Chapter Five and Chapter Six. These students are emerging
representatives for a choice of life and career. They chose to pursue college instead of living in the village and becoming like their parents. It is important to examine the rationales behind their decisions to pursue college.

During the individual interviews, the researcher asked all students their thoughts about the importance or benefits of obtaining college degree. The benefits listed by the interviewees were grouped into three different categories: benefits to the individual, benefits to family, and benefits to their ethnic groups.

**Benefits to the individual.** Regarding individual benefits, most of students remarked that acquiring a college education and degree gave them knowledge and allowed them to have lives and occupations that differed from their parents and from the people in their ethnic groups. As presented in Chapter Five and Chapter Six, the parents of these highlander students sent their children to attend secondary school and college because they wanted their children to have better lives and careers. The parents’ expectation, in turn, influenced the students’ views about their lives and futures. In the one-on-one interviews, most of the highlander students affirmed that they did not want to become farmers. They realized the difficulties and life circumstances faced by highland farmers, and they considered getting a college education as an instrument that helps them achieve their goals for not becoming farmers by providing them with more choices of occupation. In other words, education was the way to lift themselves up and out of traditional farming positions as shown in the following quotes:

> Education gives me knowledge. I can use this knowledge and the degree I will earn to apply for a job that offers a good salary.
> 
> Som, a female Hmong student
Education is something that will stay with me until I die. I can use the knowledge I learn to make a living, to look after my parents, and to help develop or change my community.

Ake, a male Akha student

If we don’t have education, we are illiterate. (If we don’t have education), when we go to the city, we know nothing. We are born yesterday. We are at disadvantaged. If we finish college, we can use knowledge we acquire to earn a living.

Chaem, a male Hmong student

It’s good to go to college. (I) hope to graduate. If I have a college degree, I can go back to the village and do any work. Having a college degree makes me feel safe. I have to obtain it (i.e., college degree). It (i.e., college degree) is a magical thing. If we want to work (as an attendant) at a gas station, we can do it, too. People without a bachelor degree can do this work, too. But if we want to apply and work for the government, we can do it because we have a degree. However, people who don’t have a degree could not do that.

Sai, a male Karen student

Benefits to the family. Highlander college goers also stated that their college education and degrees provided advantages to their families. Firstly, they perceived that their college education brought honor to the family. As repeatedly stated in Chapter Five and throughout this chapter, none of the parents and siblings of these college students had gone to college. These students were the first persons in their respective families to attend college. Having the ability and the opportunity to attend college was something that was viewed to be less possible for many highlander families and communities due to various obstacles such as lack of financial resources and limited educational backgrounds. Thus, if one of the children in a family were able to go to secondary school and then to college, such an achievement was regarded as an accomplishment, not only for the individual student, but also for the whole family. The statement of Sai, a male Karen student, clearly demonstrates this point.
As I told you, going to college created pride for my family. My village is near northern Thai villages. Sometime, when my father went to sub-district areas, northern Thai people asked him where I went for the university. He told them I studied at NU. Northern Thai people told my father that only a few people from these areas study at NU. My father did not know about NU and its reputation. But when he heard what northern Thai people told him, he felt proud. It will create even more esteem for my family and for myself if I could secure the government job after I graduate.

Sai is one among very few people in his village who made it to college, while attending college was common among the northern Thai people in his sub-district. His access to a prestigious college placed him in an admirable position within his village and also outside of his village. Sai’s college attendance made his father proud of his son and made his father proud of himself as the father of a successful son. The pride by Sai’s father became even greater when non-highlander ethnic people such as the northern Thai people admired his son’s achievement.

Secondly, highlander college students expressed the view that their college education allowed them to assist their parents and to provide educational opportunities for their younger siblings, which helped to ease the financial burden on the parents. Kaeo, a female Lahu student, is an example. Kaeo was delighted that she was the first in her family to attend college. She said, “My family was thrilled because the university where I studied was a good and famous university. My teacher (i.e., her former middle school teacher) was also happy for me and gave me some money for college expenses. My grandfather was as delighted as my parents.” Kaeo also stated that her college education was important for her family. Her parents were illiterate farmers who generated limited income from farming corn and rice. Kaeo felt that her college degree was a vital tool to uplift her family’s living situation as she said, “If I graduate and have a job, I could help
my family and make have more comfortable life.’” Other highlander students expressed similar thoughts as shown in the following excerpts.

After I graduate, I want to work and take care of my parents. Right now my parents don’t have income. They are old, too.

Som, a female Hmong student

After I graduate, I want to work. I want to have government jobs… I think the government jobs provide better fringe benefits that could also be beneficial to my parents.

Puu, a female Karen student

I want to have a better path…a better way that will make me successful in life, because my parents have difficulty or hardship. And in the future, I don’t want my parents to have difficult lives.

Gaem, a female Hmong student

As in Chapter Five, parents, siblings, and relatives played important roles in the educational successes of these highlander college goers. These students recognized that their parents had limited education and income. They further realized that having limited education meant that their parents were not be able to assist them with regular homework, navigating the educational system, or providing guidance for social and academic adjustments in mainstream Thai society. However, these college goers also recognized that their family members (i.e., parents, siblings, and relatives) helped them to succeed in school and in college. Their family members made huge sacrifices on behalf of the college goers by providing financial support for school expenses, by offering encouragement and emotional support, and by doing extra work to compensate for reduced family labor resources, as the students were away at school and not earning money for the household. The highlander college goers perceived and realized the support and sacrifices their families committed to ensure their school and college successes. So, the college goers, in turn, believed that they had obligations to pay
gratitude to their parents and other family members for the support they gave. Repaying the sacrifices, called *bun khun* in Thai, is commonly practiced by Thais and ethnic minorities, including highlanders. *Bun khun* is regarded as an important value and custom of Thai culture. It is the formation of a debt of gratitude that underlines a person’s indebtedness towards parents, guardians, and caretakers. Parents bring up and take care of their children when the children are young. This means the children have obligations to their parents. When the children grow up, they are expected to take care of their aged parents as the way to fulfill a debt of gratitude. The college goers in this study viewed repaying the sacrifices made by family member as required obligations or responsibilities. “Taking of my parents is something that I should do. They take care of me. When they are old, they cannot take care of themselves as much. When I am able to make living, I also have to go back and help them out, take care of them,” said Yong, a male Hmong student.

In addition, the college education and degrees earned by the highlander students were considered to be profitable to their siblings, especially their younger siblings. A majority of the highlander students stated that they wanted to support their siblings, especially younger siblings, to attend secondary schools and colleges. Although these highlander students could not provide financial support to their younger siblings while they were still in college and did not generate income, they planned to do so after they graduated from college and began earning. In the meantime they acted as role models who demonstrated positive attitudes toward education for their younger siblings. The stories of Gaem, Naak, and Kaeo are presented here to illustrate that the college
education the highlander college students are earning is valuable to the future of their younger siblings.

Gaem, a female Hmong student, was a notable example of a role model or a mentor who influenced a positive attitude towards education for her younger siblings. Gaem was the first oldest child and the first person in her family to attend college. She had five younger siblings: four girls and one boy. Gaem was described as a good daughter by her parents and a good sister by her younger siblings. She was determined to pursue a higher level of education, so after finishing primary school, she left the village to attend a secondary school in the city of Mea Hong Son. She was the pioneer of the family. When her two younger sisters finished primary school, Gaem suggested that her sisters attend her former middle school or high school, which was a well-known public school. In addition to providing the recommendation, she also gave them a study guide for the school entrance exams and books and other materials to help them prepare for the school entrance examinations. After they were admitted, she became a mentor for them in term of social and academic adjustments, for school coursework, and for personal issues. She also brought them to stay at her private dormitory and took care of them on behalf of her parents. Gaem was admitted to study at NU through the highlander quota program with an annual 30,000 baht scholarship for the whole duration of the curricula. Gung comprehended the advantages of this quota program, and she wanted to her sisters to study at NU and take advantage of the program, so she encouraged them to apply for the quota program, provided guidance for the application process, provided entrance examinations preparation books, and gave examination guidelines. As a result, both of Gaem’s sisters passed the examinations and were admitted to study at NU through the
quota program. When they entered the university, Gaem continued to provide assistance to her sisters. Gaem’s parents strongly supported all their children to obtain as much education as possible and tried their best to provide the assistance needed to help their children succeed in education. The parents were very pleased that three of their children were admitted to study at NU. In fact, Gaem’s family was the first family in the village to have three children who studied at a university, especially a renowned university such as NU. Having several children to attend the university was uncommon among highland communities. This family made history, as Gaem’s father said, “Our family made a history.”

Gaem’s parents and both of her younger sisters contributed to their own successes, but it is important to note that Gaem, who had knowledge and experiences in educational system, played a significant role in the successes of her sisters. Gaem’s younger sisters had advantages from having a role model who provided assistance to them in several ways as stated above. Gaem was a pioneer who paved the way for her younger siblings to be educated, and she was an agent who transmitted the benefits of higher education to her family.

