

This project is part of the work of Bridging Borders (BB). BB is a global collective that is working together to transform traditional boundaries and create vital networks that lead to innovative opportunities and pathways in education for communities living at or working with those at the margins. The collective is focused on higher education and community relationships, including a diverse group of community partners, academic departments and centers (faculty, staff, students) and organizations. BB is currently housed at the University of Utah Asia Center and College of Social Work at the University of Utah and is led by Dr. Rosey Hunter. The Karen Student College Pathway project and BB have their roots in relationships that were formed in 2007 between the Karen community of Hartland Apartments and university and community partners at the UNP Hartland Partnership Center.

In April 2018, Garroe Wah, identified two Karen college students to spearhead a research project focused on understanding the successes and barriers for the Karen community in their efforts to access and succeed in higher education. The two students are female, both born in camps along the Thailand/Burma (Myanmar) border, and are currently attending college. One is in her final year at Salt Lake Community College and is majoring in Teaching and the other is at the University of Utah and is double majoring in Teaching and Art. Garroe chose these students, both because of their past and current positionality, and also as an effort to develop young, female leadership with the Karen community.

Rather than beginning with making one-on-one connections to resources at the University of Utah for students from the Thailand-Burma border, Garroe chose to develop this research project in order to gain a more thorough understanding of the context of his community in relation to higher education. Garroe's end goal is that the research project leads to the development of a pilot college pathway program to launch in January 2019.

As part of this work Dr. Yda Smith from the Department of Occupational and Recreational Therapies was also chosen to support the research process. Yda Smith and her students facilitated a multi-year college pathway program for a group of female, Karen Hartland residents that began in 2008/9. All of those students have gone on to college and Sayro is one of those students. Yda's involvement with the Karen community has continued in SLC, as well as along the Thailand/Burma border. With her leadership, this current group has submitted an abstract and been accepted for to the 2019 American Occupational Therapy Conference in New Orleans. The abstract is titled, *Occupational Barriers and*

Research Timeline/Outcomes:

April – Research project discussed and created

May – Developed focus group and survey questions

June – Conducted 3 focus groups with 22 individuals (participants also filled out an extensive survey)

July/August – Transcribed the focus groups and collated survey data

September – Analyze data

October-December – Meet with potential partners, define pilot program, secure funding and space

January – Began Pilot Program

Social Supports among Members of a Karen Community of Former Refugees: Impact on Higher Education Access.

Focus Group Themes and Quotes (*Sayro Paw and Ser Eh Dah Htoo conducted 3 focus groups w/ 22 total participants*) **provided also is an excel document that detail the survey results which was completed by all 22 participants*

Education as a Weapon for Change

“Knowledge is power. For my dream, right?”

“No one can’t steal my education/intelligent but they can steal my money” *They can steal my money but not my education*

“If you want a better future and better life.”

“I truly believe that education is a powerful weapon which you can use to change the world and they want that for their children. They want us to have a better life and they truly believe that education is the way to truly transform your life and become successful.”

“I think for my community, college is the next level where you determine your future and where you create goals and your future.”

Striving for Equal Status – Being Judged by Others

“We have to match our shoulder with other people.”

“People have a different perspective of you if you go to college. They respect you more.”

“Like finding new jobs, getting better opportunities, not getting looked down on when you are a refugee or immigrant.”

“So [our kids] don’t face judgment for other people and if other people can do it, then they can do it too...we don’t want [our kids] to end up like us either.”

Sample Research Questions:

Focus Group

*What are your dreams for you and your family?

*What has been helpful in you reaching your education goals?

*What are the barriers that have gotten in the way of you achieving your education goals?

Survey

*How do you identify yourself? (Karen, Karen-American, American, Other)

*What is your gender?

*What language(s) do you speak at home?

*How well do you speak Karen? How about English?

*What is your level of education in the United States? How about your parents?

*What is your level of education back in your home country? How about your parents?

*Do you plan to go to college?

*For student: Do your parents expect you to go to/complete college?

*For parent: Do you expect your child to go/complete college?

*What is your current working position?

*With whom do you live?

Desire to Help Others

“For the younger generation to finish school and help out the community here or over there.”

“Don’t forget your own people...we should...remember where we are from as refugee status, who we are and never forget our roots.”

“For dream I want to go back to Thailand and help teach the kids.”

“My long-term goal is to bring my family out of poverty and bring better circumstances to them. Provide my parents with the affluence. And just a better opportunity to spend the rest of their lives. And reach out to my current community and help them achieve and overcome obstacles because there are a lot of obstacles for refugees and immigrants, a lot of barriers to overcome. So that is what I want to do.”

“Karen people...they always support each other. If you talk about education, they will always support and push you for that. However, they can’t support you financially. We came to America...we’re all new. None of us born here. Us Karen people that came here. If we have to compare... compare each other with white people...I think if we were born here we can do it.”

Barriers

“I don’t know how to do the assignments so it’s not good for me.”

“Sometime the classes were too hard.”

“There are friends that support me but financial is the real issue and childcare is hard. If only we two people work we get enough income. Time. For me it is time, childcare and money.”

“I can’t speak English that well.”

“College criteria is different than high school.”

“In [high school] I do everything on my own. I don’t have anyone [at the school] to help me.”

“In my freshman year in college I took little/few class because I don’t know the professor are and don’t know where the classes are. The campus was big and don’t know where to find other resources.”

“In my senior year I went to talk to my ESL teacher and told her that I want to go to college. Her response was, ‘You’re a refugee. Why do you need to go to college? Refugee people don’t need college and after they finish high school they went to jobs to help out the parents. So, I asked the teacher or school but no one help me. So, I decided to apply it on my own.

**There is a reoccurring issue with students being advised to take classes that they in fact don’t need.*

Supports

“I have a lot of support in my family. Any doubt or obstacles I face when I am in school I have a lot of reassurance and encouragement from my family. Another support and resource I have are my past and current teachers. My teachers are my friends and like counselors. They listen to my story, my background and they do everything in their power to help me find the best resources for myself and the best encouragement. And I think this support group has helped me a lot because continuing education in college is definitely not easy and having that support and backbone foundation is truly phenomenal.”