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Beyond Resilience: Barriers and Pathways in Higher Education for Double First-Gen Myanmar Refugee-Background Youth

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Abstract: Between 2008 and 2013, a hundred thousand refugees fleeing Burma/Myanmar's civil war resettled in the US. In this qualitative study, we interview 15 1.5-generation Myanmar refugee-background high school graduates to understand their access to higher education (HE). Using a critical grounded theory approach, we ask what supports families, communities, and educational institutions provided (or not). We coin the term "double first-gen" to describe first-generation immigrants *and* college students. By analyzing family, community, and institutional factors, we move beyond theories of individual psychological "resilience" by interviewing participants who thrived *and* struggled in HE. We conclude that K-12 schools offer varying levels of support; that parents provide financial and emotional, but not usually academic support; that oldest siblings and those from single wage-earner families face higher barriers; that racially and socio-economically diverse communities or concentrations of Myanmar refugees are advantageous; that Myanmar refugee-background youth are less likely to ask for help than US-born peers; and that HEIs could offer a stronger sense of belonging to this population. We also discuss participants' identity tensions, including varying definitions of success and responsibility, and US perceptions of refugees versus their lived experiences. We suggest how K-12 schools can construct pipelines to college and career that HEIs extend: create diverse, safe, and welcoming schools; offer college-prep, mentoring, and peer support starting in middle school; and hire college-level faculty and support staff who are first-gen and/or immigrants. These supports may also help refugee-background youth from other countries.
Keywords: Refugee-background students, Myanmar/Burma, higher education access

VT[2] is a Matu Chin man in his early twenties currently living in Indiana. He and his parents and siblings fled Burma/Myanmar[3] and resettled in Texas when he was 8, but they moved to Indiana shortly afterward because of the large Chin and Myanmar communities there. He is confident and outgoing, and learned English quickly. When he was in middle school, his guidance

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[2] All names are participant-chosen pseudonyms.
[3] The country can be called either Burma or Myanmar, while the language and national origin can be referred to as Burmese or Myanmar. We use these terms interchangeably; our participants used all these terms in various contexts. Participants in this study identify with ethnic minority groups from Myanmar (e.g., Matu Chin, Mizo Chin, Karen, Karenni), who have been disproportionately affected by civil war there.

counselor introduced him to the 21st Century Scholars program, targeted at low-income and potential first-generation college students, which involved community service as well as AP and dual-credit classes. Through that program, VT learned about an opportunity to spend a week on the campus of Indiana University the summer before his junior year in high school. While there, he heard about the Group Scholars program, which offered mentoring and covered partial tuition for low-income and first-gen college students. With this and other scholarships, VT was able to attend a state university, bond with peers from similar backgrounds, and eventually earn a master's degree. He has found a career where he can mentor young people, and he is also active working with youth in his church.

Daisy is a Karenni woman in her early twenties currently living in Missouri. She was born in a refugee camp in Thailand, and she and her parents and younger siblings resettled in a large city in California when she was 7. There were many immigrants there, and school personnel had experience offering support to multilingual students and families. However, when she was in high school, they moved to Missouri, where she did not find the schools as supportive or diverse. As the oldest in her family, she was responsible for helping her parents. She had to figure out on her own what tests to take and what forms to fill out to apply for college. Despite these obstacles, she applied to a state university. She was admitted and promised financial aid that would have allowed her to attend. However, she did not understand the financial aid letter, and concluded she could only afford community college. After two years of community college, she was able to transfer to a state university and is set to graduate soon. She dreams of being able to help her parents financially and enabling them to visit their homeland.

Kesan is a Matu Chin man in his mid-twenties currently living in Indiana. He and his parents and younger siblings fled Myanmar and settled in a small, mostly white town in Texas when he was about 11, after a traumatic journey through Malaysia. In middle school he was bullied because he could not speak English well. After concluding that his parents and teachers could not help him, he got into physical fights to defend himself. He was a talented soccer player, but his family could not financially support this pursuit, so he was not able to take advantage of opportunities that might have led to scholarships. After high school, his goal was to study chemical engineering in college. However, his mother was injured on the job and has not been able to work since, so he started working to help his parents. He currently manages a fast-food restaurant. He considers continuing his education, but he has mixed feelings–and his family needs continuous financial support.

We interviewed VT, Daisy, and Kesan, as well as a dozen others, as part of our qualitative research project seeking to understand the educational and career trajectories of Myanmar refugee-background youth. Their stories represent a spectrum of experiences with schooling in the US. These three participants have some similarities and some differences in terms of gender, ethnicity, age on arrival, birth order, personality, family situation, and receiving community. While each of these variables may have influenced their paths, we argue that the factor that mattered most was the level of support that K-12 schools and higher education institutions (HEIs) offered them. VT received the highest support, and had a relatively smooth pathway through higher education (HE). Daisy received varying levels of support, and had a bumpy road filled with avoidable obstacles, but managed to access HE anyway. Kesan received little support from schools, and was not able to access higher education. All three of them have shown resourcefulness and ingenuity in working toward their goals, as well as fidelity to their values of supporting their families and communities.

In highlighting the importance of school-based support, we are offering an alternative to theories that emphasize individual psychological factors such as resilience or grit (Duckworth, 2016) as the deciding factor in students' outcomes. Instead, we focus on structural factors in the

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education system to encourage schools to consider how they could improve students' opportunities. VT's "success story" can be an inspiration for how to create a "pipeline" into and through higher education for refugee-background students. Daisy's example may motivate guidance counselors, especially those outside diverse urban centers, to offer more support to students like her throughout the college application process. Kesan's trajectory might prompt administrators to facilitate social integration and extracurricular opportunities for refugee and immigrant students. Our goal in this article is to help school personnel understand refugee communities in general, as well as specifically those from Myanmar, so that they can provide stronger assistance.

