

A MEMO PREPARED BY

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HE LOHE KE OLA

To hear is life.

Listening with Intention to the Voices of Hawai'i College Students
to Strengthen Our Communities

AUGUST 2025

To: Hawai'i Community Foundation (HCF) & Interested Parties

From: HCF Youth Action Research Fellowship Team:
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Re: **He Lohe Ke Ola. *To hear is life.***
Listening with Intention to the Voices of Hawai'i College Students to Strengthen Our Communities¹

Date: August 2025

In the spring of 2025, the Hawai'i Community Foundation (HCF) engaged John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities (Gardner Center) to support us in an Action Research Fellowship to amplify student voices as part of their work. By interviewing college students from across the state, we would hear firsthand accounts of students' experiences and their views on challenges, supports, and perseverance on their paths to postsecondary success.

As fellows from Hawai'i, we are from different islands: from Kaua'i, O'ahu, Moloka'i, Maui and Hawai'i. With our diversity of background and heart, we all came together to participate in this research fellowship. All of us hope that our work will benefit our community with emphasis on our underrepresented, minority, vulnerable communities to bridge the gap between their life experiences and post-secondary education. We heard about the fellowship from HCF or other organizations or institutions that we had been part of in some way and were then selected through an application process where our submissions were reviewed by a team from the Gardner Center and HCF.

Shortly after beginning the fellowship, we developed a set of research questions that addressed HCF's interests in understanding the factors that influence students' plans to enroll in college as well as the factors that influence students to continue in college. To the Foundation's questions we added others that addressed aspects of the student experience we were interested in: the influence of community narrative on students' higher education decisions and students' sense of belonging in college. We then created an interview protocol and conducted 40 interviews with college students who had attended high school in Hawai'i, including each other, from June 18 through July 8, 2025. From these interviews we identified, coded, and analyzed the main points to create a set of findings. Our research questions and findings are outlined below, along with our recommendations.

INTERVIEW POOL

To invite participation in the interview process by college students who had attended high school across the state, the Hawai'i Community Foundation invited students through their FAFSA grantee and HCF scholarship recipient lists. In addition, HCF asked several of their community partners to reach out to potential interviewees. We ourselves reached out to our peers and we interviewed each other. Of the 40 interviewees, 23% went to high school on the island of Hawai'i, 20% on Kaua'i, 5% on Maui, 3% on Moloka'i, and 50% on O'ahu. About $\frac{2}{3}$ of the interviewees attend college in Hawai'i, with half of those at four-year institutions and half at two-year institutions. Combining interviewees

¹ A note about the title of our research memo: "**He Lohe Ke Ola.**" (*hay low-hay kay oh-lah*) **To hear is life.** This is a part of the Hawaiian proverb: "He lohe ke ola, he kuli ka make." (To hear is life, to turn a deaf ear is death). It comes from the book, "Ōlelo No'eau Hawaiian Proverbs and Poetical Sayings" by Mary Kawena Pukui. We decided to use the first part to keep it short and light. This title represents our actions and intentions throughout this fellowship. We take action by listening with the intention to strengthen our communities.

attending in-state and out-of-state institutions, about $\frac{2}{3}$ attend four-year institutions and $\frac{1}{3}$ attend two-year institutions.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

After meeting with the people involved in the fellowship, including the team from HCF, we identified four research questions that reflected what we wanted to know:

1. What are the factors that influence students' plans to enroll in college?
2. In what ways does community narrative influence students' decisions regarding higher education?
3. What impacts students' sense of belonging in school, and how does that impact their educational journey?
4. What are the factors that influence a student to continue in college beyond the first year?

After honing in on these broad research questions, we developed interview questions that would help to answer these questions.

FINDINGS

Over the course of this research process, we heard forty individual stories, each of which included a wide range of personal experiences surrounding Hawai'i students' journeys to and through college. While we cannot share every aspect of what we heard in our interviews, this section seeks to highlight the key themes.

In terms of planning for college, our findings emphasize the key and continued role of families, high school faculty and staff, college access programs, and internal motivation on students' way to college. These complex influences play a role in students' initial college exploration, their paths to college, and their decisionmaking surrounding higher education.

In exploring how students experience the narrative around higher education, we learned that interviewees consider a wide range of people and organizations to be part of their community – from family, peers, and teachers to community leaders and broader social media. When sharing their experiences with their communities, students had varying experiences with the narratives shared around postsecondary education, their comfort level speaking with their community about higher education plans, and the level of college support they received from community leaders.

In seeking to understand student sense of belonging, we found that differences in peer characteristics, diversity levels, and campus environments between high school and college influenced students' sense of belonging, including their ability to make genuine connections with peers and professors on campus. We also found that students had varying opinions on their school administrations' support for the issues important to students, which influences students' sense of belonging on campus as well as their understanding of their institution's values.

In terms of persisting through college, we found that many students have experienced significant challenges throughout their college experiences, including academic challenges, difficulty with balancing workloads, personal struggles, and influence of world events. When faced with these challenges, students rely on support from academic advisors, families, peers, and themselves. Students also express having to adapt their college plans to adjust to the challenges they have faced and the knowledge they have gained throughout college, both responding to challenges such as financial influences and drawing motivation from factors such as desire to support their communities. Students largely express their perception that college prepares them for life post-college, but find that some things

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are missing from their college experiences, including academic exploration, on-campus connections, job promotion, and access to financial resources.

The following sections reflect our interpretation of the data from the combined set of interviews, developed in teams with input from the full group of fellows along with our Gardner Center facilitators and guests who shared their reflections throughout the findings development process. In these sections we share the themes that emerged through our qualitative coding of the interviews. We also take a deeper dive into the information we gathered, offering examples from the interviews that illustrate the broader themes. This analysis of the interview data is presented in the main paragraphs, while our personal reflections follow in italics.

1. What are the factors that influence students' plans to enroll in college?

Findings by Jianna Johnson and Kiana Lei Vallente

To understand the factors that influence students' plans to enroll in college, we asked interviewees to describe how they began to explore their postsecondary options and the resources they had to help them with applying and enrolling in college. We also asked them to think about their high school experience and share any positive or negative things that affected their decisions related to college plans.

How students begin to explore options for postsecondary plans

When asked how students began to explore their options for postsecondary plans, we heard four responses most frequently: students were driven by internal motivation and independent research, family influence, the support of mentors and high school staff, and the role of school-based programs.

About 50% of the 40 students we interviewed spoke on the importance of internal motivation and independent research. These internal motivators include but are not limited to: the desire to leave home situations, the motivation to set an example and become an inspiration, and the need for financial stability. Students actively conducted their own college research, and sought out resources and support on their own. In one interview, a student shared that she began to think about college during her first year of high school. She expressed that she's always liked school and wanted to continue to learn, implying her own motivation to go to college.

A close second to internal motivation, a little under half of students spoke on the importance of their family when looking at postsecondary options. Among the interviews, sentiments of providing for family, having their support, and looking to the college experiences of their families helped to make decisions. For some students, they were the first-generation to go to college, so their parents encouraged them to do so because they did not have the same opportunities. It was also shared with us that, in some cases, their family provided them the stability to take the steps that lead them to the college route. Contrarily, the lack of family and home life stability did encourage some students to pursue college, wanting to create a better life for themselves and their future.

Family plays an important role, especially in Hawai'i where most people emphasize its importance. There is a large cultural component at play when we speak on a family's role in the exploration of postsecondary options.

Additionally, high school staff and faculty such as mentors, teachers, and school counselors were a factor in students' exploration of postsecondary options. These people were impactful to students in helping them explore colleges, scholarship opportunities and other resources regarding postsecondary education. Teachers and mentors played an important role by discussing all the options for after graduating high school. Counselors, high school and college,

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provide support for applying to college, choosing classes, and helping students to work through any financial struggles that may come along during college. One student even shared that their counselors provided a lot of resources for going to college, no matter where they chose to go.

Some interviewees mentioned that school-based programs were helpful in exploring options for post secondary plans. Programs like Running Start, Upward Bound, AVID, and Advanced Placement courses provided a glimpse into what college looks like. One student that really enveloped this sentiment shared that college had not been a thought before they joined AVID. They also shared that being in that program provided the resources for college readiness and college applications. Additionally, college and career fairs helped to expose students to the routes they can take after high school. In personal experiences, having college fairs at school helped to better map out the options students have after high school.

People and resources who help with college applications and enrollment

We asked the interviewees if they had people and resources in their lives who helped them with the application and enrollment process once they decided to attend college. If students did have people or resources in their lives that assisted or supported them, we asked them to explain.

Most students, more than half, found that their high school faculty were helpful during the applying and enrolling processes for college. Many of their teachers and counselors helped by writing recommendation letters and sharing scholarship opportunities. They also helped with applying to FAFSA and waiving any college application fees. Some schools even had an open door policy to their college and career centers, allowing students postsecondary aid throughout the school day.

The data illustrates the importance and need for technical support with the college process.

About half of the students noted that family was another major support source with applying to and enrolling in college. This did not only include parents, but also partners who financially supported students while attending college, siblings who had attended college, and other family members who helped with childcare so that the student could attend college. In one specific interview, the student highlighted the support from their partner, who supported the student to be a stay-at-home mom where she was able to finish her schooling. Many students turned to older siblings and cousins for support and advice, especially to those siblings and extended family members who went through college themselves and could help with not only emotional support, but technical support.

It was common that when interviewees referenced “family” this was not limited to parents and immediate family, but also partners, cousins and other relatives. This widens the definition of family support to show how versatile this support may be and how crucial it is for students to thrive.

Scholarships and financial support are another key resource for students once they decide to go to college. As mentioned above, high school faculty and staff assisted with sharing scholarship and funding opportunities with students, to help alleviate the financial burden of higher education. Support was sought out to cover application fees, financial aid, and comparing institution tuition costs.

When asked what could have been more helpful, one interviewee replied that access to more scholarships would have supported her more. She expressed that not many community scholarships were exposed to her, but rather targeted toward advisors, such as the USDA scholarship.

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Factors that affect decisions regarding college plans

To better understand what shapes students' college decisions, we asked interviewees to reflect on the key factors that influenced their post-high school plans. Their responses revealed that college decision-making is deeply personal and often shaped by a complex mix of social, familial, and institutional influences. While some students were uplifted by supportive environments and strong mentorship, others faced significant challenges that made pursuing higher education more difficult. These insights show just how much a student's surroundings — both in and out of school — can either open doors to opportunity or create barriers that are hard to overcome.

Of the 40 interviews conducted, around 60% of students stated that their social experiences affected their college plans. There were a mix of positive and negative experiences that showed how social environments can have an impact on a student's decision to attend. Some schools did not foster community or promote college, whilst others had solid support for students. For instance, one interviewee stated that their high school environment was hostile and unwelcoming which pushed her to view higher education as a way out. On the other hand, a different interviewee shared that being in clubs allowed her to have a positive school experience and feel better prepared for college.

Regardless of either positive or negative social experience in high school, from the data we can see how impactful these experiences are on students, and that they may be a key determinant in their futures.

About half of the interviewees noted that their home and family environments during high school had significant effects on their college plans. Many expressed positive feelings about their home and family environment, explaining how family members provided support and guidance. Interviewees also spoke about pressures from their family environment to attend college as a positive factor in hindsight, but at the time may have been viewed negatively. Some mentioned how stability from their home environment gave students the space and setting to focus on their academics. In contrast, many did express negative feelings about their home and family environment. Homelessness, the foster care system, family drug abuse, family illness, and poverty had negative effects on student's college plans. These challenges and barriers were stressful and consumed much of the students' mental capacity and time, leaving college on the back burner for many.

Similarly to home and family environments, the data is mixed in regards to the impacts of relationships with adult mentors outside of family. Many students have positive experiences, including relationships with coaches and teachers who helped students with basic needs like housing and financial opportunities, therapists to support mental health needs, and high school staff that motivate and guide students with exploring their future options. However, many students did experience negative relationships with adults outside of family, and these negative relationships did impact their pathway to their secondary plans. Unsolicited advice, doubts, judgements and the lack of support all affected students, delaying their college plans, causing internal confusions and self-doubt, and lowering self-esteem.

The data illustrates how crucial positive relationships with adults are and how they can be advantageous for students and their futures.

More than 40% of our interviewees shared that college and career programs and resources played either a positive or negative role in their college plans. On the positive side, some schools allowed students to travel to other states, helping to see what life was like outside of Hawai'i. Also, they had programs like AVID and nurses aid training that helped to mesh out plans for college. In contrast, other students talked about the lack of help and resources provided by their schools. One interviewee stated that they "struggled to feel engaged or inspired by the post-grad options presented, making it harder to envision a future beyond high school."

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2. In what ways does community narrative influence students' decisions regarding higher education?

Findings by Janine Salud and Maya Ploi Blasi

To gain insights into how community narrative influences students' college decisions, we asked interviewees to share how they experienced the hopes, concerns, resistances, judgements, or expectations of the people around them – including family, friends, neighbors, coworkers, etc. – as well as how they experienced higher education narratives on social media. We thought that community narrative might influence how comfortable students felt sharing their goals for the future, so we asked about that. Finally, we thought that students' experience of how community leaders can and/or do provide help for those considering college could shed light on this issue.

