

**Profile of  
Southeast Asian American Student Services  
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee  
2011 Regents Diversity Award – Institution/Unit Category**

**Synopsis**

- The program was originally established at UW-Milwaukee in 1986 under the name Southeast Asian Student Academic Services. In 2006, the program's name was changed to Southeast Asian American Student Services (SAASS), reflecting the extension of its services to include U.S.-born students of Southeast Asian ethnicities.
- SAASS offers Southeast Asian American students excellent academic advice and culturally sensitive services. Its ability to recruit and retain students has enhanced UW-Milwaukee's overall students of color graduation rates. SAASS currently has two full-time staff: Coordinator Dao Vang and Senior Advisor Channy (Jhanny) Rasavong.
- Background: Following the United States' withdrawal from the Vietnam War, Southeast Asian refugees (Cambodian, Hmong, Laotians, and Vietnamese) began arriving in Wisconsin and other parts of the United States. Refugee resettlement continued through the early 2000s. These refugees were among the poorest and least educated immigrants to come to Wisconsin. With a strong desire to improve their life condition, some began to enter the UW System in the early 1980s to obtain post-secondary education. Many worked hard to achieve. However, they faced a multitude of challenges. SAASS was created to help them overcome these challenges.
- UWM currently graduates close to 100 SEA students per academic year. They return to their communities as teachers, accountants, engineers, social workers or other professionals and contribute positively to their communities and the state, further increasing the diversity of the state's workforce.

**Sustainable Impact**

- SAASS efforts have positively contributed to increased student enrollment. In 1990, UWM began to track SEA student enrollment data. In fall 1990, 93 SEA students attended the university. By fall 2010, the number of SEA students had reached 725 – a 633% increase since 1990, and an annual average increase of 30%.
- Currently, UWM has the largest Southeast Asian student population in the UW System.
- The increasing SEA student enrollment not only reflects the changing SEA population, but also has added to the diversity of UWM students. In fall 1990, SEA students accounted for 0.4% of the total student population, and 2.7% of students of color. In fall 2010, they represented 2.4% of the total student population, and 12.3 % of students of color on campus.

## Accountability

- Enrollment, retention, and graduation data show that SAASS has helped to enhance UWM's capacity to serve Southeast Asian American students. For example, of the 1,024 students served in 2008 and 955 students served in 2009, more than 90% "Agree" or "Strongly agree" that services provided by SAASS were helpful. Sample student comments:
  - "I really appreciate the help of the advisers. They really want the best for the students."
  - "He has motivated and pushed me to achieve what I thought were impossible."
  - "He is always very informative and eager to help."

## Intersections and Collaboration

- SAASS regularly collaborates with other university units and programs to enhance UWM's diversity efforts. Recently, SAASS has teamed up with campus programs and student groups to sponsor visits by scholars, artists, and performers. Among them:
  - Hmong Australian anthropologist Dr. Gary Yia Lee, who presented on Hmong refugee cultural production in different Western contexts;
  - Dr. Louisa Schein (Rutgers University) and Hmong American filmmaker Va-Megn Thoj, who discussed the portrayal of violence and Hmong in the media; and
  - Hip hop and spoken word artist Tou Saiko Lee, whose "Fresh Traditions" performance incorporated folk songs sung by his grandmother.
- SAASS closely collaborates with African American Student Services, American Indian Student Services, the Roberto Hernandez Center, and the Multicultural Student Resource Center to host the annual Experience Diversity event on campus.
- To recruit new students, SAASS collaborates with many partners on campus, in area schools, and in the community.

## In the words of colleagues:

- "As a teacher and scholar of Hmong American studies, I would like to emphasize the deep commitment that SAASS staff have demonstrated to working with students with refugee and immigrant backgrounds whose advising needs go far beyond what courses to select or which major to choose. Many students, including those born in the U.S., are the first in their extended families to attend college, and the road they are taking is often rough. Given the complex historical, political and socioeconomic circumstances under which many Southeast Asian American students are enrolling in higher education, SAASS staff must skillfully individualize advising." –*Mary Louise Buley-Meissner, Associate Professor, English Department, UW-Milwaukee*
- "Since I joined the UWM history faculty in fall 2006, I have collaborated with SAASS staff on many occasions that contributed to not only increased student academic success, but also to fostering greater university relations with the growing Milwaukee Southeast Asian American community, and to making the campus welcoming to students and community members. The office has two full-time staff; however, the impact they have had on this campus is immeasurable." –*Chia Youyee Vang, Assistant Professor of History and Coordinator of Hmong Diaspora Studies Program, UW-Milwaukee*