Naak, a male Karen student, was another successful role model of highlander students. Naak was the oldest child of his family, and he had two younger brothers. Naak, like Kaeo and Gaem, valued the meaning of education and was determined to obtain a college degree. He left his village to attend a school in the lowlands from the time he graduated from primary school until the present. Since his parents had very limited education or school experiences, Naak ended up the navigating school system and managing his educational life by himself while wisely seeking help from the friends and
relatives surrounding him. In addition to his being successful in his educational journey, Naak also wanted his younger brothers to have the opportunity to attend secondary school and then college as he did. To accomplish this, he paved the way for education for both of his brothers by using his experiential knowledge and information to assist them. Naak’s first younger brother had a very similar educational path as Naak. After Naak’s brother finished primary school in the village, Naak encouraged him to attend Naak’s former middle school. Right after middle school, Naak advised his brother to enroll at his former high school, and Naak assisted his brother with the school application and the school entrance examination preparation. As a result, Naak’s brother was admitted to study at the same high school as Naak. This school was one of the best schools of the district. Consequently, Naak’s brother went on to study at the same university, NU, as his older brother, where they shared the same room at the university dormitory. Naak’s second younger brother received his primary school education from a school located in the same village as Naak and the other brother. By the time he completed primary school, the school was expanded to offer middle school education, so he decided to continue studying in the same school for his middle school education. After completing middle school, with guidance and help from Naak and another older brother, he was admitted at study at Naak’s previous high school. Currently Naak’s second younger brother is in the tenth grade and hopes to pursue college education right after high school as both of his older brothers did. In addition to attending the same high school, these three brothers also received the same type of scholarship help from the same organization, International Support Group Foundation (ISGF), to fund their study.\footnote{Please see Chapter Five for more details about International Support Group Foundation (ISGF)} Naak received need-based
scholarships from middle school to college. Naak said that this scholarship was one key thing that made his dream for education possible. He knew that this scholarship would also make education for his brothers possible. So, he encouraged them to apply for the ISGF scholarship, since they were qualified. As a result, both of the brothers received scholarships for their entire study programs: the first younger brother received a scholarship for college, while the youngest brother received a scholarship to attend senior high school. The educational journeys of the two younger brothers clearly indicated that Naak played very important roles in their success. He was a model for them and, at the same time, offered assistance and guidance to them. Naak paved the way for them and made their futures in higher education possible.

Kaeo, a female Lahu student, had a younger sister who was attending a primary school in her home village. Kaeo valued the importance of education and she wanted to encourage her sister to attend secondary school and college. Kaeo could not provide financial support to her sister, but she worked hard to instill the idea of going to college in her younger sister. She talked to her sister about the importance of education, set expectations for her sister to pursue additional education after finishing primary school, gave her sister ideas about college pathway, and tried to locate a secondary school for her sister to attend.

In summary, Gaem, Naak, and Kaeo were educational role models for their siblings. Kaeo was in the beginning stage of paving the way for her younger sibling’s education, while Gaem and Naak had already successfully assisted their younger siblings to access to the university. These stories indicate that the college education highlander and also the types of scholarships provided by ISGF.
students receive makes difference in the futures of their younger siblings. The experiences of the students also show that highlander college goers can create benefits for the family members not only after their graduation, but also during their times in college.

**Benefits to ethnic groups.** The twenty-four highlander students in this study managed to overcome obstacles and attain academic success. In addition to pointing out the benefits of college education and degrees to individual students and their families, the highlander college students also viewed that their success in obtaining college degrees would be beneficial to their ethnic communities. The students identified two ways to create benefits to their own people and communities.

The first way to distribute the benefits of college education would be to return and work in their home village or in other ethnic communities. This strategy would allow the highlander students to utilize their knowledge and experience to contribute to highland communities.

> After I graduate, I want to go back and work as a primary school teacher at the school in my village.
> Mamee, a female Hmong student in elementary education

> The developments have entered to the village. People in the cities take advantages of us. If we know laws, we could go against them. We could help Pwa Ka Nyaw (Karen) people.
> Sai, a male Karen student in political sciences

> After I graduate, I want to do work that improves educational opportunities for other highlander students. I want people who don’t have educational opportunities to have the opportunities to study and gain a lot of knowledge. That’s because the world has changed and we have to catch up with the changing world…I want them to catch up with the changing world and be able to deal with the changes, but to also preserve the traditional things, not to abandon the traditional things.
> Pla, a male Lahu student in home and community
After I graduate, I want to work as a teacher in a highland school. I want to be an agricultural teacher. I want to be a mountain teacher.

Fang, a male Mien student in agricultural education

I want to use knowledge I gain to develop my village. I want to make my village to be a better place and have a better economy. I want it to be less poor and have less drug trafficking problems.

Ake, a male Akha student in economics

The above passages indicate that some highlander students hope to utilize the knowledge and experiences they gain from their academic majors to help develop their villages or to address issues that their people have faced or are facing. Fang, for example, wanted to be an agricultural teacher in a highland school rather than in a lowland school because he wanted to transmit his knowledge and expertise in sufficiency economics and sustainable agriculture to highland children. Fang believed that such information and help would not only help to improve the life quality of the village children, but also to inspire them to pursue education in the field of agriculture in order to help improve the agricultural economy of their home village.

However, it is important to note that, while some highlander students wanted to establish their careers in their home village, finding such employment was not possible because jobs were not available. In reality, many jobs are available in the cities or lowland areas, but not in highland areas, so the students must work and live wherever jobs are available. Pon, a Mien student, is another example. He is currently studying for a law degree. Pon planned to take the bar examination after finishing college and wanted to fulfill his dream of becoming a public prosecutor. If Pon were to become a prosecutor, he would need to work in a city. He could not work in his Mien village. But he could give assistance to highland people as the time allows.

The second way highlander student could make contribution to their ethnic group
and communities is to be a role model for children and youths in their communities. The highlander college students successfully secured access to college, and they have already become role models for their younger siblings as discussed earlier, but they are also acting as educational role models for other children in their villages. Pam, an Akha student, is one of them. She talks about her impact as a role model as shown in the following quote:

I became like an idol for the children in the village. Children in my village…teachers at my school (in the village) liked to talk about me, such as, like, I was the first student of the school who finished the 9th grade from there and continued on to high school in the city and then made it to college. They (i.e., other younger children in the school) wanted to study like me. It’s like, what they call, I became an inspiration for children.

Pam’s story of college achievement motivated other students in her village to have desires in pursuing education beyond elementary or middle school. Her story showed them that they could also study in lowland schools or attend the university if they were willing to work hard. They could go to the university instead of just completing vocational school, which was popular among the young people in Pam’s village, and work as wage laborers in the lowland areas or abroad. Her story could also show teachers at her formal school that their Akha children could be successful in studying instead of just becoming farmers if they received appropriate expectations and adequate support from the teachers and the school.

In addition, some individual students went beyond being just educational role models. They initiated activities to further develop educational opportunities for children in their communities. Naak, a male Karen student, presented a successful educational model for his younger siblings, as mentioned earlier, and also for other Karen children and youths in his village. Naak stated that being a role model for them was important.
However, he wanted to do whatever he could to create more changes in education for the children and youths in his village. Naak has engaged in two outreach activities to promote interest in attending college in his village. The first activity was an annual school visit. In these past years, Naak voluntarily visited his former primary school and met with students. During each visit, he shared with them a story of his educational journey, and experiences in schools and in the university, as well as stories about life outside the village. In addition, he also encouraged the students to ask questions or share their concerns about education with him and with other students. Over the years, Naak learned that the majority of students were concerned about schools they could attend for higher levels of education such as upper-secondary schools and post-secondary schools. Naak tried to urge them not to be discouraged about the availability of the schools. He told them that if they were determined to continue their studies, there were ways to be admitted to higher-level schools. Naak always emphasized to the students was the importance of having a strong willpower to pursue education. Naak believed that once they had willpower, the students could face and overcome any obstacles in order to reach their dreams to obtain education. In addition to the meetings at the school, Naak also talked to these students in the village. He followed their school progress and advised them about the concerns they had. Naak said he could not provide them with financial support, but he could at least help them with information about schools and academic and social adjustments for students who decided to pursue higher levels of education. Naak regarded building motivation and confidence as priorities. By sharing his stories and information, Naak hoped that this activity would help create motivation and encouragement among students to desire in pursuing higher levels of education.
The second activity Naak did to advance education for youths in his village was to post the certificates and honors he had earned on the library’s announcement board at his former primary school. As presented in Chapter Five, Naak had been extensively engaged in extra-curricular activities since he was in primary school. He had earned certificates, honors, and scholarships from these activities at local, provincial, and national levels. When Naak went back to visit the village, he also went visit the school and posted copies of selected certificates and pictures from the award ceremonies and field trips within the country and abroad on the bulletin board at the school library. The awards included the Royal Award by Ministry of Education, the Outstanding Student Honor award by NU, and the national Outstanding Youth Award by Office of Promotion and Protection of Children, Youth, the Elderly and Vulnerable Groups. Naak hoped that his achievements would inspire other students to want to pursue education and to make them realize that they also could become like him. The students had the ability to be successful and create pride for themselves, for their families, and for the school.

In addition to working directly with children and youths, Naak has also worked closely with the school principal to encourage and assist more students to attain education beyond primary school and middle school. Naak told his strong intention to the principal in helping children and youths in his village to have higher levels of education. He asked the principal to do everything possible to encourage all students to pursue higher levels of education. If some students could not pursue high school or undergraduate study through traditional educational tracks, they should at least be encouraged to pursue additional education through less formal means which demanded less time and educational expenditures. Naak’s endeavors to work with the school principal made the school
personnel know that he cared for the future education of the children in the village. Such effort motivated the principal and the teachers to encourage and support their students to have the opportunity to pursue education beyond primary and middle schools. As a result of all the efforts Naak has put into promoting high-level educational opportunities during the past few years, more of the students who finished middle school in the village went on to high school. Naak felt very delighted about the success of his efforts. Later, he felt even more grateful when he learned that all students who completed middle school in the 2012 academic year went on to high school.