Experiences of community narrative around higher education

When asked about community narratives around postsecondary education, the most frequent response mentions family influence. Family influence is a large contributing factor in determining what a student chooses to study, where and what college they choose to attend, and even whether they should pursue college at all. Most students who have been influenced by their parents are grateful for this push, while others experienced high expectations and pressure. A common talking point in discussing postsecondary education is whether there is value in pursuing it. Most students we interviewed believed that college is valuable and earning a degree would help them stand out in the job market, as well as build career and life skills. Most students owe their ease in pursuing college to their supportive families, who encourage and more often than not, influence them to choose the college path. From what we heard from our interviewees, only a handful of students have families who discourage them from attending college, but when they do, it is due to judgment around the student's field of study or education in general.

In regards to broad community influence such as narratives heard from community leaders, colleagues, and organizations within their home island, many students find that there is a great deal of support for students who are choosing to pursue college education. These students have environments where their ambitions are encouraged, and have community members who are excited to see them transition into higher education. However, other students experience a lack of community-based resources or active opportunities to support their endeavors. While some experienced skeptical viewpoints about school from the community, many students feel that their local communities want them to be successful through education, and have found one or few people within the community to inspire their college pursuits.

In Hawai'i, family and community are directly intertwined with one another. The culture views both in high importance and as having a relationship with each other, as family values are directly influenced by cultural values, and family values determine the values of an entire community. Relations in Hawai'i are tight-knit in comparison to cities on the mainland, and even some more suburban and rural areas due to our size and culture of sharing.

Some students note their peers' motivation in secondary education as influencing their own motivation in high school and higher education. There are many different narratives around college, most notably the expectation of college naturally being the next step after high school. This narrative is split in half – one side viewing it as encouragement, and the other viewing it as pressure. Some doubt the value of college, with students looking to alternate avenues towards success, while others experience a direct push into choosing college due to shame and judgment. Some mention the stigma around Hawai'i universities and community colleges and how it compares to the mainland curriculum, hearing narratives that it is not as rigorous. A handful of students mention ethnic and racial narratives from their peers as well, notably for Native Hawaiian and Asian students.

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It appears that schools with a higher population of Native Hawaiian students are more likely to believe that they should not leave Hawai'i for college. Many of the East Asian students are encouraged to attend Ivy Leagues and other prestigious schools. Many of the Filipino students interviewed found that their families strongly encouraged them to go to college for their future.

A handful of students consider their teachers and schools to be a major contributing factor in their community narrative, with the overall student experience split between supportive and unsupportive and varying drastically from school to school. For example, upon attending community college, some students note their experience to be positive, and that the college staff are understanding and accommodating. Meanwhile, other students noted that their colleges were not as in touch with their respective communities. Some interviewees shared that high schools push for college while others fail to hold their students to that high a standard. Across both high school and college, some students found their counselors and teachers to be a resource for inspiration and guidance.

Of note, in conversations about postsecondary education, the debate around whether it is better to attend a local college or to pursue education somewhere else is prominent. There is a set of stigmas for both Hawai'i and mainland schools. On the topic of teachers' and high schools' impact on shaping students' views of higher education, a common theme is limited pathway variation – these interviewees were not put in courses that necessarily matched their desired career. One interviewee, now studying to be an elementary teacher, has always wanted to study education and/or social work, but the school did not have a pathway for it. As a result, she was put in the health pathway for nursing. An interviewee from another high school felt that the institution was pushing students in one direction, highlighting jobs in STEM and those offered on the island's military base, because the school was more concerned about students' financial success and securing lucrative careers. As an aspiring veterinarian, a theme specific to students from Kaua'i is the lack of diversity in career pathways. Two interviewees from different schools on the island experienced a similar frustration – both schools would put students in courses that followed a "career pathway," which should reflect the student's desired future career. However, due to limited career pathways, she was discouraged from pursuing medicine because there was little promotion for it at her school. She then opted for the arts and design pathway to possibly pursue a career as an architect. Though the situation for both these students was not ideal, they still expressed gratitude for being pushed out of their comfort zone. Interviewee 1 found that the knowledge she gained from her health classes will be helpful when she teaches young children. Interviewee 2 was genuinely interested in architecture, and trying the art and design pathway allowed her to see if it was a suitable job for her.

In asking students what narratives shaped their view of higher education, self-motivation was a common determining factor for students pursuing college. A majority of these students decided to go to college to accomplish a personal goal. These goals ranged from career building to community strengthening to fostering their passions. What stands out in students' responses regarding higher education is a strong desire to give back to the community. Many students claimed to reap the benefits of community resources, and they wouldn't be as happy or as successful as they are today without their community. Many students saw college as an opportunity for self-exploration and self-improvement, and as a path towards a better life (better job opportunities, financial security, comfort, etc.). Less frequent, though notable, points made in personal journey discussions include a passion for learning and a desire to set better examples for those around them.

The financial impact of pursuing college was a prominent concern across all community narratives. Most believed that college would lead to higher chances of securing an adequate or high-paying job. College is agreed to be a very expensive venture for every student interviewed, but relatively few voiced concern on its "Return On Investment." Of

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those that did, students doubt that the college degree will be as valuable as twenty years ago, with an increasingly competitive job market and less of a guarantee to secure a job post-college. There is a temptation to pursue a career without a degree.

In regards to financial concerns, family and finance have a direct relationship for students choosing to pursue higher education. For some, their desire to change one's financial circumstances also applies to their family. There is also a pressure for students to appease family's expectations, assuming the role of a child who will graduate from college.

The conversation around where to attend college for Hawai'i students is a nuanced one. While fewer students mention this, we found that from the few, students had drastically different experiences. While some experienced a push towards one thing – either a local college or a mainland college – others experienced contradictory opinions from their community. Concerns around attending school on the mainland include a lack of safety, culture shock, and a “betrayal” of leaving home. There is some pressure to stay in Hawai'i, to honor tradition, and to stay close to their community. Not everyone who was influenced to stay in Hawai'i felt forced to, however – some students were happy to meet the expectation of staying home because they valued Hawaiian knowledge and the local community. Concerns about staying in Hawai'i include the poor curriculum and the fear of being looked down upon by others. For the most part, Hawai'i students are pushed to pursue a “better” education on the mainland and to explore outside what they know.

Narratives about higher education on social media

When asked about postsecondary education narratives experienced on social media, about 40% of the interviewees shared that social media had little or no influence on their decisions about higher education. Of those that did experience influence, most students described the influence as positive. Social media helped foster academic ambition for these students, promoting college and framing it in a positive light, while also sharing the reality of it. Some students encountered posts romanticizing college or condemning it, but these extremes were less common for the students interviewed. Few students experienced negative implications of social media, such as unhealthy comparison, pressure, and self-doubt.

Though social media helped students get excited about college, when used without regulation, social media can be damaging to a student's perspective of college and mental health. That being said, it's worth considering whether social media plays a more important role in shaping young students' views on higher education. Though we did not do any intentional research on this, we wonder if students' relationship with social media and higher education vary depending on their age and/or time of graduation, specifically those who graduated pre-covid versus those who graduated after the pandemic.

In addition to promoting the college experience, students found social media to be a fruitful resource for information. These students took advantage of the information found on social media to better educate and prepare themselves for college. This knowledge about college includes scholarships, resources, advice on what to study and what college to go to, as well as general information. Some students found it helpful in learning what college is like. Some concerns about the information on social media include certain school programs “trending” and becoming more competitive for those who want to pursue them, and the spread of inaccurate information.

Comfort with sharing goals for the future

Among the sample of students interviewed, when asked about how comfortable they felt sharing their goals for the future with others, most expressed feeling comfortable, at least to some extent.

Our research indicates that students are comfortable sharing their goals, as they are proud and ambitious to become an inspiration for generations after them. Many discuss goals with family and friends, and have obtained a large sum of confidence in sharing with peers and classmates within their institutions as well. While some may attempt to remain humble in explaining their stories or journey, a lot of students have found that sharing these goals can reinforce the decision they've made to attend higher education.

Additionally, when analyzing a student's sense of pride in sharing information, it's clear that a student's family dynamic and level of support from their household creates the foundation for confident interactions with peers and classmates in college, as well as reinforces desires to share goals regarding their career or academic opportunities. Many students who have a good or close relationship with their family feel more comfortable sharing their ambitions, which further allows them to embrace the educational decisions they make for themselves, where they pursue higher education, and what they choose to study.

I understand from various interviews and from reflecting on my own relationship with family that many students have a strong sense of home and culture that is embodied through their families. We spend the most time with our families and the members of our household, so naturally we are more keen to their opinions and perceptions of our work and future plans. It doesn't surprise me that students are more open to sharing goals with others if they feel a strong sense of support from family members. However, I think it's important to consider students who may not have the same sense of support from their households. These students may need reinforcement or positive ways to negotiate their home lives with themselves as individuals in control of themselves. This is especially important in a place like Hawai'i that is so family and culturally oriented and rooted around respect and caring for one another, that being selfish with goals and aspirations may become difficult and challenging.

In addition to interviewees who did share a comfortable relationship with sharing information, there were some students who felt a little different regarding their transparency in giving information. Some students spoke that they are hesitant to share on social media as they feel it can be boastful. Others are reluctant because they are worried they may not achieve the goals they share, or they don't feel as comfortable with strangers or new peers as they would be with family or close friends.

Belief that community leaders provide help for those considering college

About 65% of the interviewees shared that they thought the community and its leaders provided the help needed for those considering college, while some shared more negative feelings.

Over half of interviewed students pointed to high school and college faculty or staff as community leaders, with high school leaders identified most often. From reviewing interviewees' statements about assistance in considering college, our analysis suggests that students are receiving different levels of support between their high schools during the application process when considering to attend college. While some had been visited by colleges or universities to engage in the application process or get information about programs offered, it didn't necessarily make a lasting impression unless students were already planning or considering higher education. Students who received the most support were actively participating in workshops and info-sessions that better prepared them or were doing exactly what was needed to fulfill applications to various institutions. Many students feel that they need to have the self drive to take the initial steps when getting help from faculty in high school. Resources were there if you went looking for them, however this was challenging for some students as they felt they were engaging in a lot of work on top of finishing their last year of high school.

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It seems there is an inconsistent level of exposure between high schools when considering college or vocational plans. I also notice a lack of effective engagement as mentioned by multiple interviewees who spoke of their plans to pursue college as something they instigated themselves, as they already knew they wanted to attend a post-secondary institution. None of the interviews I conducted mentioned that they had a change of heart from not wanting to attend college to deciding to pursue. I can see in my journey with college and highschool, that many of my classmates who didn't have a positive relationship with academia did not choose to pursue higher education, and were not persuaded to do so. With that being said, I believe there are other alternatives to just simply college, where someone can receive post secondary education and still embrace a career that isn't necessarily liberal arts based, but rather trade school or other opportunities that better suit their ambitions.

Interviewees shared experiences that indicated that students are not all being offered the same level of exposure to college readiness programs, or various universities and vocational programs. Interviewees described that students participating in Upward Bound typically make that decision themselves, and other students are not being brought to college fairs and resources that actively promote higher-ed.

It seems that while some have had a great amount of exposure, certain communities and local regions are not being offered the same extent of college preparation programs, possibly from lack of funding or self-sufficient faculty who are not seeking these opportunities for their high school students.

If students are actively engaged in their college preparation, they begin to focus on programs that support their goals. Upward Bound, for example, is great for students who know early in their high school career that college is something they are actively striving and planning to attend. It can be hard to learn about Upward Bound as an upperclassman, as the program is intended to be begun as a freshman or the summer before high school. I know that, for myself, I was consistently engaged with preparedness programs because I found them valuable. If students don't understand that value, they are less likely to pursue an activity that requires extra or additional work, as well as time to give.

Many students feel that there is a serious disconnect between governments and foundation leaders regarding concerns for higher education and resources offered to students. Lack of government funding that promotes or makes attending college accessible is an ongoing conversation and unaddressed issue, giving the impression that elected officials are not concerned with granting students reasonable resources to support college attendance. If students are getting state funded resources, it is typically because of special circumstances that offer them welfare benefits that others may not receive, as they are not necessarily in a situation that would grant them welfare. There is a general consensus that students do not feel supported by local, state, or federal government officials.

It seems from the interviews I conducted and the experiences I've had myself with college that funding and affordability is a common topic when discussing negative implications regarding pursuing a college degree. Not having relevant resources that promote higher education places a burden on students who should be more present in academic settings, rather than searching for sufficient funds. Based on my experience, government and state resources need to be increased and more heavily promoted to really expose highschoolers and active college students with the necessary means to fulfill their plans of study. Grants from within the state of Hawai'i would better serve college seeking students, as it incentivizes and promotes the idea of higher-ed. I myself know from going to school in Colorado, that the local government here offers an opportunity fund for low-income individuals to better suit their careers in college or post secondary learning. This could be considered for Hawai'i youth as well.

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3. What impacts students' *sense of belonging* in school, and how does that impact their educational journey?