Refugees from Burma/Myanmar

VT, Daisy, and Kesan are several of the 109,000 refugees from Burma/Myanmar who resettled in the US between 2008 and 2013, fleeing civil war and military repression.[4] Like these three, 35% of these refugees were between 2 and 14 when admitted (CDC, 2016). Thus many of these young people have now graduated high school and considered whether to pursue higher education (HE). Those now in their twenties, like our interviewees, could be described as 1.5-generation immigrants, having arrived between the ages of 5 and 16. This population brings with them strong roots from their home regions, yet they have been socialized within the US education system (Benesch, 2008; Benyamin, 2018).

Because Myanmar's civil war has involved the Burman Buddhist majority oppressing ethnic minority groups, refugees from Myanmar are ethnically, linguistically, and culturally diverse. They may identify less with the country and more with their ethnic group (e.g., Chin, Karen, Karenni, Kachin, Mon, Shan, Rakhine, Rohingya, as well as smaller or sub-groups such as Mizo or Matu Chin). How much these groups differ from each other in terms of outcomes in the US is a topic for future research, but we group them together for the purposes of this study, since refugees from Myanmar are likely to share more in terms of educational background and experiences with each other than they would with US citizens or other groups of refugees.

Refugees from Myanmar are among the least privileged Asians in the United States (Capps & Newland, 2015). Compared with other refugees, Myanmar refugee adults have a polarized educational makeup, with a relatively high 31% possessing a college or advanced degree, but 39% lacking a high school diploma (APIASF, 2014). If they were educated in Myanmar, classes were large (60 to 100 students), rote learning was emphasized, and central authorities discouraged critical thinking (Lall, 2020). Therefore, even if our participants' parents had earned college degrees in Myanmar, we would argue they should still be considered first-gen in a US context because so little of the cultural capital gained would transfer. 30% of refugees from Myanmar were living below the poverty line in 2014 (APIASF, 2014), and only 28% of Burmese people living in the United States were considered proficient in English (Pew Research Center, 2017).

Myanmar is a common country of origin for refugees arriving in the United States (Blizzard & Batalova, 2019), yet research on Burmese students is rare (cf. Duran, 2016; Gilhooly, 2015; Metro, 2022). They have been included in research on refugee students generally (Croce, 2015; Hos, 2014), which mostly concerns K-12 education. We seek to expand this literature to include youth beyond high school.

[4] The following few paragraphs are drawn from an earlier conference presentation (Metro et al., 2024a). We are grateful to conference participants for feedback given during that session.

Our Positionalities[5]

Each of us has different identities we bring to this project. Rose Metro is a white female US citizen in her forties. She taught English to refugee and migrant adults from Myanmar in Thailand; and she taught middle school and high school social studies in New York City and in Columbia, MO. She conducted her doctoral research with teachers on the Thai-Myanmar border, and currently serves as a Burmese language interpreter on an as-needed basis for local schools serving Myanmar refugee families. She is an Associate Teaching Professor at University of Missouri-Columbia.

Ma Maysi is a Chin woman now in her twenties, who arrived in the US as a refugee from Myanmar as a child. She received her Bachelor of Science in Health Sciences and is a current graduate student at University of Missouri-Columbia, studying Public Health Promotion and Policy, exploring inequity of health in populations. She tutors some elementary and middle schoolers from Burmese families in Columbia. She is interested in learning about barriers and factors that impact the educational journey of other refugees from Myanmar.

Joe Decker is a white male US citizen in his thirties. He worked in alternative education in Myanmar for 10 years and is interested in how those who are failed and/or erased by state education systems educate themselves and their communities. He is now enrolled in the Ph.D. program Languages and Literacy for Social Transformation at University of Missouri-Columbia, where he is exploring how praxis around language pedagogy creates and dismantles communities.

Each of us brings different insights to the project. Rose draws on decades of study on the education of refugees from Myanmar, on her K-12 teaching career, and on her experience interpreting in schools for refugee families from Myanmar. Maysi brings lived experience as a refugee from Myanmar who overcame obstacles to access higher education, and draws on a network of network of peers from similar backgrounds. Joe has extensive experience as a teacher in Myanmar and brings insights from studying comparable contexts. What we share is an interest in Myanmar refugee communities in the US and a dedication to empowering youth to reach their goals.

Methods and Data

We used a Critical Grounded Theory (Timonen et al., 2018) approach in our research, which means that we started with a social problem we wanted to address: limited access to higher education among Myanmar refugee-background youth in the US. Grounded theory projects do not start with theories or literature and then interpret the data in light of them, but rather start with data and try to generate theories from it. We did not use a strict grounded theory approach in which we ignored scholarly work related to our topic, but we did avoid starting with theoretical frameworks or concepts (for instance, “resilience”) that would condition the way we analyzed the data (Charmaz, 2011). Instead, we let the data from our interviews lead us to literature that would help us interpret it, generating new theories and concepts along the way (for instance, “double first-gen” is one term we coined).

That is why we are discussing methods and data in this paper prior to situating the data in the literature, although there is a tradition of doing the opposite. We want readers to understand what we did and why before we explain some lenses we used to interpret the data.

[5] This section and the next section are drawn from an earlier conference presentation (Metro et al., 2024b). We are grateful to conference participants for feedback given during that session.

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We started this qualitative research project by recruiting several 1.5-gen Myanmar refugee-background participants from our own social networks, then used a snowball sampling method in which we asked interviewees to suggest other participants. Our first round of interviews included mostly women and mostly people of Chin ethnicity who were enrolled in higher education, so we then sought out participants who were male, of other ethnicities, and who were working. We eventually recruited 15 people currently between the ages of 20 and 25 who had arrived in the US between the ages of 5 and 16.