In addition to the individual stories of students’ experiences with college access, the author would like to include the experiences of a collective group of highland students that have been working together to create better changes in education for other highlander children is of interest. This registered student organization, called the ‘Ethnic Students Association,’ was founded almost a decade ago by a group of highlander students who were admitted to study at NU through the highlander quota. All interviewees, except Naak and Fang, were also members of this association. Every year, they organize various activities. One of the activities they have carried out for the past seven years is an educational outreach activity. This activity is held at a school, such as a welfare boarding school, that has a large number of highlander students. The main objective of this activity is to promote educational opportunities for highlander children. To accomplish the aim, they held several activities at the selected school. The first activity was each student sharing their stories of college experiences and students’ lives on campus. They hoped that the stories would inspire or encourage some of highlander school students to pursue education. The second activity was introducing and explaining
the highlander quota program to highlander students. As discussed in Chapter Five, this quota helps increase the probability for college admission and provides scholarships throughout the study program. However, the highlander quota is not widely known among highlander school students. Many highlander students did not take advantage of the benefits offered by this quota program because they did not know about it. The third activity was sharing strategies. Based on their personal experiences, the highlander college goers shared techniques for studying in the classroom, for preparing for the college entrance examination, and for becoming academically and socially successful in high school and college. Along with this advice, the college students also offered guidance for planning for college attendance. The last activity of the outreach activity was to play group games in order establish friendships that led to a creation of a support network.

Some of college students who were interviewed for this study had actively participated in the association. Pam, a female Akha student, described her experience with the association as shown in the following narrative:

Last year I got the opportunity to participate in the outreach activity in OmKoy (one of the districts of Chiang Mai province). One of the things I learned from this activity was that the educational outreach activity is a very good thing. The outreach activity might not make every student there to think about pursuing college. But, at least, I found that there were some students who were interested in learning about college guidelines and sources of financial aid for college. The benefits of the activity to middle school students might not be obvious, but I think it is a very good way to approach middle school students because those students could learn information about college and sources of funding for college and lower and upper vocational school in early years, and they could prepare for college early. High school students were the targeted group of our outreach activity, and it was the group that gained the most advantages from the activity. A large number of the ethnic minority students attend lesser-known schools located in outskirt areas, so they have less opportunity to learn about news regarding the educational continuum. Also, a few students from higher education institutions actually reach out to the students in such schools. Those students are lacking the
opportunity for the outreach program. At present, ethnic minority students have better access to information and community technology than they did in the past, but there are still a large number of highlander students who are lacking such access. This lack of access makes them unaware of information and news about the education continuum. Of course, students’ access to such information also largely depends on the capability of the counseling teachers for each school and how much such teachers care for their students. So, I think the outreach activity organized by the highlander college students for remote schools is a way to enhance the opportunity for those school students. I got the opportunity to study at NU because I learned about the quota college admission for highland ethnic minority students from a senior highlander college student. I think the outreach activity by the ethnic student club is useful to highlander school students. It made those students learn more about guidelines for pursuing education. It also was a way to create educational inspiration to those students by presenting the examples of college students as an everlasting quote, “a good example is better than precept.” The educational outreach activity by the ethnic student club might not enormously increase the number of highlander students who pursue higher education, but, at least, our activity would create some kinds of inspiration or give some ideas to those school students.

In short, the outreach activity indicates that highlander college students were acting as active agents of social change both individually and collectively. They made a difference in the educational inspirations and opportunities for other highlander students. They engaged in activities that shifted attitudes, values, and actions to address educational issues for other highlander children and youths.

Conclusion

The chapter first presented the pride and the emotional pressure experienced by the highlander students. The students were delighted to be the first in their families or even the first in their villages to attend college. They made their parents and supporters proud of them. However, they also felt pressured in the sense that they had to complete the college studies by any means and should not fail to fulfill their parents’ and supporters’ expectations, as well as the expectations of the villagers. Inability to complete college would subsequently make them become undesirable role models for children in
their villages and also discourage other parents in their villages from sending their children to secondary school and then to college. They also felt obligated to secure careers with suitable salaries after their college completion. The pressures mainly came from their families and from people in their villages and ethnic groups rather than from mainstream outsiders. In addition, the chapter presented the rationales or incentives behind their decisions to pursue college. They stated that college education provided benefits in three different ways. They first pointed out that having college education meant having adequate livelihoods to enhance their social and economic mobility. The students chose to pursue college because they recognized that having a college education would allow them to improve their family living conditions and to assist younger siblings to obtain education. In fact, with the additional acquired cultural and social capital, some of the students successfully paved the road to college for their siblings and also assisted them with securing secondary or college education. The students also viewed that college education enabled them to assist people in their own communities and in other ethnic communities. Even during the research study, the majority of the college students in the study had already made contributions to highland people by individually acting as educational role models for other children in their villages and by collectively organizing educational outreach activities in rural highland villages and in schools that served a large number of highlander students.
CHAPTER 9
SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS, SIGNIFICANCE, AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Summary

This qualitative study focuses on first-generation Thai highlander college students and their experiences with gaining college access. It seeks to address these research questions: (1) What are the key determinants or factors that contribute to successful college access for first-generation Thai highlander college students? (2) How do the students perceive the role of their ethnic backgrounds in relation to their college access? (3) What significance does higher education have for highlander students, families, and ethnic villages? In this chapter, I will first briefly summarize the findings for each research question. Next, I will discuss the implications of the findings at micro and macro levels. I will then provide recommendations for future research. Lastly, I will close this chapter with the significance of my study.

Concerning the first research question, the findings disclosed that five key factors contributed to successful college access for twenty-three first-generation highlander college students. These factors are parental support, significant others, student resilience, student loans, and college admission quotas for highland ethnic minorities. The first three factors are regarded as micro-level factors. They are individuals influencing students’ college access. The last two factors are regarded as macro-level factors. They are larger entities such as the government and institutions of higher education. These factors are components of the highlander students’ successes in making college possible. The various factors did not emerge at the same time; rather, they emerged at different periods
and performed their critical influences at different stages of the students’ pathways to college. The three micro-level factors emerged earlier and supported highlander students from childhood until they entered college (i.e., primary school to college). The macro-level factors, on the other hand, emerged much later (i.e., from high school to college) and offered either new forms of support that the students needed to continue their pathways to college or provided supplementary support to the existing micro-level factors. In short, the five key factors combined or interconnected to create positive influences on the highlander students and their successful pathways to college at different points in time.

The second research question focuses on the role of students’ ethnic backgrounds with respect to their college access. The evidence indicates that the students’ minority ethnicities (i.e., being Hmong, Karen, Lahu, Akha, and Mien) or being positioned under ‘hill tribe’ status were influential in two different ways. On the one hand, being hill tribe students meant the highlanders received poor primary school education and experienced being teased by non-hill tribe pupils on the basis of their ethnicities at both secondary school and college level. On the other hand, being hill tribe students who were viewed as culturally, socially, and economically underprivileged persons meant the students were able to obtain special opportunities, such as financial assistance from governmental sources and strong life skills from their ethnic ways of life. In other words, ethnic origin was related to the ability of hill tribe students to ensure college access, since it could provide both benefits and drawbacks. Gaining access to college depended on how the individual hill tribe students found ways to manage the advantages and drawbacks: whether they happened to gain such benefits that were not always assured, whether they
managed to turn adversities into encouraging forces, and whether they used their advantages to alleviate their shortcomings, and vice versa.

Regarding the last research question, highlander students identified the importance of college education in three different ways. First, they viewed that a college education and degree provided them with knowledge and allowed them to have lives and careers that differed from their parents and from the people in their ethnic groups. Second, highlander students considered that college education and degrees provided advantages to their families. College education led to higher-paying jobs that allowed them to financially assist their parents and provide educational opportunities for their younger siblings. Lastly, they viewed that college education would be beneficial to their ethnic communities. They could distribute the benefits by returning and working in their home villages or in other ethnic communities, by becoming educational role models for children and youths in their communities, and by working collectively with other highland college students to create better changes in education for other highlander children.

Implications

In this section I first discuss implication for the theories. Then, I will discuss these implications of research findings and spell out policy recommendations at micro level (i.e., highlander youths, families, teachers, and schools) and macro level (i.e., higher education policy makers) based on the results of the study. These implications for policy and practice are addressed with the aim to enhance college access opportunities for highlander students.
Theories. This study aims to understand the college access phenomenon among first-generation highlander college students and to make their voices heard by telling their stories in education. Cultural capital, social capital, and critical race theory (CRT) were applied in this study to use as a meaningful framework for interpreting data, explaining the phenomenon, and making recommendations, not as means for testing theories.

Regarding cultural capital, Boudier (1984) describes cultural capital as the collection of symbolic elements such as knowledge, skills, language, clothing, and tastes that an individual obtains from being part of a certain social class. I found that Boudier’s concept of cultural capital as applied in this study minimally conformed to the empirical data and research findings obtained in my study. First of all, the empirical data and research findings collected in my study revealed other forms of cultural capital that were not included in Boudier’s concept of cultural capital and also other capitals. These additional capital assets are the use of lament as an educational strategy by the parents; preventive support by the parents; strong life skills that the students gained from their ethnic ways of life that became valuable when they left the village to attend school and to live in Thai villages; and student resilience in which students, with or without external supporting factors such as significant others in their individual social environment, turned circumstances imposed by the family living conditions and ethnic harassment experiences into encouraging mechanisms to motivate and to endure their determination in the pursuit of pathway to college. In fact, the ‘other forms’ of capital playing vital roles in making college possible for highlander students in this study rather fall into the idea of ‘community cultural wealth,’ expressed by Yosso (2005). Yosso critiques the traditional notion of cultural capital from the lens of CRT and came up with the concept of
‘community cultural wealth’ that includes five forms of capital: aspirational capital, linguistic capital, familial capital, social capital, navigational capital, and resistant capital. The idea of community cultural wealth allows us to look at the issue from holistic perspectives and to see and value other overlooked forms of capital highlander students, parents, and communities possess. To illustrate, highlander parents told laments about their hardships from being farmers and their unfulfilled dreams in education to their children. These laments in turn became the motivation that impelled their children to work hard in school and do well in studying from primary school, secondary school, and then college. The lament stories the highlander parents told their children in turn “nurtured a culture of possibility” (Yosso, 2005 p. 78) that allowed highlander students to have lives and occupations that differed from their parents and from the people in their ethnic groups, as described in Chapter Eight.

