Aggregate data on Asian Pacific Americans (APAs) may show APAs to have exceptionally high educational attainment and economic mobility compared to other racial groups (Museus & Buenavista, 2016). In reality, various APA sub-groups face significant obstacles to academic access and success and are found at both the highest and lowest levels of the achievement, as well as educational attainment and income spectrums. In spite of the growing awareness of and scholarship on the complexity of APA student experience in higher education, there is limited research on Southeast Asian Americans (SEAAs) who have come to the U.S. as refugees, the circumstances surrounding their forced migration, and how their immigration status affects their access to programs and services.
This phenomenological study explored the experience of first-generation college students of Southeast Asian descent in the Midwest, whose families have resettled in the U.S. as refugees. According to Creswell (2007, 2009), in a phenomenological approach, participants describe, in their own voice, the essence of their lived experiences about a phenomenon. Specifically, this phenomenological inquiry develops a deeper understanding of these students’ experiences and of the meaning of their college experience through the lens of refugees’ experiences.

This study utilizes a criterion sample of eight SEAA undergraduate students enrolled in U.S. institutions of higher education in the Midwestern states of Indiana, Michigan, and Ohio. The population in this study is limited to undergraduate students who have self-identified as Southeast Asian American of Vietnamese, Cambodian, Lao, or Hmong descent, have attended high school in the U.S., are first-generation college students, and whose parents have been accepted into the U.S. under refugee status. The results of this phenomenological study are developed through data collected from the face-to-face, semi-structured, in-depth interviews.

The findings of this study reveal five strong themes that capture the essence of the experiences of these first-generation college students of Southeast Asian descent, whose families have resettled in the U.S. as refugees, and how their experiences reflect the nuance of their family's forced migration. These themes are: (1) the journey is difficult, (2) family circumstances guided academic choices, (3) childhood community has an influence on college experience, (4) support, inclusion, and sense of belonging foster college success, and (5) the legacy of trauma is embedded in their everyday lives. Recommendations for practice and research are also discussed. This study adds to the small but growing literature on SEAA college students. With the knowledge produced by this study, student affairs professionals, administrators, and policymakers will have a better understanding of and be better equipped to address the issues surrounding the lack of programs and services for SEAA college students.