We interviewed these participants three times over the course of one year, using a semi-structured interview guide that we adapted in the moment to the flow of the conversation. In the initial interview, we asked about their ethnic and family backgrounds, their journey to the US, and their K-12 and higher education experiences, focusing especially on what barriers and supports they encountered from family, community, and the education system, as well as their goals for the future. Six months later, in the second interview, we asked participants to reflect on their progress toward their goals, challenges and rewards in their current educational or career paths, what they observe about their Myanmar refugee-background peers, and how they see their own identities versus how others see them. In the final interview, around the one-year mark, we asked about participants' progress toward their goals, continuing support they would find useful, what communities they are most connected to, and what advice they would give to their younger selves. We conducted these interviews over time so that we could capture not just a snapshot of participants' lives, but rather a sense of continuity and change.

Our participants are ethnically diverse, but not representative of all Myanmar refugees living in the US. We interviewed six men and nine women, including four people who identified as Karenni, one as Karen, and nine Chin (Matu, Mizo, Zomi, Mindat). Our sample included mostly Chin people because of our identities and social networks, and we acknowledge that our findings might be different if our sample had a different ethnic mix—although it is difficult to say how, because there is so little published research on specific ethnic groups from Myanmar in the US, as most studies categorize them together as "Burmese refugees," or focus on only one subgroup rather than comparing them.

All participants had graduated from high school, and most were enrolled in or had completed some higher education, although two were working and one was in the military. Participants were living or had lived in various locations in the US, including urban, rural, and suburban areas in Missouri, Indiana, North Carolina, Texas, and California. We had originally thought of recruiting only participants from Missouri, where all of us are currently based, but because digital diaspora networks (Metro et al., 2024b) influenced our snowball sampling method, our participants ended up being more geographically diverse.

While our sample size is relatively small, we continued adding participants until the point of "data saturation," (Maxwell, 2013) when new participants were mostly echoing what we had heard from others, and we could see which experiences were common versus outliers. We conducted most interviews on Zoom, although two were in person. The interviews were conducted mostly in English by Rose and Maysi, with some Burmese or other ethnic languages mixed in depending on our capacities—Rose speaks some Burmese and Maysi speaks Burmese and Matu Chin. We recorded the interviews and worked with automatically generated transcripts that we analyzed alongside the recordings.

We analyzed the data by listening to recordings and reading the transcripts, and developing a list of emerging themes and tensions. The three of us discussed these themes and tensions, and then we listened to the interviews again to gather quotations that illustrated these themes and tensions. Because Maysi is a 1.5-gen Myanmar refugee background student, she provided a built-

in "member check" (Maxwell, 2013) on our conclusions. For instance, Maysi was able to confirm based on her experience that oldest siblings in Myanmar refugee families had additional household responsibilities that could interfere with pursuing higher education.

Several ethical considerations influenced this research. We asked participants to choose a pseudonym so they would feel more comfortable sharing their experiences. In this article you will hear from Angel, Aye Reh, Emily, Eunice, Lin, Mawite, Natalie, Pan, PM, Thai, Thang Kwi, and Thawng, in addition to Kesan, Daisy, and VT.

We also used a technique recommended by Nisha Toomey (2023) in her dissertation based in Myanmar borderlands, which was to ask if participants had any suggestions on how we could make the research more valuable, and they made meaningful suggestions that we were able to incorporate. For instance, one participant suggested that we should use the knowledge we gained to offer support to current high school students who were navigating toward higher education, and, as we explain at the end of this article, we are trying to do so. Our aim was not to extract data from participants, but to involve them in the process of research.

We also considered who might be better positioned to conduct each interview. Participants who were not enrolled in higher education and had not yet reached the goals they had set for themselves were often more comfortable talking to Maysi, who shared several identities with them, rather than Rose, a middle-aged white American college professor. We had a consent form that participants digitally signed to convey their understanding of their rights, which included the right to stop participating at any time. Several people we tried to recruit did not respond to our attempts to contact them, which could be interpreted in a positive light: they did not feel unduly pressured to participate. One participant also completed only one of the three interviews, which may indicate changes in their life or contact information, but on the positive side may illustrate that dropping out of the project was seen as acceptable.

There are several limitations to our study. Because the sample size is relatively small, we are not claiming generalizability or replicability. Moreover, because not all ethnic groups who have come as refugees from Myanmar were included in our sample, our 15 participants don't represent the diversity of backgrounds would be necessary to describe Burmese refugees as a whole. Finally, our sample includes more women than men. Our analysis points to the need for more research on how gender influences Myanmar refugees' post-secondary trajectories.

Literature review and theoretical frameworks[6]

Research suggests that refugee-background students in US K-12 schools face situational challenges like poverty and emotional trauma, as well as deficiencies in schools' responsiveness, including lack of classroom support and teachers' deficit mindsets (Antony-Newman & Niyozov, 2023). Resettled refugee students worldwide encounter both structural exclusion (from institutions and services) as well as relational exclusion (lack of belonging and connectedness) (Cooc & Kim, 2023). Refugee-background students often lack access to culturally responsive pedagogies, supportive school policies, and college and career counseling (Bajaj et al., 2023). While "relational pedagogies" emphasizing predictability, clear explanations, fairness, and care are essential to refugee-background students, their teachers do not always have the training to provide it (Chopra et al., 2024).

[6] This section is drawn from an earlier conference presentation (Metro et al., 2024a). We are grateful to conference participants for feedback given during that session.

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Additional barriers interfere with refugee-background students' access to HE. Globally, displaced students have trouble finding financial support, securing documentation, struggling with mental health problems, and feeling academically prepared (Arar et. al, 2022). HEIs, governments, and NGOs have tried to offer flexibility and support, but their interventions tend to be short-term and uninformed by students' needs (Streitwieser et al., 2018). Refugee background students may feel "(mis)recognized" by HEIs that have not found effective ways to help them (Mangan & Winter, 2017).