In addition, Boudier’s idea of social capital is highly centered on class. His explanation of the role and function of social capital in educational achievement among school students does not take ethnicity into account. However, the subjects of my study are from unique minority ethnic backgrounds. Ethnicity is a very primary attribute of the individual students and it largely defines the rest of the aspects of their being. Their ethnicity highly influences on what culture they practice; what language they speak; what belief system they practice; how they view the world; how they live their lives; who they are in the Thai society; which social class of the society they belong to; what kind of education they are given; and what occupation they have. I described and discussed these aspects in Chapter Four and in Chapter Seven. In the case of my study, to understand college access of highland students, we first have to look at their ethnicity before we
explore their class. The communities that highland students come from are historically, culturally, socially, and linguistically unique, as found in the five examples of highland villages in Chapter Four. Ethnicity needs even more attention in order to understand educational accessibility and achievement among ethnic minority students in the Thai society, where social class is traditionally and highly prioritized in a way that suppresses the ethnicity characteristics of the people in its society. Class is greatly emphasized over ethnicity. In short, lack of justification for the role of ethnicity in schooling is a shortfall of social capital in the case of my study.

Concerning social capital, Boudier (1986) defines social capital as the actual or possible networks of support and resources while Coleman (1990) defines social capital as social resources based on social relationships. In the study of college access among highland youths, I found that Coleman’s concept (i.e., one makes use of social capital for advantages) is more useful. The empirical data in this study suggests that significant others, which are a form of social capital, play important roles in college access of highland youths. Social capital in this study appears to be derived from relationships between the persons (i.e., students and their significant others) and also within the highlander group (i.e., among members of the ethic minority association at NU). Students also located significant others primarily by themselves, since the social networks of their parents were mainly within their ethnic villages and possibly worked inside rather than outside their villages. Once the youths found significant others, they established trust and supportive relationships with them. These relationships, in turn, allowed students to draw support that their parents did not have or could not provide for them.
In addition, the social networks found among highland youths also originated from being members of an ethnic students’ association on the college campus. This association existed in both a physical space on campus (i.e., the actual room where they regularly gathered together) and in an online Internet space (i.e., the Facebook page of the association). This Facebook (FB) page is an ethnicity-based social group and it is not a formally institutionalized group. With its online quality, the size of this social group is not limited; geography becomes a non-essential issue; communication among the members can be prompt; and the flow of information and news among the members become swifter and broader. The online feature of the association (i.e., its FB page) is something that the social capital concept by Coleman did not cover. This intangible form of social network may play more important roles in promoting pathway to college and college access among for highland children in the near future.

Considering CRT, I found that CRT is applicable and helpful in shaping my understanding about the role of highlander students’ ethnicity in their ability to secure college access. Cultural and social capital does not explain the importance of ethnicity in illuminating college opportunities and participations, as I stated earlier. CRT places race and racism at the center of the critical analysis, challenges colorblind ideology, and acknowledges the voices and experiential knowledge of ethnic people as a crucial source of data (Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solorzano, 2009). In the case of my study, it offers conceptual ideas about how and why ethnicity matters in educational experiences and gaining college access by highlander students. There are two different examples illustrating how ethnicity matters when taken or not taken into account. The highlander quota is an example. This quota is a special admission system, is primarily based on the
recognition of ethnicity and over the past two decades it has proved to increase college enrollment among the highland populations. Since its establishment, the quota successfully supported about 365 highlander students to represent in the Thai higher education system. The contrasting example is the experience of hill children who were harassed about their ethnic backgrounds at Thai schools and who received poor primary school education from highland schools as presented in Chapter Seven. Thai schools overlook the manifestation of hill children and their cultural differences, whereas highland schools are required to implement a highly standardized national curriculum over which highlander people have no influence and which is minimally related to their ethnic cultures, languages, and ways of life. These issues are predisposed by the prevailing notions of a fair opportunity in education for all Thais and by the “integration approach” of not taking ethnicity into account in educational settings. Thus, discriminatory practices still largely go unseen and unrecognized in educational settings and in the process of making policy for education. The hidden aspects of discrimination have remained under-researched both qualitatively and quantitatively. Inclusive environments in schools and college participation among highland youths may not be greatly promoted unless we acknowledge the unique ethnicized status of ‘hill tribe’ students and their social, political, and structural positions in society, which shape or misshape their educational trajectories, as well as the need for a new agenda for social change in educational policies and practices that take ethnicity into account.

**Micro level.** This section supplies recommendations based on the research findings to highlander youths, highlander families, schoolteachers, and highland schools.

**Highlander youths.** Earning a college degree imposes an extra struggle upon
students from highland minority peoples with languages and cultures very different from the Thai mainstream. For many of them, along with the burden of ethnic differences, come the added disadvantages of low socioeconomic status and of being the first generation from their communities to gain entry into colleges or universities. However, in spite of many obstacles, the twenty-three youths of Akha, Hmong, Karen, Lahu, and Mien ethnic backgrounds in this study demonstrated that highlander students could achieve their goals of attending college. Throughout their journeys to college, the highlander students faced various types of difficulties as described in Chapter Five and Chapter Seven as well as the conditions I just briefly mentioned. These barriers made achieving their goals difficult as they pursued their college-going dreams on their own. But, instead of allowing the barriers to hinder their journeys, many students turned the barriers into encouraging forces to make them determined to succeed in school and to secure access to college. Also, when parents’ cultural, social, and economic capitals were not sufficiently supportive, the highlander students resorted to personal strengths or inner resilience. They became active agents to shape their own futures. Such commitment to overcome adversity is regarded as an important intelligent approach that contributed to their accomplishments. The motivations that were hidden behind their strong commitment to succeed were that they wanted to have lives that differed from the unstable, low-income, agriculturally-based lives of their predecessors or families. They chose to be emerging representatives for making their own choices of life and career. They chose to pursue college education instead of living in the village and becoming farmers like their parents.

In addition, these highlander college students were the first in their families or
even in their communities to pursue their dream of going to college, which was previously unknown in their families. They did not have parents or older siblings who had experienced college education and could help pave the road to college for them. So, they ended up navigating obstacles, figuring out difficult situations, and doing things own their own, but, at the same time, they were keen to seek the necessary support that they lacked from different significant others or social networks such as the siblings, relatives, teachers, and school personnel that were available to them at different point in time and place. This is considered as another crucial approach that enabled them to reach their journey to college. In the present time when advanced information and communication technologies (ICTs) are broadly available, the types and sources of social networks are not limited to the immediate locality of the students. Students can seek support from a distance through the use of modern ICTs or web-based groups or social media such as Facebook. For example, the ethnic student association at Northern University (NU) created a Facebook site in which any ethnic student on campus could join. They used Facebook for contacting one another, sharing information, disseminating news and events, and requesting assistance from one another. This site is open to public. So, if middle or high school highlander youths wanted to learn about college (e.g., college preparation, college entrance exams, expenses, and campus life), they could contact any highlanders at NU, either from the same or different ethnic backgrounds, without hesitation. In other words, highlanders still in their home villages could obtain the information they needed through this emerging means. During my fieldwork at NU, I witnessed highlander students using Facebook as an effective communication channel to contact and provide assistance in various matters to high school highlander students,
upcoming freshmen, current college students, and students who had already graduated from NU, and vice versa.

In short, it is important for all highlander children and youths to learn that college is possible for them and to be inspired to work toward college for themselves, as shown by twenty-three highlander students in this study. They, as highlander students, might face extra struggles, compared to mainstream Thai students, in gaining access to college, completing their studies, and graduating. However, they should be informed that the two strategic approaches (i.e., resilience and seeking support from available social networks) utilized by the successful examples of highlander students could also be useful tools for their pursuit of college dreams. In other words, their personal strengths and resilience could be crucial forces that make college possible.

**Highlander families.** As stated in Chapter Four and Chapter Five, highlander parents were farmers whose incomes were very limited. Their parents had little or no education. As a result, they were not knowledgeable of the structures or systems of schools and colleges. The parents possessed cultural and social capital that were dominant and valuable in their ethnic communities, which were very small sub-units of the larger Thai society. Such capital, however, became less valuable when it was placed in educational settings structured by the mainstream Thai culture. The highlander students’ parents lacked the conventional cultural and social capital that could provide advantages to their children’s education. They could not provide their children with institutional support or any understanding of the specific requirements needed in order to reach college. Yet, all highlander students in this study agreed that their parents had the best of intentions and provided emotional support, limited financial support, and
preventive efforts, as detailed in Chapter Five.