Findings by Brian Batchelor, Kaumaka Sanchez and Mele Kāneali'i

For this research question, we wanted to start by hearing about the differences in students' experiences between high school and college, thinking that this could have an impact on their sense of belonging in college. Building on those questions, we asked about connections that students have made with college peers and how they thought their college supports or challenges their sense of identity. We also thought that opportunities for engaging in student-led change or advocacy could impact students' sense of belonging, so we asked our interviewees to talk about how their campus supports or does not support these efforts.

Differences in behavior of peers in college compared with high school

When asked about differences in behavior of peers in college compared with high school, about 60% of the interviewees shared experiences related to students' attitudes toward school. Of those, most shared their perception that peers in college were more focused on learning and academics related to career growth. One interviewee shared perceptions that reflected those of many interviewees – of being in college “surrounded by people who want a degree, who want to be better, who want to learn.” Another shared that they were part of a “community of nerds” compared with being in high school, where students were uninterested in school or academics, on their phones, disruptive, or simply not working diligently. Some interviewees suggested that college peers have big goals for what they want to do in the future, making college a place where they are actively pursuing their degree and their dreams. In addition, interviewees noted that paying for college results in taking classes more seriously. Similarly, college students, including those who are older, with more responsibilities – such as work, home, and families – were seen to approach education with more seriousness and purpose, increasing the general level of maturity on campus. Relatedly, a general sentiment characterized by one interviewee was that there is a connection between the social environment and academics, with the stronger focus in college on educational goals making it easier to be oneself compared with a lot of drama that can characterize high school.

Going from a small, community-based high school with a graduating class of 100 to a mainland university with thousands of graduates coming from all over the world, it was a given for me to see and experience the difference in educational views my college peers had compared to my hometown peers. Students get more emotional and pessimistic when receiving a below-average test score in my college than my peers would back in high school. Getting straight As in every class wasn't a priority for a good portion of my high school peers – they seem to hold a higher priority in getting a sports scholarship, or joining the military. In contrast, my college peers seem to sacrifice a night's rest or hobbies if it would help them get a high grade in their class.

For over half of our interviewees, other differences described included different types of diversity: geographical, racial, age, and cultural.

- ***Geographical Diversity.*** Students emphasized the significance of geographical diversity in shaping their educational experiences, whether they attended college in- or out-of-state. Many interviewees highlighted the transition from attending high schools with predominantly local peers to college environments where classmates came from across the U.S. and around the world. One student noted that interacting with peers from different regions introduced them to new perspectives and ways of thinking. However, some students also struggled to find others with shared Hawai'i backgrounds, which led to homesickness. One student expressed that, without a strong presence of peers from Hawai'i at their college, they struggled to find a sense of belonging.

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- *Racial Diversity.* Several students described a huge contrast between the racial demographics in their home communities and their college environments. In some cases, their college settings were perceived as more racially homogenous, which led some to feel isolated. One student described the racial climate as “cliquish,” noting that cross-cultural interactions were limited. Others expressed appreciation for their college’s efforts to create inclusive environments that celebrated diversity, even if the representation was limited.
- *Age Diversity.* Age diversity predominantly emerged among students who attended community colleges or graduate programs. Several participants reflected on the impact of learning alongside older peers, including parents and elders. One interviewee noted that the presence of older students made classroom conversations more grounded and enriched by real-world context, which many saw as a stark contrast from their high school learning environments.
- *Cultural Diversity (friendliness, traditions & customs, etc.).* Students referenced differences in how cultural expectations played out in social settings. One student described a difference in manners and communal responsibilities, such as the expectation to clean up after gatherings, a norm associated with their local upbringing, but found lacking in the mainland. Another mentioned that students from similar cultural backgrounds formed stronger bonds through shared cultural understandings. Cultural organizations and identity-based groups were often the spaces where most felt a strong sense of belonging on campus.

When asked about differences in behavior of peers in high school compared with college, around 35 percent of students spoke to differences in inclusion and exclusion. Of those, most students shared that college is a more inclusive environment where students are from a wide range of backgrounds. One student mentioned that the college community is welcoming and accepting. Another student mentioned hanging out with different majors and social groups. Generally, students experienced more exclusion in high school. The majority of students mentioned high school being very clique-y and everyone was in a specific group. While some students saw positive differences in college compared to high school, some students saw negative differences in college to high school. Students shared that college is also very clique-y and students were excluded because of who they are. One student mentioned being Asian and from Hawai’i and being excluded from their college Asian community.

Based on findings, students felt that there is a difference in behavior of peers in high school compared with college. This is good information that shows that inclusion and exclusion in the social environment affects students. However, this finding will help with the sense of belonging which is coming up because there is a deeper meaning to how and why students feel inclusion and exclusion.

When interviewees discussed the process of starting new friendships, the vast majority brought up some sort of struggle in building connections with their college peers. Interviewees frequently attributed their struggles to (1) campus size and (2) meeting different background peers, including, for example, peers with different socioeconomic status, race, and/or values. However, around half of interviewees mentioned a silver lining in addition to their struggles. The most common silver linings involved (1) adapting to be more social and (2) utilizing campus resources such as clubs, events, and sports.

Adjusting to campus size and different background peers is an adjustment to any student from any state going to any college, though I feel like these two struggles are emphasized when students from Hawai’i want to attend college. It’s common for Hawai’i college students to come from a small, tight-knit community, a drastic expansion in surrounding new people may require adjustment for Hawai’i students. This is emphasized when students from Hawai’i attend out-of-state colleges because mainland culture and customs are different.

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As a college sophomore who was born and raised in Hawai'i and is currently attending a university in North Carolina, I can attest to these results. For the most part, I've adjusted to being in a huge college with tens of thousands of students and staff, but I still haven't gotten used to the different kinds of peers there in the mainland. My high school friends back home are all easygoing and nonjudgemental, while my friends at North Carolina are more self-assertive. As a result, my behavior is less genuine and more curated to the typical North Carolina student. This is not to say that one side is better or worse than the other, but it provides an example of how being with peers from different backgrounds can be and how it could impact a students' behavior.

An interviewee described their relationship with their college peers in a way that stuck out to me. She stated that there is a huge gap in socialization between Hawai'i and the mainland. She mentioned that it was almost like a "LinkedIn" approach to meeting peers. For instance, their idea of socializing was grabbing a coffee bragging about classes. Everyone seemed full of themselves.

Connections with college peers

When discussing connections with college peers with interviewees, around 50% of interviewees reported using clubs for building connections with their peers. Though difficult to pinpoint the depth of relationships, it seems like students can easily build at least moderate-level relationships due to the nature of joining a club, often finding people similar to themselves. Hobby-based clubs such as paddling, dance, and music were the most commonly mentioned type of club, followed by ethnic clubs. Nobody reported only having academic clubs, but everyone who reported being in multiple clubs were in an academic club.

A reason why clubs may be very popular in building connections with peers is that it's the most streamlined way to meet people with a common interest. Instead of going through trial-and-error trying to find their own group, clubs provide a newcomer-friendly way to meet similar people. Clubs could be good especially for students in Hawai'i because they allow students from Hawai'i to stay connected to aspects related to their culture, such as sports and ethnicity. For example, an interviewee stated that she joined a Filipino club/community where they celebrated Filipino-American History Month and served food to anyone who wants to try Filipino food. Another interviewee said that they found community through her canoeing club.

When asked to describe the connections interviewees have made with their college peers, around half of the respondents discussed some sort of barrier when making connections. The most common barrier to making connections with peers was social engagement, amassing around half of the responses, followed by work and life balance. Though it can be seen as a given that social engagement is a common barrier to socializing, interviewees reported many different types of problems from social engagement. Some students explained that it was their choice to not interact with their peers because of being introverted, while others stated that other students tend to keep a surface-level, reserved relationship.

For instance, an interviewee reported difficulty making connections because the majority of their peers are older than them. Another interviewee explained that they are socially awkward, so making connections can be stressful for them.

A little less than half of interviewees reported building a relationship through academics. Of the half that reported, more interviewees created a connection within lecture/classroom hours than non-classroom academic programs, such as tutoring and academic clubs. Though the surface and non-surface level connections were reported somewhat evenly in a classroom/lecture hours setting, there were zero reports of interviewees building a surface-level

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connection in a non-classroom academic setting. This means that interviewees only reported building a moderate to deep level connection with peers outside of lecture hours. An interesting thing to point out is that the majority of the non-classroom, non-surface level connection reports mentioned tutoring; however, each interviewee found connections to it differently.

Zero reports of a surface-level connection in a non-classroom academic setting could mean that students who go the extra mile to office hours or tutoring are more available to have beyond surface-level connections with others. Like clubs, going into a non-classroom academic setting could act as a hub for students who are interested and likely passionate about what they are learning. This doesn't just apply to student-to-student connections but also student-teacher relationships as well. For instance, an interviewee described the tutoring center at her college as an "open community" and her and her friends hang out there to share stories with each other. Another interviewee stated that the tutoring center at her community college is where she made meaningful relationships with tutors and adults.

Influence of campus environment on sense of belonging and identity

When students were asked how their college environment supports or challenges identity and sense of belonging, about 3/4 of students mentioned the environments and spaces within college. Of those, some state that those spaces were helpful to their identity and sense of belonging. First, students shared that colleges provide a "wide range of clubs for a wide range of people," ranging from Neuroscience club to Mixed Asian club. Clubs, to students, are very welcoming, accepting, and don't obligate students to join. Students also found that events helped with a sense of belonging. Sport events encourage students to show school pride and show their athletes support. Campus events have also provided students a sense of belonging, providing activities for students to bond together. Campus programs show a lot of support to students by helping with course planning and overcoming obstacles. Programs provide mental health services to check up on students. While many students found that their college's environment and spaces helped with their sense of belonging, some interviewees had a negative experience in these spaces. For example, some students mention clubs not promoting and budget cuts taking down club websites. For some interviewees, campus events are rare, superficial and limited.

Based on the data, I was surprised that students found a sense of belonging in clubs and campus events. In my own experience, I didn't get that connection through clubs and campus events. I felt that my club wasn't doing anything. I was part of a club that was discontinued in the middle of the semester. But digging more into the data, I found that clubs provide students a sense of belonging where they include and welcome all students. In addition to welcoming students, they value students with their presences. An interviewee mentioned that there are signs about clubs, events and support groups and everyone is invited. Another interviewee mentioned that campus events feel like a rave or party. In both of these interviews, it shows that campus events value students because they present and welcome all students.

When discussing influences on college campuses, more than half of students mention diversity impacting their sense of belonging and identity in college. Within the findings, some students stated that diversity of different cultures, in race, in gender identity, and in economic status impacted their sense of belonging. Exposure to different cultures provided an opportunity for students to expand new values, manners, and way of life. Students also found that the exposure to many cultures strengthened their sense of belonging. Students have shared a sense of belonging because their race is highly represented in classrooms. Students that mention gender identity and economic status have found that their colleges are accepting, welcoming and supported to students. While many students found a sense of belonging from diversity on campus, some interviewees had a negative experience with diversity. One interviewee mentioned segregated spaces for students of different races and economic statuses. Another interview mentioned

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that students were afraid to offend someone, so instead they avoided each other. Students also mention neglect, being overlooked and disrespected by institutions because they are people of color, along with being used as a marketing strategy.

Based on the findings, it made sense that diversity supports students' identity and sense of belonging. The majority of students mentioned that diversity in college gave them an opportunity to learn about different cultures, values and way of life. I agree that diversity in majors provides a perspective for "in-the-field" experience. I am a math peer tutor and I tutor from college algebra to calculus two. While I was tutoring students in culinary math, I gained a perspective that culinary math is much more than converting ingredients for recipes. Culinary math considers scaling of recipes to feed more or less people, and it's also about considering food cost and labor to make, for example, a cake that would determine cost. Along with diversity providing new perspectives, I also want to mention that diversity provides a sense of belonging where students noticed their culture and race were being represented and included in the classroom. I had one interviewee that talked about being worried about going to college because they were afraid about the unknown of who is going to be there or if they are going to fit in or not. They felt a relief and found a sense of inclusion when they saw students that were Filipino in the classroom and students/staff that went to the same school.

During interviews, we also found that less than half of students found a sense of belonging from relationships with peers. Students express that peers share a lot of support and information on where to go for help or helping other students. Students mention finding familiarity with peers that helps with sense of belonging and identity and makes them feel like they are home. Students also mention that there is a lot of inclusion and blending of other social groups, however some do experience cliques. Some students who experience cliques feel excluded and that they are divided. Students state that cliques that run very deep are hard to break. Some students feel limited to who they can interact with based on not only cliques but small communities – students interact with the same people. Along with that, students also face “feeling less when compared to peers' college readiness and maturity.”

With the findings about students finding a sense of belonging based on relationships with peers, I found that students find a sense of belonging with peers based on the acceptance of their presence with others. However, some students find it's hard to connect with students that don't allow them into their friend group or clique. One interviewee mentioned that cliques created a sense of exclusion, making it hard for them, along with other peers, to feel fully connected to the campus community. Along with friend groups, students found a sense of belonging from peers and staff by supporting and helping students' ambitions. In two interviews, students mentioned that peers along with college staff have helped them academically and personally. Their peers challenge their identity with the sense of who they want to be. They started to not be part of a group of friends that were mean and hateful because they didn't want to be that type of person. Another interviewee mentioned that peers were very open about getting and sharing support for students both academically and personally. They mention that they share information to classmates about what helps them with class and where to go.