One population overlooked in existing research is 1.5-generation high school graduates. Literature on K-12 refugee background students often focuses on 1.5-generation students, but research on HE often assumes refugee students to be "destitute displaced persons," (Arar et al., 2022, p. xxii), which does not fit the experience of those who have been in the US for years and may no longer identify/be identified as "refugees."

Therefore, we aim to connect the insights described above, from research about refugee students at the primary, secondary and post-secondary levels worldwide, to this particular group of 1.5 generation Myanmar refugee-background students in the US, who have recently graduated from high school. Without seeking to replicate any of the studies mentioned, we are interested in commonalities we may find.

There is, however, one dynamic we seek to avoid. A common theoretical framework used in research on refugee-background youth is resilience (Msengi, Marsh, & Harris, 2020). According to the American Psychological Association (2023), resilience is "the process and outcome of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences, especially through mental, emotional, and behavioral flexibility and adjustment to external and internal demands." (para. 1). This concept has been popularized as "grit" by authors including Angela Duckworth (2016). Studies of resilience or grit often focus only on those who have been successful in HE (e.g., Msengi, Marsh, & Harris, 2020). Such studies emphasize psychological rather than structural/systemic factors; this research may celebrate the successes of the few while leaving unexamined the frustrations of the many (Slater, 2022). Moreover, resilience is not necessarily positive. It can indicate unfounded hope and be maladaptive in the face of unwelcoming institutional structures (Mahdiani & Ungar, 2021).

We try to move the discourse "beyond resilience," as we state in our title, by examining the experiences of young people who have struggled in HE alongside those who have thrived. We take seriously their rationales for entering or leaving HE without assuming that continuing despite all obstacles would be the best choice, and without imposing the idea that entering the labor market without a college degree represents a failure on their part.

Results

In the section below we describe the findings from our interviews. In summary, we conclude that K-12 schools offered varying levels of support, with English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teachers, coaches, and elementary teachers on the vanguard and secondary content teachers and guidance counselors often ignorant of or indifferent to students' struggles. Participants' families did not have strong understandings of the US education system, so while parents provided financial and emotional support, they were not able to offer academic support. Most of the time, schools did not fill this gap, although those in diverse communities with high refugee populations were the exception. Birth order and family composition were relevant in that oldest siblings and those from single wage-earner families faced higher barriers. Racially and socio-economically diverse communities or concentrations of Myanmar refugees were

advantageous for participants, while homogenously white, middle-class communities offered least support. This is partly because Myanmar refugee-background youth were less likely to ask for help than US born peers, especially when surrounded by peers from the dominant culture. For those who did manage to access HE, most HEIs they attended did not offer a strong sense of belonging, and participants had to seek this out for themselves. Finally, participants faced identity tensions, which led to ambivalence about higher education. Namely, they faced varying definitions of success and responsibility, and a contrast between US perceptions of refugees their lived experiences.

K-12 schools' level of support for refugee students

On the positive side, all participants noted that their ESOL teachers were helpful, as were other school personnel who went out of their way to cultivate connections with refugee students. PM explained that her high school ESOL teacher "supported [her] throughout everything," and that her homeroom teachers encouraged her to speak English, be confident, and expand her comfort zone. Thang Kwi described his ESOL teacher fondly as "the real OG" [original gangsta] who would invite students to her farm for extra English practice, while Lin noted that his ESOL teacher would drive to his house to help him with applications or homework. Coaches also stood out–Aye Reh's soccer coach bought him lunch when he was hungry but had no money. Many participants had fond memories of elementary school, especially when they were surrounded by ethnically diverse peers. Eunice described her arrival in 5th grade alongside other refugees from Sudan by saying, "I've never felt so much love in my whole entire life."

However, participants perceived most content teachers at the secondary level as ineffective or inattentive. Angel said, "I felt like no one really was…paying attention to what I was doing or what I was going through." Kesan noted that this neglect was not necessarily intentional: "The teachers, they want so bad to help, but they can't understand what we need. So they just put us on a computer and we play games to waste time." Acceptance from US-born peers decreased in secondary school, alongside school personnel's declining attention to bullying. Eunice was targeted for how she dressed and spoke. These trends advantaged those who arrived in the US earlier in life. Aye Reh, who arrived when he was twelve, said that some of his Myanmar refugee-background peers dropped out of school because of social and academic difficulties. Most participants reported no contact with their guidance counselors, unless they introduced themselves and asked for help. Emily reported, "my counselor only cared about the top ten students." In sum, we found mixed but certainly not universal understanding or support for refugee-background students.

Refugee families' (mis)understanding of the US education system

Students from all backgrounds may experience inconsistent support in school, but some students' families or communities are able to fill this gap by helping young people navigate the education system. This was not the case for participants. As Angel explained, "I don't have parents that went to college, so they have no idea what to do. I found out about FAFSA by myself." Mawite had US-born friends who, like her, wanted to pursue a career in healthcare, and were able to shadow a relative or family friend on the job; her family did not have these connections. Emily explained that she could have graduated with honors had she known the requirements, but her family did not even know that graduating with honors was possible.

Parents also did not understand the US system's valuation of extracurricular activities such as soccer, volleyball, or cheerleading, but saw them instead as a waste of time and money. Thang

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Kwi, a talented soccer player, eventually got a scholarship to play in college. But he believed he could have gone to a better school if his parents had been able to afford the recruitment camps and highlight reels that were standard for his peers.