It is imperative for other highlander parents to know that even though they could not provide their children with educational experiences and advice, adequate financial support, or social networks, they could still play important roles in their children’s education. They can turn the circumstances surrounding them into useful strengths that are emotionally and spiritually supportive for their children. For example, they could use stories about the hardships in their lives and lamentations regarding their lack of opportunity to attend school to make their children see the significance of education and to inspire their children to pursue education, as did Gaem’s parents, Ranee’s parents, Sorn’s mother, and Mon’s parents. Stories and laments made a difference in Gaem, Ranee, Sorn, and Mon’s lives and helped promote their determination to acquire education. In addition, parents whose children successfully enrolled in college can form supportive groups within their communities to share their experiences and helpful advice to other parents who want to support their children to secondary school and then to college. It is important to note that most of the highlander communities are small communities and are held together by a strong cohesive bond influenced by cultures, norms, and roles established over time. They have close relationships where everyone knows everyone. They also participate extensively in community activities and engage in community life. The adoption of fashions or trends can also undoubtedly spread, as showed in the case of agriculture and ethnic clothing and fashions. These parental strengths should be applied in the case of education. The unique social cohesion could be regarded as ‘community social capital,’ and the villagers should take advantages of their social cohesion to work together in order to increase higher learning opportunities for the
young people in their communities.

*Teachers.* A number of students in this study indicated that teachers at primary or secondary schools played important roles in their educational successes. They regarded teachers as significant others who profoundly supported their pursuit of education. For many of the minority students, teachers were viewed to be educators, inspiring role models, counselors, financial supporters, or even parents. Therefore, teachers in both highland and lowland schools that serve highland children and youths should be informed about how important they are in making the educational dreams of highland children possible. Their educational experiences and credentials can provide important supplementary attributes that the parents of highlander students lack. They can provide support in various ways. For example, teachers can share their own stories about when they were college student to inspire highland children to think about college. Also, teachers can provide information and advice about the different schools that highland students can attend after completing primary schools in the villages; assist with the school application process; offer information about available scholarships; give the students advice beforehand about the kinds of issues they would face when enrolling in lowland schools; and helping the students to develop the resolution needed to succeed in unfamiliar environments.

When highland students leave their villages to attend middle schools in Thai villages, which have different cultural and social settings, it is critical for highland students to have a connection to at least one teacher in the schools. Having connections with trusted adults means having access to informal mentoring, which helps to reduce the students’ feelings of isolation during critical stages of their school lives and gives them
support for their day-to-day challenges in living away from their families. Such support,
in turn, influences the likelihood of highland students’ middle and high school
persistence. Continuous availability of teachers with trusting and supportive relationships
would be even more beneficial for highland students and their continuation in pursing
and attaining college degrees.

**Highland schools.** The majority of the hilltribe or highlander college students
revealed that they faced poor school preparation during their primary school years in their
villages. This early disadvantage in their beginning school years negatively affected their
academic performances when they continued with middle school, high school, and
college. They recognized the gap or disparity in quality of education between highland
schools and lowland schools soon after they left their highland primary schools and
attended lowland middle schools. The students’ realization of poor primary school
background also discouraged some of them from even thinking about going to middle
school. In Chapter Five and Chapter Seven, students pointed out relevant reasons
contributing to the problem, so I will not restate them. What I want to highlight here is
that the issue of poor learning and teaching in highland schools needs immediate
attention from all key stakeholders: teachers; school principals; primary education
services area office, which supervise the operation and administration of primary schools;
the Bureau of Academic Affairs and Educational Standards, which administer the
national basic curriculum; and the Office of the Basic Education Commission (OBEC),
which oversees K-12 education. This issue has been overlooked for many decades.
College participation and enrollment among highland populations will be less likely as
long as they are of deprived quality education in the highland primary schools, and this
problem, which is a fundamental foundation of education, is acknowledged and addressed. This issue should be addressed with unique educational policies that are clearly planned and implemented according to the unique challenges and cultural distinctions found within the schools’ student bodies.

Based on the interviews with highlander college students, very few students in their cohorts chose to attend middle school, high school, and then college. The majority of the youths stayed in the village or worked as a wage laborers in the cities. This situation is partly true for today. More village children are attending either regular or non-formal middle schools due to new laws requiring nine years of compulsory education. However, the number of students who continued high school or vocational school after middle school has largely declined. The number of high school student who decided to pursue postsecondary education became even less. This indicated that some students chose to leave the pathway to college along the way or divert their lives to different journeys. This drop-off might indicate that college-going environments inside highland schools are either not present at all or present only to a minimal degree. If so, there is a necessity for schools to build a college-going climate in order to inspire students to think or to be inspired about college early. Many studies have shown that college-going cultures implemented in schools have profoundly enhanced the number of students pursuing postsecondary education, especially among underrepresented students (Aldana, 2014; Koven, 2009; McKillip, Godfrey, & Rawls, 2013; McCollough, 2011; Radcliffe & Bos, 2011; Rochford, O'Neill, Gelb, Ross, & Stark Education, 2011; Weinstein & Savitz-Romer, 2009). In many cases, a college-going culture is established at the high school level. However, in the case of highland children, a culture of college
going should be created as early as primary school. Because going to college is not something that is broadly seen in their communities, most highlander parents have limited education and resources to offer to their children, and early college inspiration would direct them to middle schools that later leads to higher levels of education. The schools should set this college going standard as one of their primary missions and collaboratively work with parents and communities to develop and implement a college-going culture program.

**Macro level.** In this section, based upon reflections on the findings, I would like to address pragmatic recommendations to higher education policymakers, Ministry of Interior, public secondary schools, teacher training institutions, and relevant agencies.

**Higher education policy makers.** Student loans, made available to low-income students in high school and tertiary education by the Thai government, play a crucial role in the successful educational pursuit of highlander students. Some students entirely relied on student loans to attend both high school and then college. Some students whose parents were able to afford high school expenses also took student loans during their high school years to save money in advance for college expenses. Another group of students took student loans right after they entered college. Such findings indicate that there is no doubt that student loan programs helped increase greater college participation and accessibility for highlander students. It made a significant difference between having and not having access to college, which is very expensive with continually rising costs. The student loans need to be continued, but, at the same time, there is a need to consider increasing the amounts of student loan allocation per student. All students who took student loans reported that the amount of the loans they secured covered only tuition and
a small portion of the cost of living. There was still a large portion of college expenses that for which they had to be responsible. They had to seek other financial sources, such as self-earnings, parental contributions, and scholarships, to close the unmet need gap. However, not every highlander student was able to secure other financial sources to pay for unmet expenses. The increased amounts of student loans would help ease students’ concerns in unmet financial demands, while the loans’ low interest rates (one percent) and long repayment periods (15 years) need to be retained.

**Ministry of Interior and higher education institutions.** Over and above student loans, college admission quotas for highlander minorities are additional essential elements that made college possible for the highlander students in this study. The highlander quota program was established in 1994 by the Department of Provincial Administration (DOPA) under the Ministry of the Interior (MOI). Since its establishment, 365 highlander students have already benefited from this program. In fact, nineteen out of the twenty-three student participants were admitted to study at NU through this program. They acknowledged how important this program was for their college dream. However, they also pointed out three key limitations of the program and offered practical recommendations to address its limitations as follows. First, the number of quota seats is limited. Only nineteen students are annually admitted through this program, even though, in each year, the program receives a large number of applicants.

The highlander college students in this study strongly suggested DOPA to increase the number of quota seats so that more low-income but talented highlander students could take advantage of the program. Increasing the number of quota seats means increasing the number of highlander student representatives in the Thai higher education system.
Second, under the highlander quota program, the choice of academic major is limited to only seven disciplines in social sciences and humanities. The students pointed out that majors such as medicine, engineering, nursing, and natural sciences should be included in the program. They conveyed that highland people and communities also highly need human resource expert trained in those majors. They believed that there are highlander students who desire to pursue these majors and who are qualified to study and to be successful. Lastly, this quota program is mainly implemented at NU, and since 2006, at another public university with an annual allowance of six quota seats in agricultural majors. In Thailand, there are about 81 public higher education institutions, but this type of quota program is selectively operated only at two universities. This indicates that there is a possibility for DOPA to expand its program to different locations and types of institutions. Meanwhile, other institutions of higher education, especially the first-tier university group known for vigorous admission, should look into this program and consider adding this type of quota into their existing admission systems in order to broaden college participation and accessibility for highlander youths.

In addition to the practical suggestions offered by highlander students, I would like to suggest two additional recommendations. The first suggestion is to increase and make a stronger budget for the quota program. According to the interview with program staff, since its establishment, the government budget allowance for this program was very small compared to many other programs operated by the Ministry of Interior (MOI). In some years, the program received very small allocations that hardly covered regular expenses. The officers had to seek surplus money from other programs within MOI to supplement the inadequate budget. The uncertain allocation of the program or insufficient
funding is the main reason that highly limits the quota program from increasing the
number of students, along with limited choices of academic majors, and limited choices
of higher education institutions, as suggested by the highlander students. The program
may not serve more students unless its funding issue is addressed.

Another recommendation is to develop the quota program into a federally-funded
program. The highlander quota program is the outcome of explicit ethnic policies created
during the 1950s when the central government interest was stimulated by the concerns of
highland minorities over the ‘hilltribe problems.’

Many of those policies were considered to create many negative consequences rather than positive ones. The
highlander quota is one among a few positive outcomes. However, since its origin, the
program has remained as part of the more general programs in DOPA under MOI. With
its twenty-three years of operation, it has proved that the program helped expand college
participation among highland populations. But, it has not been recognized by other
government agencies such as the Ministry of Education (MOE), the Office of Higher
Education Commission (OHEC), that deal directly with education, or the Department of
Social Development and Welfare (DSDW), which has worked with highland populations
for decades and has the Office of Ethnic Affairs within its organization. In other words,
this program has not been recognized and made into a special national education policy
program. During the 1950s, when the Thai government attempted to address the ‘hilltribe
problem,’ various governmental agencies were created to address such problems. These
included the Office of Basic Education, the Border Patrol Police (BPP), the Department
of Public Welfare, the Department of Non-Formal and Informal Education, the Office of

---

14 These problems were the opium cultivation, communist insurgency, and forest and land
degradation.
National Buddhism, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), including missionaries and ethnic-based organizations. Ideally, federalizing the highlander quota program could be accomplished in the same way. The government could appeal for assistance from those agencies either to transfer the highlander quota program with inadequate funding to become a federally-funded program or to start the first federally-funded college opportunity programs, modeled after programs such as the Federal TRIO Programs (TRIO) in the U.S. higher education system. The programs with greater funding and recognition could ensure greater access to college and serve larger numbers of low-income highlander students and other students from ethnic minority backgrounds.