About a third of students found a sense of belonging and identity from their relationship with professors. Most students mention their relationship with the professors with regard to professors and staff supporting their students, such as by making accommodations if they can't come to class. One student mentioned a staff member picked her up from her house to be part of an activity. Professors check in on students and show students skills being taught in the work environment. Students mention that staff and professors are very willing to help and answer any questions without judgement. Students say that professors share their experiences and are accepting of mistakes. Students also

shared that professors and staff members encouraged students to work hard and go beyond their desired degree to help with a sense of belonging. While some students experience a sense of belonging with their professors or staff, some have negative experiences. Students have shared that professors limit information to students and almost gatekeep information in order to keep students in class. The same students also found it difficult to learn because the professor lacks the effort to teach the class. In addition, getting help from professors because of office hours is sometimes difficult, as they need to provide a specific concept that they struggle with. This leads to students adapting and finding help somewhere else.

Based on this finding with students finding a sense of belonging with professor and staff, this shows that staff and professor have a deep understanding of students' ambitions. They do all they can to help their students succeed.

Campus support for student-led change or advocacy

Students expressed mixed perceptions of institutional support for student-led advocacy and change. While many described meaningful opportunities for engagement and expression, others pointed to exclusion, slow bureaucracy, and external pressures that limited the impact of their voices.

For example, on many campuses, students felt empowered to express themselves on issues of justice, diversity, and policy, with peaceful protests often permitted and even supported by the presence of faculty and administrators. Institutions regularly distributed voluntary surveys to gather input on campus events and decisions, and some students believed this feedback led to real change. Open forums and student board meetings provided direct communication channels with administrators, and faculty members were often seen as approachable allies who encouraged student involvement in clubs, community initiatives, and cultural activities.

However, students also noted significant limitations. Institutional change was widely described as slow and bureaucratic, with the complexity of internal processes only becoming clear once students entered leadership roles. Some felt excluded from decision-making spaces unless they belonged to certain social groups or student cliques, while others weren't sure where to seek support or whether it would be taken seriously. Even when structures for input existed, there was often a lack of deeper conversations, especially around sociopolitical issues, which left some students feeling unheard.

External factors further complicated students' sense of agency. Several believed that university decisions were swayed by donor influence, sometimes at odds with student interests. On public campuses, the presence of non-student protestors, some promoting racist or homophobic rhetoric, was permitted under free speech protections. Although legally upheld, these experiences negatively affected students' feelings of safety and belonging, particularly for marginalized groups.

A student from the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa described the campus as open and responsive to student advocacy. From her perspective, UH Mānoa supports student-led change and provides opportunities for students to speak up on issues that matter to them. She recalled that at the beginning of the school year, student advocates organized a protest, and administrators were present, not to police the event, but to observe and allow students to peacefully express their views. To her, this demonstrated that UH Mānoa welcomes protest and respects students' rights to free speech. She also noted that when the university plans to implement changes that affect the student body, it holds meetings to hear directly from students. She appreciated that the administration tries to understand where students stand on proposed changes before moving forward. Overall, she described UH Mānoa as a transparent institution where communication is

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strong and student voices are genuinely considered. For her, the combination of administrative openness, support systems, and respect for student protest contributes to a positive and empowering campus climate.

However, an interviewee from a state university in California highlighted a complex dynamic between public campus policies and student safety. As a public institution, the university allows non-students to demonstrate on campus grounds, which has occasionally included individuals expressing hateful rhetoric, such as homophobic messages. While this policy aligns with First Amendment protections, the interviewee expressed concern about how such encounters can negatively impact her sense of belonging, particularly as an Asian woman. She noted that witnessing or anticipating hate speech contributes to a climate of potential danger, not only for herself, but also for peers from other marginalized racial or ethnic backgrounds. However, she also acknowledged the visible presence and accessibility of campus police, which provided a degree of reassurance despite these tensions.

Students also described a gap between their institutions' public messaging around advocacy and the meaningful support needed to turn student-led efforts into action.

For example, while many schools promoted values of student voice, civic engagement, or cultural inclusion, students experienced these commitments as largely symbolic. Institutional responses to student-led proposals were often vague, delayed, or absent altogether, leaving students uncertain about whether their feedback had any real impact. Several examples, from unacknowledged cultural event proposals to unsupported club revivals, highlighted how under-resourced staff and procedural barriers hindered student voice being turned into action. Formal avenues for raising concerns were technically available but widely perceived as ineffective, performative, or emotionally exhausting to navigate. Even in cases where administrators appeared to care, students questioned whether the systems in place were equipped or willing to act in meaningful ways, ultimately casting doubt on the authenticity of the institution's stated values.

One interviewee described public forums at his university, such as a debate featuring a right-wing political activist, as creating more conflict than constructive dialogue. Rather than fostering mutual understanding, these events often deepened divisions among students. The interviewee shared his perceptions about the university's lack of response to urgent, real-world issues, citing the deportation of six students by ICE as a moment when the institution failed to offer visible support. While the university provides designated spaces for free speech and political engagement, the student characterized these efforts as largely performative, pointing to a broader pattern of administrative inaction following student advocacy and concern.

A similar pattern of limited support emerged in the experience of a student trying to revive a dance club at a local community college. The student faced multiple challenges stemming from a lack of material resources and minimal faculty involvement. Teachers were often too busy to serve as advisors, and those who did were either reluctant or overextended due to understaffing. While one advisor provided more consistent support, the overall lack of institutional infrastructure made it difficult to sustain the club. The student noted that many faculty members at the college juggle multiple responsibilities, leaving little time or energy to nurture student organizations.

Lastly, students encountered inconsistent institutional support for political engagement, often shaped by risk management, federal pressures, and discomfort with disagreement.

For example, some institutions actively promoted civic engagement by streaming elections, sharing protest opportunities, and facilitating voter registration drives, which signaled a public commitment to democratic

involvement. In certain cases, administrators worked collaboratively with students to organize protests, providing clear guidelines and open communication. However, others encountered restrictive policies, including censorship of classroom dialogue, threats of disciplinary action for protest participation, and denied requests to lead voter initiatives. Interviewees also noted how federal politics shaped institutional caution, with some campuses limiting student activism out of fear of losing funding or being publicly targeted by the Trump Administration. These mixed experiences suggest that while political advocacy is sometimes encouraged, institutional responses are often shaped more by liability, optics, and federal alignment than by a consistent commitment to student expression.

One student shared that her school is very supportive of student-led advocacy. She said there are a lot of student protests on campus and that the administration is really transparent and communicative with student groups about what kinds of protests are allowed. For her, this open dialogue was helpful, and it made organizing feel safer and more supported. She especially appreciated that the school would include information about protests happening off campus in their weekly emails, so students could get involved in city-wide activism if they wanted to. She also talked about how the school broadcasted the 2024 election in the campus center, which she saw as a big sign that the university cares about students being engaged in politics. Overall, she said she really admired that her school promotes justice and advocacy, and that it made her feel like student voices mattered.

At another school, a student pointed out that, while there's strong messaging around justice and advocacy, there are still clear limits. She recalled that when students were preparing to protest, the university handed out flyers warning that anyone who participated could be arrested. That moment made her realize that institutional support for protest often has boundaries, especially when it might challenge the university's image or authority. She also mentioned a lecture class about Palestine and Israel where the professor didn't allow any discussion at all. That stood out to her as well, as, despite the school's emphasis on justice, some topics felt too sensitive to talk about openly, which she found frustrating.

4. What factors influence a student to continue in college beyond the first year?

Findings by Mariah Iris Ramo, Leila Vigorito-Kekuewa, and Tayla-Angel Jimenez

To gain insights into the factors that influence a student to persist in college, we asked interviewees to describe the challenges they have faced and the supports that helped them overcome those challenges. We also wanted to understand any changes that they made in their college journeys and what things influenced those changes, as we thought that this information would provide further insight into student persistence. In addition, we were interested in understanding how global politics and world events may be influencing students' decisions regarding persistence, as well as their perceptions of the connections between what they are learning and what they will need in their life after completing college. Finally, we thought that hearing their perceptions about what was missing from their college experience could provide insights into college persistence.

Challenges during college

More than half of the interviewees attributed academic challenges and classroom experiences as major factors in their reconsideration of continuing college after the first year. They described the transition from high school to college as overwhelming due to the rigorous coursework, heavier workloads, and exposure to more peers. An interviewee shared that they felt “spooked a little with the change of pace of the assignments,” while another expressed feeling like they could not “bring out any well-informed input” when comparing themselves to their classmates. Many did not feel adequately prepared or equipped to navigate the academic shift into college. In addition to the academic pressures, they reported a lack of support and understanding from peers and professors.

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Some noted a lack of gender diversity and poor teaching quality in certain classes, which made it difficult to feel seen or supported. On top of that, they were balancing jobs and personal responsibilities, which compounded their academic stress. As a result, many struggled with failing grades or receiving marks far below what they were used to.

An interviewee shared that his most stressful year was his sophomore year, where he worked a full-time job while managing five courses, some of which were asynchronous. He felt a lack of support from his peers in one class, attributing to the pandemic and the challenges it posed for building connections. He expressed a desire to collaborate with classmates for mutual accountability, as group work and shared learning were emphasized in high school. He wanted a similar dynamic in college but found it lacking. That semester, he lost his motivation because he received a C, his first ever time earning such a grade. I related to his story, as I also struggled during my first year of college and received my first C in a class I had been excited about. I remember how quiet the classroom felt, how we kept to ourselves, and how difficult it was to break through that. Perhaps that is just because of the culture of many college classrooms – “in and out.” I did not have the encouragement to join study groups, to ask if anyone else was a first-generation college student, or even to reach out for help. Examples like this highlight how the shift in expectations and lack of collaborations can leave students feeling isolated in their challenges and underprepared to tackle them, making academic success even harder to achieve.

Of the interviewees that shared their perspective on this issue, many expressed that their school workload took most of their time in the day, impacting their personal lives such as their time spent with their families, children and friends. Also, having to juggle between going to work and attending school has become incredibly time consuming and, as some have stated, “exhausting.” This has resulted in around 40 percent of interviewees contemplating their continuation in college and if it’s really worth it.

One of the interviewees's answers really exemplified this specific subject. She shared that there were many times she reconsidered her degree. She struggles with the workload that comes with being a nursing student while working. What helped to motivate and keep her going was having conversations. She talked to and gained support from family, friends, and fellow nursing students. Examples such as this really show the challenges that some college students face and how important it is to have people in their lives to support and motivate them to continue.

Additionally, around 40% of interviewees shared that personal struggles prompted them to reconsider the pursuit of their degree. Among the interviewees who shared personal challenges, many spoke about struggles related to family, peers, and internal pressures. Some described the grief of losing a loved one or the weight of being their family’s primary income provider and support, which added stress to their academic life. Others highlighted the difficulty of adjusting to peers with different values or upbringing. Internally, interviewees shared experiences of self-doubt, burnout, homesickness, and postpartum anxiety or depression. Still, many found avenues of support such as immersing themselves in work they are passionate about, being surrounded by people who encourage them, or personal affirmations, often drawing strength from their identities as first-gen students, parents, or community advocates.

An interviewee described how, in high school, she doubted herself a lot and felt inadequate to accomplish her goals. This self-doubt carried into college as she began exploring her career path. She shared that she does not feel comfortable telling others she wants to pursue law because of her grades and attendance back in high school. Still, she hopes to overcome those feelings by continuing to explore the path, especially since she expresses how anxious she was with everything going on in her community and wanting to make change for

the better. She also mentioned that she has been attending therapy to help her navigate through situations, and that she felt supported in college by peers. This example showed how deeply rooted these internal struggles could be, and how the narratives we tell ourselves and each other can greatly shape our sense of self and identity.

About a quarter of Interviewees attributed their reconsideration of college to struggles with career and degree planning. Many interviewees who answered on this issue found themselves changing or reconsidering their major. Interviewees express that they either find themselves indecisive in choosing a major that interests them or are struggling to achieve the workloads expected of them in their major of choice. An example of this comes from an interviewee who stated that, during one of her rigorous classes, it “made her question whether her degree of study was truly the right path for her.” In addition to these findings, other challenges interviewees mentioned regarding degree and career exploration includes changes in career interest, either for better pay or more significant change in the community, and whether or not they had resources to explore their degree and career interest in both high school and college. The general view on available resources is mixed, with differentiating experiences across multiple resource avenues throughout interviewees educational journeys.