While most schools did little to ameliorate the information and resource gap that participants faced, some schools actively created a college pipeline for students. VT's story, which we shared in the opening vignettes, is the best example of this, but other schools made some interventions as well. PM described career counseling that allowed her to take nursing prerequisites at community college while she was still in high school. Thang Kwi's high school required a class that instructed students how to prepare for the ACT and fill out the FAFSA. These supports relieved the burden that participants felt to figure it all out by themselves.

Parents offer emotional and financial but not academic support

Participants reported that parents were not able to help them with academics, but most believed that their parents were as supportive as they could be in an unfamiliar education system. Many parents did encourage their kids to persist in school. Most families highly valued education, and had even moved to the US specifically so their children would have better school opportunities. Mawite explained, "When we got here my dad…started as a janitor in [a hotel]… He got paid, like, $7.50 an hour…He would always tell me, 'I don't want you to go through this when you are older…You have opportunities here.'" When Mawite later struggled during college with academics and became discouraged, her parents financially supported her while she repeated a class. Several participants also noted the support of their churches. VT said his parents and community were always praying for him to do well in school.

However, this emphasis on schooling was not universal among families. Aye Reh noted, "I wish my parents were more educated and valued education more"; he believed their lack of understanding of education's potential led to his older brother dropping out of school to work. Thai, who had wanted to pursue a career in healthcare, explained, "There is no reason I couldn't attend college except that my parents forbid me…I think they want me to set the example of an obedient child for my younger siblings." Their experiences were outliers in our sample.

Regardless of parents' attitudes toward education, it should not be overlooked that many parents had to work extremely hard, including multiple jobs and night shifts, just so their children would have food and shelter. While participants appreciated this, some also noticed the difference in how more privileged US-born peers were parented. Angel, who reported that her parents took only one day off per year for Christmas, remarked,

> I think my parents' way of supporting me was, like, working 24/7….We didn't come from a place where we showed a lot of emotions or love towards one another …I wanted more than that. I wanted them to at least once come to like, any event at school.

It seemed that exposure to US parenting norms caused participants like Angel to question her own parents' priorities. Yet remarks like this were rare in our sample compared to appreciations for parents' emotional and financial support.

Birth order, family composition, and gender

While we stand firm that the main determinant of participants' success in reaching their goals was the level of support their schools offered, there were other factors that impacted their outcomes. Specifically, being from a single-parent or single wage-earner family, being first-born,

and, as we discussed earlier, arriving in adolescence rather than childhood all introduced challenges.

The first point is straightforward–those with only one working parent faced greater financial pressures. Kesan (who we described in the opening vignettes) and Aye Reh both either deferred or did not attend college because only one parent was working. As Aye Reh put it, "That's why it took me so long to get my bachelors, I had to work. If I was rich, I probably would have my Master's or Ph.D. by now."

Being first-born also had some educational disadvantages. Mawite noted that as the oldest child, she felt like a "guinea pig" responsible for being a "bridge between…parents and the younger siblings." Older siblings were more likely to take on the role of "language broker" (Weisskirch, 2017) for their families, which can build literacy skills, but which can also be burdensome. Angel, the oldest in a large family, got her drivers' license at 15, interpreted for family members, and cared for younger siblings. During her senior year, her grandfather, who lived in another state, was diagnosed with cancer. She traveled back and forth so she could interpret for him. "Even if I didn't want to, I had to," she explained. Angel fulfilled similar roles in her larger Mizo community, noting that when people have difficulties, she is "the first person they call." Because of her role at home and in her community, she found it hard to ask for help in the classroom–she was used to helping others.

On the other hand, younger siblings often benefited from older ones' experiences and support. Natalie reported that her sisters, who arrived in 5th and 8th grade while she was in 3rd, helped her out where her parents couldn't. They joined clubs, made connections, and discovered scholarships that they had missed but that Natalie could still get, and Natalie was able to follow in her sister's footsteps to become a nurse. Similarly, Eunice's older brother drove her to soccer practice and bought her a laptop, which her parents could not have done.

Gender seemed to have inconsistent effects. In general, the burden of working to support family seemed to fall harder on men, such as Kesan and Aye Reh. Yet the role of household manager and caretaker for siblings was often taken up by women like Angel. The fact that Thai's parents forbid her from attending college may also have had a gender dimension. We did not ask participants specifically how they thought gender may have impacted their trajectories–that could be a topic for future research.

Diverse communities support students

One factor that helped participants in their educational journeys, both in K-12 settings and higher education, was communities that were diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, and socio-economics, rather than communities that were mostly white, English-speaking, and middle-class. This was because schools in such areas had more experience helping refugees, immigrants, and low-income students. These areas also tended to have nonprofit organizations that served refugees. Eunice and Natalie both reported positive experiences in diverse elementary and high school, where they felt at home among students from all over the world. VT described the solidarity he felt with those from other backgrounds who faced similar challenges as he did:

> My peers, we were all in the same boat, in some sense, because we were all first-generation students. Many of the people that I know and connected well with were also immigrants, refugees. So my friends kind of like got together and said, 'We're going to support each other.' We graduated together.

Such networks were very positive for participants who were able to cultivate them.

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Those in less diverse environments faced misrecognition and "model minority" stereotypes (Ngo & Lee, 2007). As Mawite explained of her majority-white high school, "in a group project, if I'm the only Asian, they think I'm the smartest and I'll do all the work…They expect you to have it figured out." Emily drew attention to this dynamic in higher education, explaining the importance of an Asian community in particular: "Even when they do diversity and inclusion, they don't mention Asians…they only mention Hispanic and African Americans. I was there, but I felt like I was unseen." Participants in rural areas had a particularly difficult time. As Kesan explained, "I grew up in a small town. We all lived separately. Caucasians or African Americans wanted to help, but…I guess they were afraid to help 'cause we might take it a different way."