*Public secondary schools.* As shown in Chapter Seven, one of the major issues that first-generation highlander college students experienced throughout their pathways to college and even after entering college was harassment based on their ethnic backgrounds. Such harassment took place especially during their middle school years, because the highland children finished primary school in their highland schools and then continued their studies at middle schools located in major Thai towns, where the majority of students were from mainstream Thai backgrounds. Thai highlander children have historically been viewed to be ‘other.’ Their being viewed as ‘other’ was partly due to the history of making Thai nationalism hegemonic based on three pillars: (1) *chat*, the national identity including the Thai people, land, and language; (2) *satsana*, the Buddhist religion; and (3) *phramahakasat*, the monarchy (Keyes, 1997). The highlanders’ designation as ‘other’ has been especially apparent since the 1950s, when the Thai government identified, labeled, and categorized ten ethnic minority groups, regardless of their unique ethnic origins, as ‘hill tribes.’ As a result, highlander people were exposed to
policies that were overtly based on recognition of ethnic differences (Keyes, 1997). Such explicit ethnic policies adopted by the Thai government toward highlander peoples created negative consequences. Highlander people were viewed as out-groups (i.e., neither northern Thai nor mainstream Thai). Such policies also drove mainstream media to construct and propagate stereotypes and stigmatizations of highlander people in the larger society. These negative characterizations of highlanders included global and derogatory descriptions such as poor, dirty, unintelligent, spiritually peculiar, illiterate, and drug dependent. The stereotypes and stigmatizations promoted by the media continuously reinforced the idea of highlander people as being out-groups. These recurring stereotypes by the media could possibly, in turn, have contributed to harassment based on ethnicities or cultural differences between highlander pupils and mainstream Thai pupils at schools.

Several Thai and foreign scholars criticized the media in constructing such stereotypes. However, at this point, I do not see any studies that focus on the impact of ethnic harassment on hill children’s identity, self-confidence, academic outcomes, or social reciprocity. Nevertheless, the anecdotes of college students in this study, at least, disclosed that teasing and harassment undermined their self-confidence in their own academic abilities. When they confronted such teasing, they did not verbally and physically fight against students who teased them, because if they did, they would possibly be viewed as troublemakers by other pupils and school personnel. Such negative perceptions could lead to other consequences such as persistent absences and dropping out. The students made decisions to ignore such teasing, but they also took this
difficulty and turned it into an encouraging force to do well in school and to prove their detractors wrong.

In their accounts, very few highlander students mentioned talking to school personnel about such incidents. Some students revealed that school personnel such as schoolteachers and college instructors also engaged in spreading false information about or making fun of hill people in the classrooms. The experiences of ethnic harassment confronted by this group of highlander students indicated that there is a need for multicultural education to be considered and implemented at predominately Thai schools that serve ethnic minority students in order to address the issue of ethnic harassment.

Multicultural education, aiming in creating equal educational opportunities for students from various backgrounds (Banks & Banks, 1995), originated and was widely implemented in western countries. However, in Thailand, it did not receive consideration until 2004, when a long-term ethnic insurgency in the three southernmost provinces of Thailand erupted into widespread violence. This unrest, which had historically taken place since the 1960s, became critical when renewed bloodshed caused more than 200 deaths. The populations of the three provinces (i.e., Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat,) are largely Malay-speaking Muslims (94 % of the population, compared to the national average of 95% Buddhist and 5% Muslim) (Klein, 2010). Among other reasons, the failure of the governments to understand the local populations (Klein, 2010), who mainly used the Patani Malay language in all domains of life and Islam beliefs had dominated their religious lives and their identities, were considered to be the root of the conflict. In response to the rebirth of violence, educational policies through multicultural education were advocated by the Thai government. As a result, substantive research concerning
multicultural education has been carried out in those provinces. For examples, Yongyuan, Day-ma, and Hiransai (2010) examined cultural understanding and respect for cultural diversity among 792 primary school teachers in the three southernmost provinces. Sungtong (2014) studied the multicultural leadership styles of thirty public school principals in the three southern border provinces of Thailand (i.e., Yala, Pattani, and Narathiwat). Premsrirat and Samo (2012) conducted a nine-year participatory research project on Mother Tongue-Based Bilingual Education using the Patani Malay and Thai languages in three pre-primary and primary schools in those three provinces. This project was supported by the Thai government’s educational policy for the special southernmost border area.

However, the northern region that had a large number of various ethnic groups was unlike the Deep South region. Multicultural education aimed at creating understanding in cultural differences has not been implemented in schools that serve both mainstream Thais and hill tribe children. A few research projects were conducted by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in mountain schools, as described in Chapter Four, but those projects focused on bilingual education. The projects neither created nor continued crucial impacts on language policies and educational policies at local, regional, or national levels.

The studies conducted in the three southernmost provinces showed that multicultural education helped to create cultural awareness and understanding among Thai Muslim students and Buddhist students, as well as Muslim and Buddhist school personnel. Therefore, multicultural education programs should be applied to schools in
the northern region to help eradicate the continuing embedded bias toward hill tribe people and their cultural and social differences.

When mainstream Thais think about other ethnic minority groups in their society, they mainly think about noticeable aspects of culture such as costumes, foods, and festivals. This mindset also applies to national school curriculum. Arphattananon (2013) examined the frequency and extent of multicultural content included in the social studies and history textbooks used in primary schools in Thailand. The study disclosed that the textbooks issued under the 2008 Basic National Core Curriculum (BNCC) had more multiculturalism content than the books issues under the 2001 BNCC. This is regarded as a good indication. However, the books’ contents mainly emphasized visible aspects of culture such as the foods, clothing, and festivals of people who lived in different regions in Thailand. Neither the disparities between people from diverse cultures nor their difficulties caused by cultural difference were presented. Arphattananon (2013) further noted that the specific examples of multiculturalism presented in the textbooks represented the Thai nation’s effort to institutionalize and standardize the cultures of various groups and to use diversity in cultures to produce economic benefits, rather than to highlight the power inequality of people in different cultures, which was the real cause of conflict among people across diverse cultures.

Thus, the multicultural education program I propose here should not reiterate such perceptions about multiculturalism. Multicultural education in schools should be created with the aim of achieving three key goals as Feinberg (1998) points out: educating students about cultural differences, supporting respect for diversity in cultural practice by other cultural groups, and encouraging the member groups to be proud of their cultural
heritage. With those goals in mind, the program should also be constructed in a way that helps mainstream students unlearn misperceptions or stereotypes about hill people, rather than educating non-hill tribe pupils about hill tribe costumes or festivals. It should also promote respect for diversities in ethnicities, languages, religions, cultures, and ways of life of hill peoples through various educational tools. In other words, the program should help sensitize the minds of majority groups who are oppressing others before it creates intercultural understanding. It is also vital to note that multicultural education programs should be implemented as early as possible in elementary school, middle school, and high school, where harassment based on race or ethnicity is common. The earlier the consciousness is raised, the sooner the respect for cultural differences would take place.

**Teacher training institutions.** In addition, another key issue this study uncovered is the poor primary education provided in the mountain schools due to various causes as described in Chapters Four and Seven. One of the main causes contributing to poor-quality education is a lack of teachers who know how to work with linguistically and culturally diverse students. As stated in Chapter Four, teachers who teach in highland schools were mainly from Thai backgrounds and most of them were assigned to teach in highland schools, either because they could not make high scores on national examinations or because they were new teachers. The teachers also did not know the languages of their ethnic students. When Thai teachers were employed to teach in the mountain schools, they often did not have previous direct experiences with hill tribe children and their cultures, and they might have held stereotypes about hill tribe people propagated by the mainstream media. The teachers also perhaps imposed their mainstream views on how hill tribe students should behave, dress, learn, communicate,
and live their lives, as Johnson (2005) found in a Thai public school operating in a Hmong village. In order for teachers to effectively teach hill tribe children and for hill tribe children to successfully engage in learning, it is vital for teachers to understand the relevant ethnic backgrounds, cultures, and contexts that nurture their hill tribe children. These aspects influence who the hill tribe children are, how they view the world, how they learn in their daily life, and how they can learn in schools. These problems are created partly because the teacher-training programs in most universities in Thailand do not provide student teachers with multicultural education.

Multicultural education is broadly advocated in many parts of the world to address unequal educational opportunities for students from diverse backgrounds. One way is to educate student teachers, who would later become professional teachers and play important roles in students’ success in schooling, about knowledge and training in multicultural education. It would be more effective if educational institutions could make ‘multicultural education’ as a mandatory course for student teachers or to have in-depth exposure to this teaching specialization.