One interviewee described her decision-making process for changing her major, highlighting how grueling her nursing program was along with the challenges of maintaining a job. Not only was finding the time to immerse herself in her schoolwork difficult, but her packed schedule was taking the enjoyment out of her program, with more feelings of overwhelm than passion. She eventually opted to change her major, with hopes of returning to nursing once her plan becomes more defined. Similar narratives presented themselves in other interviews, with some interviewees expressing ongoing uncertainty regarding their current major while others communicated having reconsidered their major either one or multiple times to get to where they are now. Regarding availability of resources that can help students better understand their college and career path, many of our interviewees express having an abundance of support and conversation, specifically with their academic advisor, that they find helpful in understanding where to go in their future. However, a few interviewees did mention otherwise, stating that they had fewer opportunities to explore college and career interests in either high school or college. This especially was heard from students who went to or are going to smaller sized institutions, where interviewees believe opportunities may be more limited and scarce. Differences in availability of resources have led to strikingly different responses from the interviewees, with interviewees who had resources available sounding more confident and sure of themselves versus students with less resources who find themselves frustrated with the system and uncertain about their futures.

Not surprisingly, interviewees have expressed that finding the financial resources to afford college has been difficult. Some who come from low-income homes heavily rely on scholarships, federal aid, and grants to support their college careers. Some also have expressed the worry that such federal aid, programs, and jobs will be cut, making them contemplate their future plans not only in college but also in certain careers.

One interviewee expressed their concern about their future in school and whether they will have enough money and funding to continue. They shared that the current state of our country may impact whether they and others can continue receiving funding for their education (for example: through FASFA, scholarships, grants, etc.) as well as federal funding for their programs. It also raises concerns about whether pursuing a job in their field will be worthwhile if those jobs are potentially cut after graduation. I too have personally struggled with something similar to examples such as this. As a native Hawaiian born and raised in Hawai'i, my intentions were always to stay here as long as possible, but sometimes the weight of the inflating economy gets too heavy, leaving me to weigh my options. Many of us locals who work, attend college, and

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raise families carry this financial burden everyday. There must be ways to alleviate these burdens and make it easier financially for college students to get the education they need that will better our communities and build our country up stronger than ever. Investing in college students means investing in everyone's future.

Supports during college

On the topic of the kinds of support systems students rely on during college, about half of interviewees shared how their school's academic advisors are very supportive and helpful for personal and academic concerns as well as challenges. Although some expressed not being comfortable with reaching out for help from tutors and professors, most interviewees shared how a lot of their support comes from their professors. Many interviewees also expressed how supportive their school's programs are for their academic, personal and health challenges. Some school program examples include the Academic Success Center, KOKUA for disabled students at UH, and UH Mānoa's Learning Emporium. Programs that interviewees were a part of during high school such as TRIO, Upward Bound, and TIDES (also an in-college program), were also mentioned as a huge support and motivation for the interviewees to attend college.

One example shared by an interviewee shows how dedicated these programs and centers are to their students. They shared that, during their first week of college, they injured their ankle. The next day, they went to their university's Wellness Center, where they were advised to get an x-ray. The Wellness Center not only advised the student but they also drove them 45 minutes away to get the x-ray! Having this one-on-one personal relationship with students can ensure a student's continuation in college. Motivation, support, and encouragement can lead them to success.

Not surprisingly, many interviewees expressed how their families and spouses are a big part of their support systems. Many interviewees mentioned that being out of state and away from home has been difficult, but that their families remind them that they are in their corner and are always there for them. This support system has motivated them to stay in school and continue their educational goals.

Having the support of family and/or loved ones such as a spouse, children and extended family members is an integral part of a student's success in college. Without the financial, emotional, and mental help from my spouse I could not attend college full-time. It's with their efforts and sacrifices that make this educational journey a reality.

Classmates and friends were also mentioned by interviewees as an important source of support while attending college. Discussions with classmates have been helpful in choosing which classes to take and which professors to choose or avoid. Also, having shared experiences and gaining other perspectives while in college has been helpful for dealing with stress and heavy workloads. Interviewees expressed how their friends, even those that may not be in college with them, are an outlet for them and a stress reliever. Having their friends to talk to about their personal and academic challenges helps them to continue their academic career.

Friends and classmates have shown to be a valuable source of emotional and mental support for students. For example, an interviewee thanked their friends for being there for them. The fact that they can take baby steps together and understand and navigate college life as a team is very special. This team environment allows them to branch out and meet more people. They shared a funny story where the professor saw the interviewee by themselves and questioned where their other friend was, because they viewed them as a "duo."

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Some interviewees who shared their perspective on this issue expressed how their own self initiative and self motivation is what gets them through school. Working out by participating in sports, engaging in outdoor activities, listening to music, and meditating are a few examples of what interviewees have used to support and motivate themselves. One interviewee mentioned how they had to take it upon themselves to understand what their professor was teaching in class by finding real life examples such as watching the news to familiarize themselves more with the course and subject.

Self-initiative, self-motivation and self-care are the many qualities that are needed to be a successful college student. One interviewee expressed that their primary source of support and resilience is their strong commitment to achieving their goals. While they may not have leaned on peers or mentors extensively, their focus on the bigger picture helped them navigate challenges independently.

Changes to plans during college

Many interviewees discussed changes to their education and career journey over the course of college. Of those that spoke on these changes, they mentioned how the level of difficulty within their courses was a major factor. Some also expressed a loss of interest due to the course curriculum, for example the amount of math classes one needs to take to get a degree in finance. Some did not want to be in school for too long, so the extensive education that is required for a certain degree became too daunting. About the same number of interviewees also expressed that their minds changed about their major and career as they grew up due to life changes outside of their control (COVID-19) or just a personal loss of interest. Other interviewees experienced institutional-based changes, such as a new location, new school, or new program. For example, some interviewees shared that, although they initially did not plan to go out of state or out of the country to attend college, it just happened due to academic advising and personal efforts.

As with every journey in life there comes difficulties. With college students, gained perspective comes with time spent in their field of study and this sometimes leads to changes in their majors and career paths. I personally have experienced this first hand. I began my college career with the goal of working in conservation with the state or federal government. So I planned to major in Marine Biology. I applied, got the job and career I wanted, and dropped out of school. I learned that the job was not what I expected as well as the pay. I am now majoring in a different field of study that will pay a lot more, better fits me, and has opportunities to be more independent and more flexible in terms of location.

In terms of what influenced changes, many students mentioned financial influences. Some interviewees shared the importance of staying close to home to reduce financial strain such as by having the support from their families and having lower tuition rates for in-state students. Some also shared how they established the need to focus on a career that will better support them financially, so changing their major or career plans became necessary.

Financial support is one of the most important factors in a student's educational journey. Although students are reluctant and private about sharing their financial obstacles, this can either motivate a student or discourage them deeply. I personally have returned back to college after a ten year gap to pursue the degree I need to acquire a higher paying job. Living here in Hawai'i has been financially difficult and sometimes I worry about being priced out of my own home. My mission is to make enough money in order to stay and help my community.

Of the interviewees who shared their perspectives on this issue, many shared how their own personal experiences with their communities motivated a change in their major and career of choice. They shared how they have personally observed the struggles in healthcare, mental health, and education in their own families and community

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members, which motivated them to be the source of support in the future. It was not a surprise that community is the reason for career-related motivation. According to some interviewees, academic advisors such as teachers and counselors were their motivators and influencers towards their educational and career goals.

Community is very important for the people of Hawai'i. Being small islands in the middle of the largest ocean on the planet, our families, friends, teachers, advisors, and leaders are all we have. This level of importance has inspired each of us to support each other and reach out to those in need and help. We are a loving and giving community and this strength stems from our aloha. One interviewee exemplifies this aloha when they shared their experience. While in community college, they were exposed to more of their community when they visited their peers' households. There, they saw how many families struggle with similar health concerns. This made them curious – Why is OUR community being affected by these health problems? This was a push to pursue healthcare and commit to pre-med. This level of service and dedication to better one's community is one of the many examples we hear among students.

Regarding the issue of what changes were made during college and what influenced it, the topic of attending college at home versus the mainland was a difficult decision to make for some of the interviewees. Some interviewees expressed how important it is for them to stay close to home for financial support and culturally representing their indigenous ties to their home. Other interviewees expressed how the mainland was “intimidating,” but, on the contrary, for some it was beneficial to their academic career because of what institutions could offer in terms of degrees and courses compared to schools at home in Hawai'i. Although time management was shared as difficult, some interviewees have found good routines to keep them motivated to continue school in the mainland or at home in Hawai'i. Some also shared that online classes have really helped with time management while working part-time and attending school.

Students from Hawai'i will sometimes face the difficult decision to stay or leave home to attend college in the mainland or abroad. One interviewee shared that, during high school, they initially planned to attend college out of state, with the University of Washington or UC Irvine as their top choices. They were strongly set on leaving Hawai'i for college and only considered UH Mānoa due to its proximity to home. They got into Arizona State University, University of Washington, UC Irvine, and UH Mānoa and had to decide where they wanted to go. Ultimately, they chose to stay close to home so they could remain near their support systems, stay in a familiar environment, and reduce financial strain. On the other hand, one interviewee found that attending college in the mainland was ultimately the best choice for them. They shared that they realized that there are many things that they can accomplish in the mainland that they would not have accomplished if they were home in Hawai'i. Being homesick affected them so much that they considered changing schools to be closer to home. However, they got in the mindset to stick it out instead of running away. Now, they have a better routine and manage their time better, which has helped them get through school and stick it out, rather than quitting and moving back home.

Influence of politics and world events on education and career journey

About 40% of the interviewees noted that the news and media, or in some cases, the lack thereof, sparked or deepened their desire to create change. For many of them, this desire manifests through pursuing a college degree or a particular career path, such as law and public health. Being enrolled in specific courses, majors, or programs also reinforced their motivation to keep learning, as a shared belief among these interviewees was that education has been a key tool for understanding and addressing pressing issues, such as healthcare disparities. Some interviewees

also reflected on their personal background and identity, noting how current legislation affects communities they are a part of, which further fueled their focus on advocacy.

An interviewee expressed how his awareness of politics and world events adds fire to his motivation to finish up college and pursue a career in teaching. He wants to help his students achieve a degree of critical consciousness, making them aware of their history in relation to ongoing issues and preparing them to become active citizens that take action within their communities. He looks forward to teaching Sociology in his alma mater this school year. Similarly, the recent educational changes in our nation fueled my interest in pursuing educational policy. This past semester alone, I took a balance of education and political science courses, helping me contextualize the news with theories and historical information while being surrounded by people who are also passionate about similar things. Being cognizant about what is happening around us allows many, particularly the younger generations, to recognize disparities and muster the courage and drive to tackle them.

About 35% of interviewees felt that politics and world events have minimal or no influence on their education and career journeys. Many expressed that they do not actively engage with political news and instead prioritize other aspects of life, such as living in the present moment. While a few acknowledged that politics is a constant part of their environment, they concluded that it has little to no impact, or generally doesn't have a negative impact, on their educational and professional direction.

An interviewee expressed how she is apolitical, not allowing any politics or world events influence her career choices. Another interviewee shared a similar sentiment by explaining how she continues to stay positive as she pursues her dreams and her education. This narrative goes to show that their attitudes and outlook in their personal lives has not changed – despite the current events, they remain steadfast in their goals.

About 65% of interviewees noted how policies at the federal level have influenced their educational journey. Within this, two distinct conversations emerged: concerns about recent federal policies and concerns about the future direction of federal policy. About half of the interviewees pointed to the defunding of programs such as Job Corps, research opportunities, higher education, and even primary schools. One interviewee emphasized that these cuts “send a discouraging message about the value of education.” A few also referenced recent immigration raids within their community, deepening their frustrations with the current administration. The other half of interviewees, while not always directly impacted, expressed concern over potential changes such as the accessibility of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and how such changes to the application could affect their ability to finance their college education in the future. These interviewees shared a growing sense of unease about the present moment and the uncertainty of what lies ahead.

An interviewee shared that she typically receives a \$1,000 grant per month, allowing her child to attend pre-school at the Hawai'i Community College for free. However, the recent federal cuts have completely blocked those grants. She now pays out of pocket, despite the costliness of tuition, because she saw her son's love of learning in that space. Moreover, there is a growing uncertainty among college students in regards to their financial aid and educational plans. I recently attended a meeting to discuss this very issue, noting that there are many people that are experiencing this at the moment in our state alone. I remember one of the attendees mentioning how she has to put her graduate school plans on hold because she is unsure if she can afford it. Likewise, I am also second-guessing attending graduate school because I do not know how to answer my parents when they ask, “how are you going to pay for it?” Stories like these underscore how

politics and world events, both ongoing and possible changes, are deeply intertwined with our day-to-day lives, and with these examples, it has had a detrimental influence.

College learning as preparation for life after graduation

Over 75% of interviewees believe that their college experience has prepared them for their career pathway. Some of the most predominant and impactful preparations we've seen include students taking different types of classes (for example: major-related, general or mandatory, and hands-on labs), student participation in programs and field experience, and students generally earning their degree and establishing their major. Most students within this category find their major-required or related classes helpful, with one interviewer highlighting a common interviewee sentiment using this specific sentence: "courses related to their major and related topics have given them a clearer, more relevant foundation, unlike their previous liberal arts major which felt unfocused and less helpful for their goals." On the contrary, some students highlight the importance of general and mandatory classes, with one interviewee stating that they "recognize the importance of building a broad academic base to prepare for the specialized knowledge needed later on." To add on, students have found the programs and field experience provided by their college helpful in career exploration and hands-on learning. Others describe more general views, stating that college prepares students for the workplace by awarding a degree or establishing a major that helps them achieve that degree. The types of preparations these students believe they're receiving include skills for the workplace and personal growth, which will be expanded upon in the second part of our findings.