A local community of people from Myanmar or from participants' ethnic group was also helpful. We saw in the opening vignette how VT benefited from growing up in Indiana, where there is a high concentration of refugees from Myanmar and from his Matu Chin ethnicity. PM's experience was similar. When she first arrived in Texas, there were many Karenni peers who could translate for her. But when she moved to a majority-white high school in Missouri, this support was lacking, and she was mistaken for Korean. Natalie also noted how comforting it was to attend church with Matu Chin people who "speak like us and act like us." There was some cross-ethnic solidarity among people who had come from Myanmar. Natalie continued: "My first semester [in college], a Burmese student came up to me and was like, 'Are you Burmese?'...and invited me to come study with his friends, it was all Burmese people."

Yet some participants noted divisions among Myanmar refugees based on ethnicity or kinship structures. Emily felt that other Myanmar refugees did not help her as much as they could have. For instance, they did not share the details of scholarships or honors classes with her even when they were well-informed. Kesan echoed this, noting that when other refugees from Myanmar found a resource, "they are keeping it to themselves. Even in our Burmese community we have bias, they would only help their family members." On the whole, however, it seemed that diverse communities in K-12 and HE significantly benefited participants.

Retention in higher education

If participants did manage to access college, they often faced struggles once there, because they were not aware of support services, or because such services were inadequate. Eunice explained, "Most of my instructors grew up around money…they never experienced…life in poverty, or diversity…They're like, 'just give yourself time to study.' But there's also other life that goes on." Many participants had financial and practical responsibilities to their families even while attending college, which instructors didn't take into account. As Angel put it, "A lot of my peers are like, 'My parents pay for my apartment…my parents pay for my car…for my food.'...If I don't work, I'm in a hole." None of our participants fit into the "traditional" identity of a college student that Angel described as exemplified by her peers. As a result, their paths through higher education were circuitous, with some postponing college, taking time off to work, or taking more than four years to graduate.

Being a first-gen college student also raised challenges. Mawite said, "There's a lot of things I don't know, that for a lot of other students is like common sense… I feel like people who grew up here, they did have support, their starting point is a little bit different." Pan changed her major several times and did not graduate on time, because she was no aware of all her options from the start. Academic advisors tended to be unavailable and also unfamiliar with first-gen and immigrant students' struggles. Natalie emphasized that "having an advisor or counselor who will have similar background or know the struggle of first gen" would have been helpful. This

disconnect also came up for students who sought out mental health services–they had a hard time connecting with white, US-born therapists. Their perspectives highlight the importance of diversifying student support services staff in secondary and higher education.

Impact of culture and personality

Both the cultures of participants and their individual personalities influenced their educational pathways. Some noted that in general, people from Myanmar in the US tended to be quieter and less comfortable advocating for themselves than their US-born peers. "We feel bad asking for help," Angel said, referencing the Burmese term *ah nah deh*, the unwillingness to impose on people (Gilhooly, 2015; Metro, 2022). As Eunice explained, "In my community, we'd rather take the bully from people than have problems. We'd rather stay low." Thawng confirmed, "In Myanmar, in school, if you ask questions you usually get in trouble, so just stay quiet." "I just suffer," said Thang Kwi. "I don't like to ask for help." Angel noted how this tendency to stay quiet had disadvantaged her, noting that she hadn't shared her financial struggles with peers or instructors, for fear of being pitied. "But if I had voiced that more during past years, it would have created more opportunity for me to do better."

However, some students found more assertive ways of engaging, either because of their unique personalities or because they worked hard to advocate for themselves. We saw in the opening vignettes how VT's outgoing personality helped him connect with other immigrant and first-gen students, creating a network of support. Other participants strived to get out of their comfort zones. Eunice described being quiet in middle school, but changing course in high school: "I think I had, like a, 'Okay, that's enough' kind of moment…I literally forced myself to practice [English] by just talking to teachers all the time." She joined the soccer team so she would have to talk to her teammates, and watched movies with subtitles to build up confidence in English. PM described how she had learned to advocate for herself in college: "When I introduce myself I'll let [my professors] know that English is my second language, and they find that really helpful as well…and they take more time to sit down with me and explain things." While Myanmar culture is not monolithic, and participants expressed their cultures in different ways, it did seem that some who persisted into higher education learned US-style self-advocacy.

Identity tensions

As participants navigated these factors that smoothed or disrupted their educational and career paths, we noticed certain tensions that emerged among aspects of their identities. One was between a US model of individualistic success that required participants to put their own needs first, and a more collectivist orientation in which they were obligated to serve their families and communities. We have already described how participants acted as language brokers for their families and communities, and how this emotional and practical labor took them away from their studies or personal pursuits. Participants saw both the benefits and drawbacks of this arrangement. Mawite said, "we heavily emphasize community, whereas America is very individualistic." She then wondered aloud if her younger siblings, who were born in the US, would feel less obligation to the community than she did. "That's not necessarily a bad thing," she concluded. "Having the opportunity to focus on yourself is a privilege." VT felt this tension too, noting that his parents, as much as they emotionally supported him, "don't really understand the extent to which students have to maintain their commitment to their education." Eunice put it more starkly: "I want to take care of myself, but it's really hard in this community, which I hate but I can't break away from it."

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This ambivalence was common–participants deeply appreciated their connections to their communities, but could not help but feel constrained by the responsibility they felt in a country that urged them to put themselves first.

A second tension emerged around Americans' perceptions of refugees as helpless people with thick accents, and the realities that participants were living, as young adults with multifaceted identities and complex needs. "When people think of refugee," Eunice explained, "when they see it on TV…they feel sad for them. Then when we're actually here, they don't want to help us." Participants were not usually perceived as refugees, nor did they get the support that, at least in theory, would be due to them. In fact, the US system rewarded participants for appearing "American." But being perceived as American erased their experiences as refugees. Mawite said, "Most people would probably assume I was born here. A lot of people tell me, 'You speak English very well!'" Eunice explained that when she told people she was a refugee, "they're always like, 'Well I'm so surprised, you don't have an accent.' Which I kind of don't like?...I want them to see where I'm coming from and appreciate it." While participants had privilege that older members of their families with less confident English might lack, their past and ongoing struggles could become invisible.