However, this option is minimally present in Thailand. Very few institutions have advocated and engaged in providing multicultural education to their student teachers. One of those is Northern University (NU), which has an extended history in working with highlander peoples and lately has advocated diversity on its campus. NU first founded the Center for Multiculturalism and Educational Policy within the College of Education in 2007. After four years of developing a curriculum for multicultural education, in 2011, College of Education at NU offered a minor in multicultural education. This course provided students with fundamental knowledge about various ethic groups and their
histories, cultures, languages, social contexts, ways of life, and issues with mainstream Thai culture. The college took bigger step in 2014 by mandating multicultural education as a required course for all undergraduate students admitted in the 2014 academic year and also by offering a doctoral degree in multicultural education. Other teacher training institutions, especially the Rajabhat Universities system (a former teachers’ college system) that consists of 42 universities and annually produces a large number of teachers, should consider advocating and offering multicultural education courses, as does NU.

The issue of unequal opportunity to successfully learn faced by highland children at their primary school, which later had effects on their chances to attain college access, will be minimally addressed as long as teaching training programs give less attention and support to multicultural education, or do not make this kind of education a special educational program for the student teachers who will likely go teach at Thai public schools that serve hill tribe children. The absence of training in multicultural education limits them from recognizing that highland children have very limited opportunities to practice the Thai language, since most students in their schools are from the same ethnicity or are isolated from Thai towns. If teachers recognize participatory learning occurs in the home and village settings and then modify the school lessons they use in teaching accordingly, this would at least enhance students’ motivation to learn.

Other relevant agencies. This study was able to recruit only 23 first-generation highlander college students to participate in the study. These students are a small number of representatives of highland populations in the Thai higher education. This number shows us that there are highland students in the higher education system, but it does not speak to us about college participation levels or college access and graduation rates
among highland populations as a whole. Therefore, in order for policymakers to realize
the ethnic gap in college participation, statistical data on the number of highlander
students in the Thai higher education is required to be collected or known. If government
educational agencies are not willing to collect data on college participation by ethnic
backgrounds, the Office of Ethnic Affairs (OEA), instituted in 2007 under the
Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWS), could possibly collect
educational backgrounds of highland people when it conducts its census on highland
populations in the near future. The DSWS once conducted the census survey of the
highland populations in 2002. Data on highland people from this survey were used in
their various projects, but it would possibly be outdated in the present time. The DSWS
should mandate OEA to conduct a new census survey of this population to acquire more
up-to-date data. One of OEA responsibilities is to provide knowledge and information
concerning highland populations for social development, welfare management, and
reinforcement of harmony. How could OEA fulfill its duty and inform other
governmental agencies about ongoing or emerging issues such as educational issues
without the latest socioeconomic data of highland populations.

**Directions for Future Research**

With respect to implications for future research, I propose five future studies that
could expand upon my findings and current studies on college access for low-income
first-generation students of highland ethnic minorities in Thailand.

1. One of the most important findings of this study is the issue of ethnic
harassment faced by highlander students in educational settings. Given this
finding, it is imperative to explore how harassment based on ethnicity or
ethnic microaggression in everyday life at schools affects their identities and self-esteem.

2. With the nature of the study topic, this study methodologically relied on interview data, ethnography data, and to some extent on field notes for analysis and interpretation. Mixed-method research could be employed to further examine the key determinants found by this study. For example, an upcoming study could conduct surveys to examine how each key factor is statistically related or interdependent with the others.

3. The findings of this study were the result of research conducted with twenty-three first-generation college students from five different ethnic groups attending a renowned public university. Similar studies could be replicated at similar types of institutions that have highlander students. Findings from the additional study may offer other crucial factors that are not found in my study, but could be incorporated in policy to improve college access for highlander students.

4. My study focused only on twenty-three highlander students from five ethnic groups (i.e. Akha, Karen, Lahu, Hmong, Mien). This number may not represent hill tribe student population as the whole since it included only five out of ten hill tribe groups. So, in order to see the whole picture in the issue of college access, the future study should include highlander students from the other five hill tribe groups (i.e., Lisu, Lua, Htin, Khamu and Mlabri).

5. A comparative study between first-generation highlander students and first-generation mainstream Thai students could generate important findings.
6. This study focuses on college access and is limited to the pre-college experiences of first-generation college students. It may be important to explore the experiences of first-generation college students after they enter college. The study may focus on their college experiences and on relevant issues such as, social and academic adjustments, college persistence, attrition, and degree completion.

**Significance**

This study contributes to the current research on educational participation and opportunities for first-generation students of Thai highland ethnic minorities in four ways. First, studies that deal directly with the issue of college access for highlander students hardly exist or have not been properly documented. Therefore, this qualitative study provides background information that can benefit subsequent research. For example, a larger statistical study, where the subject matter and the nature of certain issues need to be more clearly understood before appropriate measures are selected, can benefit from the insights provided by this qualitative study. Second, this study aimed at gaining an in-depth understanding of how highlander students successfully gained college access in the face of their limited opportunities and challenging barriers. The study revealed the five main factors that helped to explain their successes and also helped us understand how these factors are related to one another. Third, learning from the life experiences of successful highlander students and examining what lay behind their ways of gaining college access not only brought the issues of college access to light, but also supplied recommendations for policies and practices to promote college opportunities and access for highlander students. Lastly, this study suggests that race/ethnicity is important for ethnic minority students and their ability and opportunity to secure access to college.
The equality in access to college may not be greatly promoted unless the educational system that over-generalizes everyone as mainstream Thais acknowledges and takes student ethnicity into account when educational policies are being formulated.

**Conclusion**

This qualitative study focuses on impressive examples of first-generation highlander college students and how they succeeded in attaining college access in spite of challenging barriers throughout their educational experiences. Their anecdotes showed us that college is possible for highlander children and youths who are from historically, socially, culturally, and economically disadvantaged groups. Their achievements were not something that happened by accident. In fact, their successes are rather in accord with a famous African proverb stating that ‘it takes a whole village to raise a child.’ It required different positive supports from the students themselves, their parents and extended families, teachers, significant others, schools, higher education institutions, and governmental agencies. The positive factors derived from the lived experiences of these students should not only be acknowledged by all stakeholders, especially state agencies, but also developed into concrete policies and plans to promote college accessibility, opportunities, and participation in the system of Thai higher education.
REFERENCES


Buadaeng, Kh. (2006). *The rise and fall of the tribal research institute (TRI).*
Social Research Institute, Chiangmai University, Thailand.

Buadaeng, Kh. (2007). *The developments of educational management in highland ethnic communities by Thai government (phatthanakarn karnjakarnsuksa khongrat naichumchonchattiphan bonphunthisung).* Social Research Institute, Chiangmai University, Thailand.

Buadaeng, Kh. (2008). The development of private organizations and educational support for highland ethnic minorities. Social Research Institute, Chiangmai University, Thailand.


http://www2.uwstout.edu/content/lib/thesis/2003/2003mouat.pdf


http://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:046dc27e-fa91-4f1d-9e1f-0ce057db6ebb


APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR STUDENT PARTICIPANTS

Nambe of student:……………………………………..

Gender of student:……..Male ……….Female

Name of Interviewer:…………………………………

Name of Translator (if present):………………………..

Date of Interview:……………………………………

Time of Interview:……………………………………

Place of Interview:……………………………………

Identification number of interview:…………………..

Demographic Information

I would like to start the interview by asking a few questions about yourself and your background.

1. What is your date of birth?

2. Where were you born (family village, city, and province)?

3. What is your academic major? What make you interested in this major?

4. What year of study are you in?

5. Where do you stay now?

6. Who do you live with? How do you know one another?

7. Did you father go to school?
   a. If so, how many years did your father attend school?

8. Did you mother go to school?
   a. If so, how many years did your mother attend school?
9. What is your father’s occupation?

10. What is your mother’s occupation?

11. How many brothers/sisters do you have? Can you tell me about each of them?

12. How old are each of your brothers/sisters?

13. Are any of them now in school, college, or university?
   a. If so, where and what do they study?
   b. If not, how much education has each of your brothers/sisters had?

14. Are any of your brothers/sisters employed? If so, what are their occupations?

15. To what ethnic minority groups (i.e. Karen, Hmong, Lahu, Mien, & Akha) do you belong? To what group does your father belong? To what group does your mother belong?

**Family and Significant Others**

Now I would like to talk to you about your family and significant others and how they influenced your education.

1. Can you think of particular ways that your family has helped you succeed in school or to get education? How were your parents involved in you education?

   Probes:
   a. Particular family members who were inspirational?
   b. Family making sacrifices such as financial in order for children to get an education?
   c. Parent helping with homework?
   d. Parent enrolling children in special classes outside of regular school hours?
2. What roles did your family play in helping you making the decision to pursue college/university?

3. Have your parents visited the university? If so, how did they say about their experiences about this university?

4. Do you have family responsibilities? If so, can you tell me about it?

5. Did you have any mentors in the past when you were in school? If so, could you please tell me who they were, how they became your mentor, and what did roles mentors have in your life?

6. Are the others, who are not family, help you with your education?

Village

Now I would like to talk to you about the area where you grew up.

1. What is the name of your current village? Where is it located?

2. Is your village close to highway or is it close to Thai villages?

3. How does your village demographics look like? Are most people in your village Hmong, Karen, Lahu, Akha, or Lisu? Are there other ethnic groups live in your village?

4. How far is your village from the nearest school?
   a. Primary school
   b. Middle school
   c. High school
   d. College/ university

5. How often do you go back to your village? Is there a particular time of year when you return?
6. If people from your hometown were asked to describe you, what do you think they would say?

7. Were there people in your village (besides family members) who influenced you about education or to do well in school? If so, how did they do this?

**Previous Educational Experiences**

Now I would like to talk to you about schools and then about your life here at Chiangmai University.

1. Tell me about primary, middle, and high school you attended. Probes:
   a. Is it located in your village or in the Thai town?
   b. Public or private school?
   c. Could you describe each of schools in term of the size, student demography, facilities (the condition of building, kinds of instructional supplies), and teachers?
   d. How far did you travel from home to school? How did you get there?
   e. Were there any teachers who belong to any hill tribe groups in the school you attended?