Hands-on experiences for college students have been expressed by many interviewees as a beneficial mode of learning. For the interviewees who participated in a hands-on experience, we heard common narratives including that it gives interviewees a glimpse of what their future career could look like. Depending on whether they enjoy or dislike what they're doing, they can then act accordingly in either the continuation of their degree or in finding other avenues that better suit their preferences. One interviewee expressed that having fewer theoretical classes and more hands-on experiences was useful in gaining an understanding of what it is like to act as a lawyer and policy analyst. This interviewee expressed gratefulness for the opportunity and confidence that this experience could well prepare her for a career in public policy. When it comes to life-after-college preparation, interviewees express that half the battle is just knowing what you want to do and understanding how to get there. The types of classes students have the opportunity to join plays a huge role in helping students with that understanding and encouraging students onto a path that better suits their interest and needs.

To expand upon the above findings, students believe their college experience is also preparing them for life apart from their career. Interviewees have demonstrated preparation in skills related to their overall workplace and personal life, their community, and personal growth. Most interviewees voiced that they have learned communication and networking skills from college. In relation to personal growth, learning skills such as independence, how to advocate for oneself, and emotionality such as empathy has been valuable for many, with one interviewee stating that "they learned how to persevere for what they want and need."

Interviewees spoke correspondingly about the skills they've learned in college and the impact those skills will have on both their career and personal lives, with rare distinctions between the two. When general life skills came up in interviews, most interviewees spoke about the impact college will have or has had on their communication skills. One interviewee explained that college has encouraged her to be able to speak up for herself, specifically to ask for help, to find personal support, and in learning how to communicate with others that have similar and different communication styles. Another interviewee stated that certain college

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programs have provided her with networking opportunities for career exploration and that college in general has had a profound impact on her communication skills, which she believes has been helpful in her current position as a Pharmacy Technician. The interviewee expressed having difficulties with communication in general, but highly values college for helping her improve her communication skills in all aspects of life. Additionally, interviewees who are majoring in hospitality, healthcare, and education have expressed expanding their abilities to embody compassion and empathy within their career and in their personal lives. An interviewee explained that, as a Psychology major, she has had many opportunities to exercise compassion and empathy, especially because she's aspiring to become a teacher. It is worthy to note that some interviewees believe that college as a whole will be helpful for all aspects of life, with one interviewee stating that they believe almost everything they are learning in college applies to the real world. Altogether, however, most students highlighted communication skills as the primary point of life preparation provided by their college experiences.

What is missing from the college experience

When interviewees were asked about what they believe is missing from their college experience, opinions varied widely based on individual experiences and circumstances. A handful of interviewees state that academic opportunities are missing from their college experience that would support them in successfully completing their program. Many students shared that there is not enough flexibility to explore academic interests and not enough availability to explore specific classes, minors, or majors. Interviewees state that they would like to pursue additional majors, minors, and classes, but that schools either don't have the options available or don't allow them the space to explore. One interviewee explains her frustration with the matter, stating that there are additional majors and minors they would love to pursue, but they often feel like they have to hold themselves back in order to stay on track with their current degree - this leads them to feeling rather limited in their true desires to learn. It is also worthy to note that a few students would like to see better professor retention and attitudes, not just for student motivation, but also to motivate professors in feeling passionate about what they teach and wanting to be there to teach it.

Regarding the lack of flexibility to explore academic interests, interviewees made valid points about how their workload and schedule have made it significantly harder for them to explore multiple interests at the same time. Many interviewees I spoke with were or are majoring in some type of healthcare or STEM field at a large university. These interviewees, including myself as a former STEM major, have seen just how packed workloads become. With back to back class schedules and intense classwork for multiple classes at the same time, academic exploration often requires individuals to either change their major altogether or start from a smaller college and work their way back up, which interviewees expressed not wanting to pursue. Pursuing a major and a minor at the same time has been an option for a few interviewees, but it still hasn't satisfied their want to learn more. These interviewees have expressed vehemently wanting to learn, explaining that they're in college to explore various academic interests, but feel limited in their ability to choose classes that help explore further interests or deeper topics. Two interviewees explained that they settled for a non-specific major because their school didn't offer specific programs they were interested in such as Biochemistry and specific science fields. Another stated that going to a small community college has restricted her abilities to learn more in her field because they took away a select number of major-related courses due to unfulfilled class amounts. Additionally, regarding professor retention and attitudes, what I and other students around me have expressed are very similar. When I attended a large university, I often heard from professors, TAs, and fellow students about how flawed the current academic tenure system is. Both students and faculty expressed frustration at this system and, as an interviewee said, they want to see more educators in the classroom who are willing to connect with students and have a passion for education.

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A significant portion of interviewees who reflected on gaps in their college experience identified that they would like to make connections through out-of-classroom opportunities such as campus engagement, extracurricular involvement (such as clubs), networking, and social events (both formally and informally). A few students shared how working in college has affected their ability to socialize, with one interviewee sharing that they “did not hang out as much with their classmates in college because [they] needed to work and support [their] family” and that they wished they “had more capacity to engage in campus life.” However, for most, making connections is an informal, additional part of their college journey, with many stating that they have received substantial resources from out-of-classroom opportunities.

Making connections in college is not seen as a necessity by many of the interviewees who answered on this issue. Rather, it's more of a want – something they wish they had greater access to. Interviewees described wanting informal relationships outside of the classroom, but some struggled to pursue them due to the challenge of balancing jobs to support themselves and their families while also managing their academic responsibilities. One interviewee shared his story, stating that he doesn't have the time to be a part of clubs and campus-led social opportunities. These issues have even stretched to his formal academic career, as he states that he doesn't have time to attend in-person classes or workshops that advertise internships and job opportunities. He expresses feeling extremely left out without an option for Zoom, where he can actively be present and possibly gain connections by at least attempting to be there. For many, their campus has the opportunities, but it's taking that first step of getting involved that proves to be the most difficult.

A lack of promotional opportunities for jobs, including a lack of career fairs both on and off campus, is an important point of concern regarding what students believe is missing from their current college experience, with many students saying this could have significant impacts on their educational journey, especially beyond college. Interviewees express a desire for more career fairs to better understand what degree they would need for their specific field of interest and what specific career they should be aiming for after they finish college. They believe early and continued exposure of their career fields is crucial for students to have a better understanding of what exactly they'll be doing with their degree, with one interviewee stating that it would be “helpful to show the full breakdown on certain careers and opportunities.”

One interviewee expressed a desire for more career field exposure. She explained that there have been no targeted career discussions in her communication and business classes. She believes that job fairs could increase students' understanding of the specific careers they can pursue with their degree. My significant other also supports the idea of career field exposure. He has had many opportunities to explore various careers related to his architecture degree through affiliated individuals who offer job opportunities. He has also gained insight into which specific skills he needs to strengthen and how they align with particular jobs. These opportunities were made possible by his architecture professors during lectures, where either they or colleagues they are associated with provide career-related resources and post-graduation advice. My significant other has expressed sincere gratitude for these opportunities, stating that they've given him a clearer sense of direction when making decisions after college. He also believes that all degree pathways (BA or BS) should offer similar career exposure to their students.

Interviewees believe that financial resources are missing from their and other students' college experience, which could have consequential impacts on their education and the education of students around them. A handful of interviewees state that there needs to be greater support for low income students, with desired modes of support being to either make the process less complicated or to provide resources that are able to adequately support students during the financial aid process – from finding the aid, to applying, to managing the received funds.

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Fellows, interviewees, the students around me, and I have expressed how essential financial resources are in our ability to attend college, with many of the same narratives going around: “if it wasn’t for financial aid, I wouldn’t be in college right now.” Financial aid is crucial for many students’ lives, especially low income students who would need financial aid in order to get into college and stay in college long-term. However, interviewees who answered on this issue expressed how complicated the financial aid process is, or even cited the lack of a process to begin with because their schools didn’t provide insight or opportunities to seek guidance. An interviewee explained that her university could have had better student support programs and resources, stating that they did not guide her on where to look for scholarships and did not provide help in completing her application processes. This became apparent when she was denied FAFSA eligibility and found herself in a place where she wished she had known about other scholarships and financial aid available to her. Other interviewees have provided similar accounts of confusion before and during the financial aid process, but it ultimately comes down to this: interviewees within this category want more support, such as physical spaces and financial support, in making financial resources easier to access and more abundant both in college and within their communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations flow from the findings, our reflections, and our own experiences. While the recommendations are divided into four overarching categories, it should be noted that many recommendations relate to multiple categories and that some clear themes thread through them. In particular, the recommendations highlight the need for setting the stage for postsecondary success from an early age, with engagement of families and children alike. The recommendations suggest that this can take place through multiple avenues, including college preparatory programs that offer an array of programs and support for students starting and continuing through college.

Establishing College Mindset and Ensuring Preparation

Family Engagement

Based on the finding that family input or the lack thereof plays a crucial role in students’ decisions to enroll in college, we recommend

Hawai’i Community Foundation or its partners implement programs that include both parents and children that touch on the topic of postsecondary options; college, trade school, straight into the workforce.

This can allow for the conversation to begin flowing within the household.

Early Exposure to College and Career Options

Based on the finding that internal motivation was the most influential factor in students’ decisions to pursue college, we recommend

Hawai’i Community Foundation invests in a statewide college and career readiness infrastructure that begins as early as elementary and middle school.

Early exposure to conversations about higher education can help students develop internal motivators and envision college as an attainable goal. This initiative should include visits and career fairs at intermediate and high schools, featuring professionals from local industries and college student volunteers who can share firsthand experiences. These events should highlight available college and career pathways, including

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programs like AVID and Upward Bound, as well as guidance on the college application process, financial aid, and dual-credit or early college opportunities—especially in under-resourced schools. The fairs should share a range of local career opportunities, illustrating a wide range of pathways to becoming, for example, a teacher, a community worker, a healthcare professional, an early responder, among the many other options. The fairs could act as early recruitment for some of these professions, and might highlight educational opportunities such as summer programs like Junior Police Officers or Junior Lifeguards, where retired volunteers lead programs that expose young ones to the process of entering various professions and the kinds of emotional, physical, technical, and other skills that these careers entail.

The goal is to create visible, community-rooted postsecondary pathways that inspire and support students from a young age.

College Preparation in High Schools

Based on the motivations and factors shared for enrolling into college, we recommend

Increasing the availability of college/career prep programs and integrating college/career prep into the high school curriculum, to better prepare students for the real world and workforce.

For example: English classes can integrate scholarship essay assignments (e.g., writing a Personal Statement for future scholarships and filling applications properly and thoroughly (college applications, FAFSA). Math class can integrate filing income taxes, social security, retirement funds (401k), health insurance (e.g., future scenarios and how to prepare financially for them, what does it mean to open your own business regarding taxes, healthcare options and retirement funds). Social Studies can discuss the career fields that are needed locally and nationally and what these careers do for the economy and the communities that it affects.

Based on the important role of teachers, counselors, and other school faculty in postsecondary plans, along with the abundance or lack of their presence in a student's life due to funding within schools and other programs, we recommend

Looking into the possibility of grants that may help schools be able to afford the appropriate staffing and resources for teachers, counselors, and other school faculty.

College Readiness Programs

Based on the finding that school-based programs, like Upward Bound and AVID, help students' explore options for post-secondary plans, we recommend that

Along with in-school curriculum, school-based college prep programs should be an option for all students statewide.

We see in the data that these school-based programs were influential in students' making the decision to enroll in college. If these programs were accessible to all students, enrollment rates may be increased. Community organizations, like the Hawai'i Community Foundation, may be able to assist with implementing these school-based programs statewide.

Based on what was gathered on students' influences for enrolling in college, we recommend

College preparation programs promote their program and mission more broadly and extend their knowledge and resources to students and people not part of their program.

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Though each program targets a certain demographic, programs should foster collaboration with one another. Similarly, information and resources should not be exclusively available from those who heard about the program and are lucky enough to register and/or participate in it.

Based on the ideas for recommendations discussed as a group in relation to patterns and themes, we recommend

Hawai'i Community Foundation invests in college readiness programs that help the transition from high school to college, including school visits.

A pattern was shown that students who have internal motivation were able to push themselves to do research to go to college. However, students that need assistance struggle with applying to college. College readiness programs appear to play an important role in providing this assistance.

For example: TIDES Program "provides services to students who identify as Filipino or Pacific Islander," and hosts community-building events to "emphasize the significance of creating intentional spaces for students" (UH News, 2024). The program is under UH Mānoa's Office of Student Equity, Excellence, and Diversity, and is supported by the AANAPISI grant. However, because of the current administrations' plan target on DEI programs, AANAPISI funding is at risk. Therefore, I spoke with folks who work in this program and they unfortunately do not see TIDES continuing their work.

Based on findings of the impact that mentors and outside programs have on a student's decision to apply to college and sometimes the lack of these mentors, as well as the importance of a positive adult-student relationship, we recommend

Hawai'i Community Foundation and its partners find a way to bring into fruition an alumni mentoring program for interested alumni and students.