This cultural erasure could impact participants' relations with their own communities as well. Natalie said, "The place where I grew up, there weren't any Burmese people. I grew up in a very American setting, I had to learn very fast, I got adjusted pretty quick. Even growing up, a lot of people called me white-washed." Branching out and making new connections, whether for social survival or personal choice, could cause them to be seen as disloyal to their ethnic communities. Mawite noted that when stopped attending the Burmese church in her city in favor of one with more diverse attendees including Vietnamese and Chinese people, some from her Myanmar community objected. Participants' ability to thrive in a broader society ended up being a mark against them for some in their ethnic enclaves.

Unsurprisingly, given these complex social dynamics, several participants noted that the way they responded to the question, "Where are you from?" shifted over time and according to the situation. VT described "stumbling over that question," trying to figure out if people wanted to know where in the US he was from, or where his family had roots. Mawite explained that she used to say she was "Burmese," but was now more likely to say she was "Chin, from Myanmar," so as not to erase the history of repression and ongoing civil war. If Natalie was talking to another person from Myanmar, she would identify herself as Matu, but otherwise she would be less specific. When Angel first arrived at college and people asked her where she was from, she would say the name of the US city where she graduated from high school, not wanting to share more about her background. Yet over time, she began explaining that she was a refugee from Burma, which surprised her instructors and classmates. Daisy, whose parents were from Burma but who was born in a Karen refugee camp in Thailand and raised in the US, noted having to choose the level of detail she went into based on her interlocutor's level of attention and interest. One participant, who was born in Thailand and tellingly chose the pseudonym Thai, would say she was from Thailand without mentioning Burma at all. Needless to say, there were no "correct answers" to the identity questions that participants faced, and they all navigated them slightly differently.

A third tension evident was between participants' strong desire to give back to their communities, both locally and transnationally, and the heavy weight of their responsibilities and past experiences, which could sometimes bring up mixed feelings. As Eunice put it, "I'm not grateful for what I've been through, but I kind of am. I think that's what builds me here, if I didn't go through what I went through, I wouldn't have anything to push me forward." Almost all participants had chosen careers that would allow them to contribute to their communities both in

the US and in Southeast Asia–education and healthcare were popular. For instance, Natalie, who was studying health sciences, explained, "I've been picky on what [medical] specialty to go in, so I can be of the most use…So I kind of want to go into the emergency department and things that are acute…because that's most relevant to what we need there right now." Several participants also tutored younger students from Myanmar refugee backgrounds, hoping they could help the upcoming generation avoid some of the struggles they had faced.

A related tension emerged among different definitions of success. Participants' families and communities seemed to define success as finishing HE and getting a well-paid job in the sciences, healthcare, or business. Yet participants often prioritized more inward goals such as happiness, fulfillment, mental health, family relationships, or simply survival. There was sometimes a tension between finding a career that was personally meaningful, and one that would alleviate the financial stresses that were universal in our sample. For instance, Angel explained that her family wanted her to pursue a medical career that they assumed would be more lucrative, but she decided to become an educator instead—even though she concealed her decision from them at first. Aye Reh noted that although his current job involved mentoring high-school aged youth, he sometimes imagined opening a bar on the Thai-Burma border. "I know it's bad," he said, "but that's how the money comes in." These quotations illustrate the guilt that could accompany breaking out of expected careers or roles.

Eunice had a nuanced analysis of the pressures she felt as one of the first kids in her community to complete high school in the US. "They want me to be like, the first in my class, which, I don't know...It felt impossible." She felt that these pressures sometimes caused her peers to pursue careers they wouldn't have chosen themselves:

> I know so many people that go to school for something they don't want to do, for example, nursing, or engineering…their parents want them to do [that], but it's taking them more than four years, like six years, because they're struggling with that.

She concluded poignantly by wishing that her community would stop comparing her to other people:

> I already compare myself so much with other people…They want us to live this American dream that they have in their mind for us. It might be coming from love, but it's so much…It's not like I'm in jail or anything. I'm trying. I wish they could see me trying a bit more.

She said she sometimes wanted to quit school and start a family, focusing on her mental health rather than meeting the high standards her family and community had set.

In a similar vein, Kesan, who we met in the opening vignettes, reflected on his ambivalence about higher education, which he had not yet been able to access:

> To be honest, education is not a thing for me. At the same time, in the community, if you drop out of college, it's a bad reputation for your parents. As you get older, you're not only thinking about yourself. You have to think about your parents, your people, your family's name…for the role model I want to be for my children as well.

With so many conflicting pressures, and the harsh financial realities that participants faced, it should not be surprising that it was sometimes hard for them to pinpoint what education meant to them and how it fit into their lives.

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Significance

Our findings are significant in light of existing research on refugee-background students. We can see so many missed opportunities where K-12 schools and HEIs could have offered more support to participants, in line with suggestions from Monisha Bajaj and colleagues (2023) to provide humanizing K-12 environments for refugee and immigrant students that recognize their strengths and support their college and career pathways. Our findings confirm their claim that "few teachers…receive sufficient training in how to meet the needs of immigrant and refugee students" (Bajaj et al., 2023, p. 2). While humanizing pedagogies would help students "develop proficiency in academic and life skills that facilitate post-secondary transitions" (p. 3), our participants largely had to gain these capabilities themselves. Also relevant are the observations of Vidur Chopra and colleagues (2024) that refugee-background students benefit from "pedagogies that explicitly focus on fairness support them to navigate the inequities they experience in their education and opportunities" (p. 12). Our participants had no illusions that they were on a level playing field with their US-born peers. The more educational institutions acknowledge the gaps that exist and provide additional supports, the better.