2. What languages were spoken in your house when you were a school student?

3. What language was used in each school you previously attended?

4. What was your primary school, middle, and high school experience like?

5. Who did pay for your school tuition in each school level (families the governments, etc.)?

6. Now think back over all your years in school.
a. Tell me about a teacher you thought was particularly good. What made this person a good teacher?

b. Did any teacher and others make school difficult, or caused difficulties for you?

7. Who paid for your housing and food?

8. What roles did your schools play in shaping your educational goals?

9. In what ways did your high school prepare or not prepare you for college?

10. What did most of your classmates do after high school?

11. Think back what motivated you most to do well in primary, elementary, and high school? What inspired you to continue on with your education even during difficulty times?

12. Now take a moment to think of what made you decide to pursue college/university? Or what motivated you to pursue higher education?

13. Do you remember when you started thinking about college?

14. How and why did you come to study at Northern University?

15. How did you choose your major? Did you talk to your family, friends, and others about it?

16. Could you tell me about your experiences with the university entrance examination?

17. Did you come here alone to study or with a friend from high school?

18. In what ways did your previous schools help you do well in school?

19. In what ways did your previous schools (i.e. primary, elementary, or high school) help or prepare you for pursuing higher education?
20. How much do you spend each month for all of your expenses?

21. Where does this money come from? Probes: from parents, student loan, scholarships or other sources?

22. How much per semester do you spend for tuition and books? How do you pay all of these expenses?

23. If you are the first, could you please share your experiences as the first in your family to go college?

**Ethnicity and Education**

For the next few minutes we will talk about ethnicity and education

1. Before you came to the university, with whom did you spend your free time in your village (e.g. other hill tribe students, Thai people, or NGO officers)?
   Now that you are here at the university, with whom do you spend your free time?

2. Is being Karen, Hmong, Lahu, Mien or Akha important to you? Can you describe any Karen, Hmong, Lahu, Mien or Akha customs that affect your everyday life? Probes:
   a. Speaking a minority language?
   b. Participating a particular religion?
   c. Celebrating certain holidays/dates a given way?

3. Do you feel you have benefited from being Karen, Hmong, Lahu, Mien or Akha? Have you felt any discrimination or hostility because of being Karen, Hmong, Lahu, Mien or Akha? What were the circumstances?
4. Do you think your ethnic background as hill tribe impacts your opportunity to attend college?

5. Have you ever experienced any cultural conflict (i.e. between your ethnic culture and main stream Thai cultural)? If so, how do you deal with or resolve this issue?

6. Do people at your university identify you as highlander or hill tribe students? Do you identify yourself to others as a hill tribe student? In what circumstances do you identify or not identify yourself to others as a hill tribe student?

7. Highlander students sometimes face special problem in getting an education that other students do not face. Could you tell me some reasons why minority students may have problems in getting an education and doing well in school?

**Future Plan**

The final set of questions will deal with your plans for the future

1. What kind of work do you want to do after completing college?

2. Where do you want to work? If there is an available job position in your village, do you want to go back and work there? What do you think some effects of returning to your home village and working there such as working as a teacher or nurse?

3. Will the fact that you are Hmong, Karen, Lahu, Mien, or Akha make any difference in the work you do after your graduation? If so, how will that make a difference after graduation?
4. What difference will a college education make in your life or compound to others like you in your village? Will it make you different from other Hmong, Karen, Lahu, Mien, or Akha who did not go to college?

5. Is there anything else you would like to say that we have not talked about?
APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR PARENT PARTICIPANTS

1. What do you think about your children’s education?

2. In what ways do you get involved in your children education?
   a. Family making sacrifices such as financial?
   b. Helping with homework?
   c. Enrolling children in special classes outside of regular school hours?
   d. Helping with college application?
   e. Helping with making a college decision?
   f. Others?

3. Why do you support, or not support, your children’s pursuit of higher education?

4. How important or unimportant is education for you as a parent (s), for your children, and for the whole family?
APPENDIX C

FIELD OBSERVATION GUIDELINES AND FIELD NOTE FORM

Classroom Setting

1. How many students in the class are hill tribe students?
2. Classroom participation.
3. Student’s interaction with classmates and instructors.
4. Interpersonal relation: the relationship with the teachers and friends.
5. Peer supports.
6. Thai language proficiency.

Social Event

1. Look at social skills.
2. The roles that the student participants take in social events.
3. Contribution the student participants make to the events.
4. Participants’ disclosure of ethnicity to people in the events.

Home Setting

1. Does the family think that it is useful for their children to attend school?
   a. Yes/no, what are their views of school for their children?
2. Where does the family send their children to attend school?
   Probes:
   a. Primary school, middle school, high school, vocational school, or university?
   b. Is the school near the village, near Thai village, or city?
   c. Is the school private or public school/institution?
d. What are sources of financial support for their children education?

3. Are there other schools that these children could attend, or in each instance, in this the only school available to people of a given age?

4. How is the decision made as to what school a child will attend?

5. Living conditions?

6. Does any one in this family regularly read any newspaper, magazine, cartoon, or book at home?

7. Do parents ask or talk to their children about school, homework, and life in school, college, and university?

8. What sorts of educational activities students do with their parents and siblings at home?

9. A student’s participations in his/her ethnic rituals and cultural activities.

10. His/her role in his/her siblings’ education.

11. His/her education role model in the village.

**Village Environment**

1. How many people live in this village?

2. What are different major religions in this village (e.g. animism, Buddhist, Christianity, Muslim, or others? Or does everyone in the village practice the same religion? What religion?

3. What are the social structures and the nature of culture of the village?

4. In what kind of work are most people who live here engaged?

5. How well off economically are people in this community?
6. Is it common for children in this village to work in order to supplement family income?

7. How many people in this village have obtained college/university degree? If any, in what academic majors?

8. How many students from this village are attending at high school, college and university?
Focus Group Discussion Questions

1. What key determinants do you think contribute to the success of first-generation college students of Hmong, Karen, Lahu, Mien, and Akha students in gaining access to college?

2. What key determinants do you think serve as barriers to those students in gaining access to college?

3. How do you perceive the impact of ethnic background on your education and opportunity to attend college?

4. How do you see the issue of college access for highlander students going in the future?

5. Based on your views, what are some possible ways to deal with or improve college access for highlander youths?

6. What information do they think is important that the researcher has not asked, covered, or collected?

7. Do you have any comment or feedback about the way the research project is conducted, the way research activities are carried out, and the way the researcher performs her roles as researcher in the research project?
## APPENDIX E

**LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ASEAN</td>
<td>Association of Southeast Asian Nations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AUA</td>
<td>Autonomous University Act</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BECC</td>
<td>Basic Education Core Curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BPP</td>
<td>Border Patrol Police</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAS</td>
<td>Central Admission System</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CBC</td>
<td>Culturally based curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CESD</td>
<td>Center for Ethnic Studies and Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C.C.T</td>
<td>Church of Christ in Thailand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OHEC</td>
<td>Office of the Higher Education Commission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CLS</td>
<td>Critical legal studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CRT</td>
<td>Critical race theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CUAS</td>
<td>Central University Admissions System</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CYC</td>
<td>Child and Youth Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DLA</td>
<td>Department of Local Administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DGE</td>
<td>Department of General Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DNFE</td>
<td>Department of Non-Formal Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DOGE</td>
<td>Department of General Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DOPA</td>
<td>Department of Provincial Administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DPW</td>
<td>Department of Public Welfare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DSDS</td>
<td>Department of Social Development and Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DSDW</td>
<td>Department of Social Development and Welfare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abbreviation</td>
<td>Full Form</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPS</td>
<td>Employment Permit System</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDF</td>
<td>Education for Development Foundation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FAL</td>
<td>Foundation for Applied Linguistic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FB</td>
<td>Facebook</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GPA</td>
<td>Grade Point Average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GPD</td>
<td>Gross Domestic Product</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HAEP</td>
<td>Hill Area Education Project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HTC</td>
<td>Hill Tribe Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HTWC</td>
<td>Hill Tribe Welfare Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICL</td>
<td>Income Contingency Loan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICT</td>
<td>Information and communication technologies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IDB</td>
<td>Islamic Development Bank</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IMPECT</td>
<td>Inter-Mountain Peoples’ Education and Culture in Thailand Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISGF</td>
<td>International Support Group Foundation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LU</td>
<td>Lanna University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MLE</td>
<td>Multilingual Education Project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MOE</td>
<td>Ministry of Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MOI</td>
<td>Ministry of Interior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MOE</td>
<td>Ministry of Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGOs</td>
<td>Non-Governmental Development Organizations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NSO</td>
<td>National Statistical Office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NIEA</td>
<td>National Indian Education Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NQEE</td>
<td>Northern Quota Entrance Examination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acronym</td>
<td>Full Form</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NSTDA</td>
<td>National Science and Technology Development Agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NU</td>
<td>Northern University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OBEC</td>
<td>Office of Basic Education Commission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OEA</td>
<td>Office of Ethnic Affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OHEC</td>
<td>Office of Higher Education Commission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ONB</td>
<td>Office of National Buddhism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OPA</td>
<td>Office of Provincial Administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OCSC</td>
<td>Office of the Civil Service Commission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RFD</td>
<td>Royal Forest Department</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SES</td>
<td>Socio-Economic Status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SRI</td>
<td>Social Research Institution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRI</td>
<td>Tribal Research Institute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TPIK</td>
<td>Test of Proficiency in Korean</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>