This program would aim to present to students a person in college that may be able to provide a positive adult relationship to help explore and visualise their future.

Mental Health

Based on what the interviewees shared regarding what motivated them to enroll into college, we recommend

Providing mental health courses as a part of the Department of Education curriculum for grades K-12.

These courses would include: time management skills; how to handle and deal with stress, including the importance of physical exercise, stretching, breathing and meditation to alleviate stress (I was stressed out in elementary school that led to breathing problems due to anxiety and a stressful environment at home); how to motivate yourself- focusing exercises; and how to communicate with people around you effectively and lovingly (how to listen to each other without quick judgements).

Shaping Community Narrative

Social Media / Traditional Media

Based on the broader community narratives surrounding college, we recommend

Making public announcements (to educate the public that college degrees are sometimes necessary to acquire certain jobs, encouraging a positive narrative towards college).

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These announcements can happen via social media, commercials, radio announcements. They should be about the careers available locally that require a college degree (including salary/pay/benefits). This is important because many state and federal positions remain open due to high requirements such as a four-year degree or a certain amount of years of experience in that field; many in the community remain unaware of this. Public announcements should also advertise job fairs (times and locations) as well as college enrollment period, financial aid opportunities, and college events to recruit new students.

Based on the findings that social media does not typically play an impactful role in how a student views higher education and the common idea that social media is a part of most students lives, we recommend

Colleges make better use of their social media to provide more information for applying, and the actual college life rather than trying to market themselves and

Hawai'i Community Foundation and its partners make use of their social media to better promote programs and scholarships for students.

Based on how politics and world events influence a student's education and career journey, we recommend

Hawai'i Community Foundation, college campuses and educational organizations provide a source of information for students and the community such as a newsletter (printed, emailed) and social media page (Facebook and Instagram) that provides transparency and additional details in regards to federal, state and county changes in policy and laws that can possibly impact students educational career.

This is to educate and clear up any misconceptions about changes in policies and/or laws communicated by local media outlets that may impact students' lives, allowing them to make better decisions based on facts.

High Schools

Based on interviewees identifying their high schools as important in shaping the higher education narrative, we recommend

Schools and community organizations embed narrative-shifting efforts into existing FAFSA nights, college and career fairs, and family engagement activities.

For example, these events could feature a local alumni panel, student-led storytelling, or short videos that highlight a range of postsecondary paths. These efforts can challenge dominant narratives about success and what students and families see as possible.

As noted earlier, college preparation programs are important for the role they play for students as they are entering college. The interviews also indicated that the higher education narrative is influenced by their high school and the information their high school provides. Thus, we recommend

High schools have a program or plan to focus on engaging students in a practical and hands-on way that exposes them to different post high school opportunities.

The critical idea here is that the program is embedded in the curriculum, so that it becomes part of the school's narrative. This would include high schools offering a greater variety of classes and career pathways for students to explore options, as well as foster what they already know they want to study. It could include job fairs, or majors of study workshops, where students can research a program of study and what that would look like. Finally, the program could include visiting local community colleges and universities, along with college fairs and presentations.

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This should also include degree audit reviews for various institutions, so students can see exactly what they would need to do to receive a specific degree.

Family and Friends

Based on findings that family and friends play a significant role in students' experience of the narrative around higher education, we suggest that family engagement should be considered as a way to build college-related knowledge and also to change the community narrative. Based on the role of parents for many students when considering college, where to attend, and what to study, we recommend

High schools hold parent-teacher conferences that engage in conversations with parents regarding college and higher education.

There is a serious connection between students' confidence and desire to pursue college with the relationship and support they receive from their family members. We believe students having reinforced conversations and the opinions of their parents or close relatives that reflect a positive outlook on their ambitions and idea of higher-ed could push students in a positive direction they may not have been going towards, or feel more comfortable in their considerations.

Based on the findings that family and friends play a role in a student's decision to attend college, we recommend

Hawai'i Community Foundation and its partners find a way to better inform both families and the children themselves of the benefits of attending college.

This includes ideas centering around the pros and cons of staying home for college and leaving for the mainland.

Financial Literacy and Basic Needs

Based on students' internalizing the narrative that they will need to be self sufficient during college, leading to concerns with financial capability to complete college, we recommend

Community leaders develop, lead, and promote financial literacy programs that reflect realistic and approachable ways to pursue higher education, whether at an institution or vocationally.

These programs would include things like loan understanding, future scholarships, as well as grants and donor applications – anything that can pre-educate high schoolers to be better prepared during college and scholarship application season. These programs should also include talks about how outside scholarships affect financial aid packages, because while each school has their scholarship policy, some colleges reduce the financial aid that they offer, so some amount of a scholarship may not always directly reduce one's tuition.

Based on our findings and information we gleaned from [Higher Education Guide: Chapter 4 - Support Services In The Community | Juvenile Law Center](#) we recommend

Community leaders develop, lead, and promote programs that connect students with a range of resources, because college access also means access to basic needs such as food and housing.

Students should know about SNAP and TANF eligibility and application process, access to food banks and pantries, types of health insurance, mental health support, etc. These resources should be readily accessible for them so they know what is available and can take action from there. These resources can be shared as

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infographics online and distributed in high school college and career planning offices, ultimately sparking conversations about basic needs.

Creating and Sustaining Sense of Belonging

Preparing for College

When interviewees discussed the struggle of developing new relationships in college, the two most common struggles involve campus size and different background peers. Students from Hawai'i usually do not have the opportunity to see what mainland schools look and feel like. As a result, we recommend

Hawai'i Community Foundation and high schools help prepare students for the college environment, including supporting them to get first-hand experience with certain colleges in the mainland.

Students should be exposed to the different kinds of institutions they can attend and see how each varies in terms of academic, social, and cultural environment. Narratives around institutions shouldn't be so heavily positive or negative, so students have a fair picture of each of their options and can weigh them effectively.

High schools, with support from Hawai'i Community Foundation, have the opportunity and the responsibility to make known the reality attending schools on the mainland, PWIs, and schools have less diversity or connection with POCs, Native Hawaiians, and Hawaiian/island culture. This is especially important for students who consider leaving Hawai'i, because our data shows that culture shock is quite common and can lead to homesickness and loneliness, isolation, and frustration.

Since there are already clubs at some high schools that do this exact thing, HCF could ensure that these kinds of clubs are available to more schools in Hawai'i. Because I was from a small high school in Waialua, there weren't any resources that allowed me to explore colleges in the mainland in-person, so my first time in college was also my first time in the mainland. In addition, HCF could also help fundraise or donate to schools who are already doing these clubs so that the schools could (1) continue providing these clubs, (2) allow more students each year to participate in these clubs, and/or (3) increase their repertoire of colleges that they visit.

This would allow them to see how they could create a sense of belonging in a campuses' most authentic state.

Based on reflections after each of the interviews conducted, we recommend that

Hawai'i Community Foundation should invest in a summer reflection program for students, incorporating discussions on identity with culture philosophies.

An example is the 3 pikos. Piko po'o: connection to ancestors/genealogy/representing your family, Piko na'au: connection to wisdom (gut feeling), and Piko ma'i: the connection to your descendants/legacy. In Hawaiian culture, 3 pikos help us as Kanaka Maoli harbor the sense of identity based on genealogy of family (knowing of where you come from), the wisdom that you can receive and put into action (gut feeling) and the ability to create descendants to harbor your teachings.

Based on interviewees expressing that they felt excluded from decision-making spaces in higher ed, and that if they got a seat on the table, they did not feel supported from the institution due to bureaucracy and external pressures, we recommend

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Supporting student agency through early opportunities that allow them to exercise their voice and freedom, realizing their capacities and capabilities of making change.

This can take place through summer employment programs, mentorship of young leaders, and high school civic clubs. [4 ways to engage young people in civic life — beyond elections | by Reimagining the Civic Commons]

Transition to College

Based on the finding that a lot of students didn't view orientation as helpful in terms of connecting with their college peers, we recommend that

Colleges should provide more individualized orientations.

Since there weren't a lot of responses for orientation, colleges could provide more welcoming events that maybe focus towards a specific group. I interviewed a college student who attended a liberal arts college that held a LGBTQ orientation. They mentioned that it was very helpful to immediately find people who hold similar backgrounds to help connect with peers.

During College

Based on the finding that students tend to build a deep connection with their peers during non-classroom, academic settings, we recommend

College professors host "office hour"-like seminars.

Office hours are great to build a relationship with professors, but building a relationship with class peers is just as important. Professors or TAs would host office hours in a classroom instead of their office so that students could come in if they either have questions, or to meet and connect with their classmates. This can be useful in finding other students who share the same passion for the subject of the class which could sprout a meaningful relationship.

Based on findings related to the impact of clubs and other affinity groups on a student's sense of belonging, we recommend

College campuses amplify their efforts to have programs, clubs, or activities that foster a student's sense of identity within the campus, continuing to provide and fund clubs that target specific groups.

These include hobby clubs (music, sports, dance), ethnic clubs, clubs for parents who are students, and academic clubs (math, science, politics, law). These types of clubs have shown to provide a sense of belonging which can result in students to continue in their educational journey. They can help create a safe place for people that may be far from home.

Given the importance of college-based clubs and affinity groups and their role in building students' sense of belonging, especially at under-resourced community colleges, we recommend

Hawai'i Community Foundation creates a targeted grant program to expand and sustain student affinity groups, peer mentorship programs, and interest groups.

Supporting College Persistence

Preparation for Persistence

As noted earlier, college preparation programs play an important role for students as they are entering college. The interviews also indicated that these kinds of programs were a factor in students' persistence through college. Thus, we reiterate here our recommendation

Hawaii Community Foundation creates and/or funds a college preparedness program.

This program would be similar to AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) or Upward Bound that prepares students from intermediate through high school for college. While it would include the activities mentioned earlier, it might also include activities specifically tied to thriving in college, for example: (1) Excursions where they can meet advisors, professors, learning centers and even sitting in on a class; (2) Teaching and discussing the topic of time management, teaching students how to juggle between working and going to school; and (3) How to deal with negative comments regarding their educational journey or negative narratives in the community; (4) Stress management through mindfulness meditation, exercise, stretching, and breathing.

Based on our findings and experience, we recommend

HCF starts a college preparedness program for adults returning or beginning their college journey.

This program could support adult learners as they re-enter college by addressing both academic readiness and personal growth. It might include: (1) Campus immersion experiences, such as guided tours of local colleges, opportunities to speak with academic advisors, financial aid staff, and student support centers, and even sitting in on college classes to ease anxiety about returning to a classroom setting; (2) Work-life balance workshops and support, which offer practical strategies for managing responsibilities like full-time jobs, parenting, or caregiving while pursuing a degree, including time management tools and flexible scheduling tips; and (3) Confidence-building sessions, focused on navigating self-doubt, overcoming negative societal narratives about being an "older student," and building a strong personal support system through peer networks, mentors, and community connections.

Based on students' lack of preparedness for college-level classes and unexpected workloads, we recommend

Preparing students early on in high school with exposure to higher-level courses.

This would include participation in dual-enrollment options with local UH universities or community colleges across the islands, to prepare them for the type of academic rigor present in college. It would offer an easier college introduction by having some core requirements/ gen-eds completed and arrive at college closer to their electives and degree requirements.

Based on students debating or being unsure with their degree choices or ideas surrounding what plan of study to pursue, we recommend

Counselors and teachers within high schools, starting freshman year and continuing through senior year, develop one-on-one relationships with students that focus on their ambitions and reflect on the student's skills and qualities throughout the classroom and extracurriculars.

This is meant to find pathways and majors that fall in line with what a student enjoys and to address students' lack of knowledge about careers that fit into their activities of enjoyment, or things that fulfill a

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student. We suggest that finding what students enjoy doing, and pointing them in the direction to turn it into a career, that higher-education can reinforce and support that passion.

Financial Resources

Based on the challenges that come with balancing academic workload and personal life, namely working jobs, we recommend

Increasing on-campus jobs for students.

On-campus jobs allow students to still have a source of income while being in a space that readily acknowledges their capacities as students, and a space to build their skills.

Based on the financial challenges and ability to afford college, we recommend

Providing more scholarships for undergrad students that do not require extensive essays, but instead prioritize students with financial need and allow a lower minimum GPA, including more scholarship opportunities for transfer and grad school students with similar criteria.

We suggest offering more flexible funding throughout students' journeys, including making the scholarship awards unrestricted, broad, and renewable, especially for those that present significant financial need, independence financially, and good academic standing. These funds could help students who are working full-time pay for expenses such as bills, groceries, etc., possibly reducing their workload, even if they have to continue working to some degree. Many students express struggles working during college in general; providing easier, more accessible financial opportunities could benefit students.

Another suggestion would be to continue to expand ways to connect these scholarship recipients with donors, creating opportunities to share stories and meet one another. This could benefit the donor because they could meet some of the students who are persisting through college due to their donations and better understand the ways their donations are making a difference in someone's life. It could also offer scholarship recipients the chance to meet and express gratitude to the people who care about and support their academic journeys.

Pursuing additional school after a four year degree should be awarded and not discouraged due to lack of financial support.