While our research focused on Myanmar refugee-background students in particular, it is likely that other 1.5 gen and refugee students faced similar obstacles. If school personnel were not offering consistent support to our participants, it is unlikely that they would have offered it to students from similar backgrounds in their schools—and other research with refugee students confirms this (Antony-Newman & Niyozov, 2023; Cooc & Kim, 2023; Ratini, 2019). Therefore, it seems that the level of community and family support in refugee and immigrant communities would be an important factor influencing students' trajectories. Civil society and religious organizations in immigrant and refugee communities may be filling the gaps that public school systems leave unaddressed. For instance, we describe in other venues (Metro et al., 2024b) organizations including the Burmese American Community Institute, which provides summer camps, mentorship, scholarships, and professional networking for youth; and the Matu Affairs Organization, through which youth convene in digital and physical spaces to offer each other career advice and mentoring while keeping them connected to the culture they share with older generations. Research on similar organizations in other refugee and immigrant communities may show how they are coping with the lack of K-12 support.

In the future, we hope K-12 schools create pipelines for double first-gen students that HEIs extend. Our findings point toward creating diverse, safe, and welcoming schools; offering college-prep and mentoring starting in middle school; empowering guidance counselors to offer targeted support with college applications; hiring college-level faculty and student support staff who are themselves first-gen or immigrants; and creating mentoring programs and peer support opportunities. Guidance counselors might be trained through programs like College Access: Research and Action, which uses a whole school model to provide wrap-around support to increase HE access for a range of students (CARA, 2024). Scholarships might target students who are "triple first gen"–not only immigrants and first-gen college students, but also the oldest sibling.

School personnel might also learn from this article about Myanmar cultures in particular, in terms of the hesitance to ask for help that many participants expressed, and which is echoed in other research (Gilhooly, 2015; Metro, 2022). Teachers and counselors should not assume that Myanmar refugee-background youth will feel entitled to supports that other students use. In sum, we hope to see more students getting the level of support that VT enjoyed, and fewer feeling as unsupported as Daisy and Kesan did.

Educational policymakers might also note that 1.5-generation refugee-background students have more in common with other US-born first-generation college students and with other 1.5-generation immigrants than they do with young adults who travel to the US as refugees to pursue HE. There are various commendable initiatives–for instance, the National Association of Higher Education Systems Refugee Resettlement Initiative (NASH-RRI), and the President's Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration–that seek to serve the needs of migrant and displaced students. But there are not many programs that serve the needs of 1.5-gen refugee-background students, who are often US citizens and fluent English speakers by the time they enter college. Our participants' words in this article should be a reminder that many of these students do consider themselves refugees and do welcome assistance–as long as it does not come along with unfounded assumptions about their skills and backgrounds.

Our description of the challenges faced by double first-gen students may be relevant for the education of refugees and immigrants from other countries of origin. While the specific cultural dynamics may differ, we suspect that the position of 1.5 gen youth as a bridge between first- and second- generation immigrants may be similar for those from many backgrounds. Regardless of the countries where they have roots, young people should not be measured according to how "resilient" they can be in the face of unwelcoming institutional structures–rather, schools and HEIs should be measured by how responsive they can be to double first-gen students' needs. As scholars, we can hold ourselves back from equating persistence and degree completion with the "best outcome" for all students. We can acknowledge that the ethical and practical dilemmas that youth face are complex, requiring them to decide how to use their time, energy, and resources when facing competing demands from school, family, and community.

Conclusion

In terms of future research, we see a need for studies on how various ethnic groups from Myanmar fare differently in US public schools and higher education, as well as research on the impact of gender difference in these communities. We would also be interested to learn how second-generation refugees from Myanmar (the younger siblings or children of people like our participants) compare to 1.5 gen students in terms of the obstacles and supports they experience.

We are currently putting our conclusions to the test by offering a college and career preparation club in two Missouri schools, one which serves a large population of refugees from Myanmar, and another whose refugee and immigrant students are more diverse. This club, which we call Refugee and Immigrant Student Enrichment (RISE), provides information about college applications, scholarships, extracurricular activities, and career opportunities. We involve youth in the process of researching their own experiences and setting goals for the future. Putting our findings into action is the best way to honor the trust our participants have placed in us by sharing their stories. We look forward to being able to share the curriculum we create for this club, as well as the insights that the youth generate about how schools could better assist them.

Yet this and similar projects are increasingly being challenged. Following the Supreme Court's 2023 affirmative action decision, universities like ours have been pressured to cancel, rename, or restructure initiatives serving specific racial or national groups (Bailey, 2023). Since January 2025, federal grants that would have funded research about refugee and immigrant students have yielded "Page Not Found" notifications. Scholars will face steep competition for comparable private grants. Therefore, while it would be shortsighted to end this article without mentioning the uncertain political climate, we remain determined work creatively around these obstacles, inspired by the example of our participants.

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Notes on Contributors

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Ma Maysi received her Bachelor's of Science in Health Sciences and is a current graduate student at Mizzou studying Public Health Promotion and Policy, exploring inequity of health in populations. She is a Chin refugee from Myanmar herself and she tutors some elementary and middle schoolers from Burmese families in Columbia, MO. She is interested in learning about barriers and factors that impact the educational journey of other refugees from Myanmar.

Joe Decker worked in alternative education in Myanmar for 10 years and is interested in how those who are failed and/or erased by state education systems educate themselves and their communities. He is now enrolled in the Ph.D. program Languages and Literacy for Social Transformation at University of Missouri-Columbia, where he is exploring how praxis around language pedagogy creates and dismantles communities.

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