Based on interview themes related to economic stress caused by essential needs that may not be supported through scholarships, we recommend

Hawai'i Community Foundation funds emergency/immediate needs stipend programs for students in need.

Bolstering funding for these kinds of programs would provide financial support for essential and often overlooked expenses such as travel to and from school, including stipends for flights or other transportation costs, as well as emergency funds for unexpected needs like purchasing a suit for a job interview or fixing a flat tire. Ensuring this comprehensive support can help reduce burdens that impact students' ability to stay enrolled and succeed in college. These programs are typically offered through colleges, given their close connections with their students, but may lack adequate funding.

College Faculty and Peers

Based on the support systems that were mentioned that interviewees have found to be necessary to continue in college, we recommend that

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Professors continue to be supportive and available for students, including being approachable and providing options to meet and discuss their course curriculum, such as zoom meetings or in-person. To support professors in this effort, we suggest yearly professional development courses for professors.

Professional development (once a year, continuing education) would include topics such as (1) how to be more approachable, communicating effectively, and how to create an environment that is welcoming and (2) how to handle difficult students.

Our research suggests that transitioning to college leaves students in a vulnerable state where they could be facing multiple issues. Prevalent issues found in our research includes feeling inadequate when comparing to their college peers (imposter syndrome), adapting to the rigorous coursework, exposure to many peers from different backgrounds, figuring out what to do for their career, the list goes on. With such a wide range of common problems it's important to talk to someone. Thus, we recommend that

Hawai'i Community Foundation and colleges promote student-to-student peer mentoring.

Student-student relationships are so important, and based on some of our interviews, we know these help many students get through college. HCF making a mentorship program within the scholarship recipient pool, pairing a mentee/mentor that received the same scholarship from different years and with similar interests/goals, to share about their experiences in college would foster knowledge sharing instead of gatekeeping.

OUR BELIEF AND OUR HOPE

We believe that investing in education is investing in ourselves; that postsecondary education and aid for Hawai'i youth will strengthen and solidify a healthy and thriving community for all of our futures. To better our communities we must listen to each other and keep the discussion open about the many issues our communities face. We feel fortunate for the opportunity to engage in this discussion throughout our research fellowship. We hope the stories from students across the state and our collective effort to listen intentionally, analyze carefully, and reflect thoughtfully will lead to meaningful action that leads to stronger educational structures that make us proud.

MAHALO!

We would like to express our gratitude to:

- The 40 students we interviewed for taking the time to be vulnerable and sharing their stories and lived experiences and for helping us to provide feedback to help further postsecondary aid for Hawai'i youth.
- Hawai'i Community Foundation for opening this space to center the lived experiences of students from Hawai'i in hopes of bettering the programs that support our communities. We would also like to thank you for providing scholarships as it reminds us that our dreams are worth pursuing. Your work uplifts Hawai'i's youth.
- Gardner Center for guiding us through the research process with so much intention. You have helped us embrace the complexity of our educational journeys and transform these stories into meaningful action. Your approach reminds us that there is so much power in the nuances of our narratives, and we look forward to carrying these skills with us into future conversations, interviews, and research. To the guest researchers, thank you for sharing your career paths with us. To Liz, Lily, Harry, and Laurel, thank you for being there for every step of the way. Your encouragement made us feel heard, seen, and grounded throughout this process.
- Our high school and college counselors, advisors, mentors, and teachers for sharing opportunities, like this fellowship, and believing that our voice can make a change, breathing life to the quote "be the change you wish to see in the world."

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TAYLA-ANGEL JIMENEZ

O'ahu



Hello! My name is Tayla Jimenez, and I'm currently in my second year of college. I am transitioning from the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, where I studied Botany, to the University of Hawai'i at West O'ahu to pursue a BA in Business Administration with a concentration in Data Analytics. My interest in Data Analytics began in elementary school, originally with plans to apply it to Meteorology. However, since the age of 16, I've worked in various administrative positions, which shifted my perspective toward the technical and applied side of the field. Through my work, especially in medical settings, I've met many individuals who struggle to access resources for themselves or their children. These experiences have inspired me to contribute meaningfully through this research fellowship. The opportunity is especially important to me because it aims to empower communities I have been a part of, helping ensure that families can access the support and programs they need. I am particularly passionate about expanding resources for students with physical and intellectual disabilities, helping them pursue higher education and reach their full potential. I believe this fellowship holds the power to create meaningful, lasting change for our generation and for many generations to come!

KIANA LEI VALLENTE

Hawai'i

Aloha! My name is Kiana Lei Vallente. I am from Hilo, on the Island of Hawai'i. I am attending the University of Hawai'i at Hilo, majoring in Communications, Minor in Business, and earning a Certificate in Sustainable Tourism. I am a mother, paddler, scholar, hard-worker and lifelong-learner. I am passionate about my community, and I've worked with various nonprofit organizations for several years, and enjoy putting on events and teaching workshops that strengthen the fabric of our community and our people in Hawai'i. My higher-education journey has not been conventional, and I still am learning to enjoy the fun things in life – like traveling, motherhood, and career-building – while still pursuing my degree. I am a firm believer that being uncomfortable is the most fertile soil for growth, and I hope to inspire my 'ohana and my community to pursue their goals and dreams, regardless of their circumstances and challenges. I am honored to be a part of this fellowship, and particularly excited to help increase programs and organizations to support access to quality education for all.





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JIANNA JOHNSON

O'ahu



Aloha! My name is Jianna Johnson. I was born and raised in Hawai'i on the island of O'ahu. I am currently in my second year at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa pursuing a degree in Public Health with hopes of getting a Masters in Nursing or Nutrition. When not in school or hanging out with friends I work at an Assisted living facility because I am passionate about being able to provide support and help to other people. Thanks to my passion, I participated in a Youth of the Year competition that allowed me to help other people by using my voice to advocate for change here in my home state. I was able to speak on my experiences as a minority and child of a single mother, providing a different perspective that most do not think of. That competition connected me to this amazing fellowship where I can continue to use my experiences in hopes of better understanding and providing support for my college peers along with those who aim to pursue a postsecondary education. I hope to continue to advocate for change and provide support for Hawai'i Youth in the future.

JANINE SALUD

Kaua'i

Hi! I'm Janine Salud. I was born and raised on Kaua'i and have spent the first two years of my post-secondary education at Kaua'i Community College. I will be studying Korean Language and Literature at Jeju National University in South Korea this upcoming 2025-2026 school year. I plan to finish my bachelor's degree in Cinematic Arts at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa from the School of Cinematic Arts. I currently work at Kaua'i Community College as a Peer Mentor for first-year college students, guiding them through application and enrollment, and promoting their academic success. I've participated in community events to promote art and its importance, including performing for and educating children at Lihue Hongwanji Preschool. I also reactivated Kaua'i Community College's Dance Club as the president. Art and people are the driving forces of my life, and I believe that film is a fantastic medium for connection and expression. I chose to participate in this fellowship because I am a storyteller, and I believe research needs storytellers to connect the data to the big ideas. It is vital that, as I enter the entertainment industry, I remember art does not exist in a vacuum. Art flows through us, and it should be used for positive change.





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LEILA VIGORITO-KEKUEWA

Hawai'i



Aloha, my name is Leila Vigorito-Kekuewa. I was born on Maui and raised on Hawai'i island. I am a rising junior at the University of Hawai'i in Hilo and I intend to practice law in the state of Hawai'i. I am in the process of acquiring both a bachelor's degree in Political Science, as well as a certificate in Pre-Law, and will be applying to Richardson's School of Law to acquire a Juris Doctor Law degree post-graduation. Through my service, I hope to not only help alleviate one of the many issues that plague Hawai'i (a lawyer shortage), but to also uplift my fellow Hawaiians, encouraging them to go above and beyond in order to achieve greatness. This journey has taught me strength, resilience, passion and courage. I have been married for 8 years and I am thankful to my spouse for supporting my educational goals while I attend school full-time. My love of the land and ocean has led me onto many paths and offered me countless opportunities to attain practical knowledge and hands-on experience. From the wetlands and forests, to the shorelines and atolls, I have placed my paddle in the waters, feet in the sand and hands in the dirt. Trees, plants, birds, fish and people all thrive when every ounce of the body, mind and spirit is put into them. As with any journey it will require a great deal of effort, however, I cannot get far without the most essential component: people. Only with the support of others can I reach new heights. I am proud and privileged to be a part of this internship where I can engage with new people and grow my experience in research. I am ready for this long-distance paddle, sight focused on my destination while encouraging others to paddle with me. IMUA (onward)!

MARIAH IRIS RAMO

O'ahu

Hi! I am Mariah Iris Ramo, a first-gen Filipino immigrant and Scholar of Distinction at Barnard College of Columbia University, where I study Urban Studies (Political Science concentration) and Educational Studies. I have helped create culturally responsive curricula through the Filipino Curriculum Project, served as President of Columbia's Filipino club, organized events for AAPI Heritage Month, and researched first-gen college student experiences, ultimately communicating the importance of embracing our identities and histories. I have also taught in public schools in Hawaii and New York City in hopes of increasing representation in classroom settings beyond literature. This summer, I am returning to the Philippines to study youth political mobilization in Ilocos Norte. I aspire to work in educational policy, centering the lived experiences of students and educators to shape more inclusive curricula, school spaces, and learning environments, much like the work we are doing through this fellowship to ensure everyone from Hawaii has access to quality education.





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MAYA PLOI BLASI

Maui



Hi! My name is Maya Ploi Blasi, I graduated from Hana High and Elementary school on Maui. I am a senior at the University of Colorado Denver getting a BS in Music Recording Arts and a BA in International Studies with a minor in Economics and a Global Intercultural Communications Certificate. I love to cook and travel whenever I can, as well as participate in outdoor activities. I love seeing new cultures and immersing myself in the environment and foods that surround the areas I visit. I have a deep passion for human rights and advocating for underrepresented populations around the world as well as finding creative mediums to share people's stories and experiences. I believe everyone should have access to quality health, food, and education and am seeking opportunities in my career to promote that for others. I chose to enter this fellowship as I saw an intersection between my own passions and concerns, and a way to actively participate in a program where I will see a positive change in my community and home that raised me, hopefully supporting other youth to pursue higher education and increase opportunities to increase their socioeconomic status, in whatever way fits best for them. I believe this fellowship supports the intention to increase resources and access to such, for various youth across Hawai'i to be equipped with the proper tools to pursue a future with options and stability, as well as prosperous career and personal opportunities.

MELE KĀNEALI'I

Moloka'i

Hi! I'm Mele Kāneali'i, a rising junior at Hamilton College studying Public Policy with minors in Economics and Sociology. Raised between Maui and Moloka'i, I've witnessed firsthand the impacts of housing insecurity, limited healthcare access, and the ongoing underinvestment in Native Hawaiian and rural communities, which has shaped my commitment to policy rooted in lived experience and cultural grounding. I am passionate about ensuring that students from underserved communities like Moloka'i have the resources, mentorship, and opportunities they need to succeed beyond high school. My experience includes roles as a Public Policy and Housing Fellow at the Levitt Public Affairs Center, a Legislative Research Intern for the Maui County Council, and a Congressional Intern for U.S. Senator Brian Schatz. I joined this fellowship because I believe in creating support systems that respond to Hawai'i's unique needs, especially in advancing educational equity, and I hope to contribute to efforts that not only close opportunity gaps but also uplift the brilliance, identity, and resilience thriving across our islands.





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BRIAN BATCHELOR

O'ahu

Hello! My name is Brian Batchelor. I'm entering my sophomore year at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (go tar heels!) pursuing a bachelor of science in psychology with a minor in neuroscience. I enjoy staying active whether it's going on hikes, working out, or playing sports. I've aged out of the foster care system after being in it for around ten years; with this, I've experienced tremendous peaks and troughs, but support from Waialua High and the Hawai'i Community Foundation gave me an opportunity to enroll in postsecondary education. As a result, I am blessed to work with the Hawai'i Community Foundation and Stanford University's John W. Gardner Center to help everyone better understand what it takes to enroll and thrive in college! I hope to use my skills that I learned through this research fellowship and my familiarity with the foster care system to empathize and find ways to help children and youth who are in the same situation as me through research and social work.

KAUMAKA SANCHEZ

Kaua'i

Aloha! I'm Kaumaka Sanchez. I am a second year student at Kaua'i Community College pursuing a degree in Automotive and becoming a master automotive technician. I love working and fixing cars. Cars are very complex because they are multiple systems. I love to problem solve and find new solutions. I placed third in the SkillsUSA automotive competition. It gave me the confidence to pursue my career in automotive and led me to owning a shop. I am also a math peer tutor at Kaua'i Community College. I tutor math from college algebra to Calculus 2. I recently was an embedded tutor for culinary math class. I love to help students to understand complicated math problems. To be completely honest, I joined this fellowship because it was recommended to me by my college counselor. She called my mom and I about this fellowship and insisted on me applying. I applied with the intent of learning something new. I wasn't worried if I didn't get to participate. Now, being a fellow, there's much more than research and data analyzing. It's learning and understanding from others, being able to ask the right questions, taking the time to read every experience, and finding a code. Being a fellow is really taking the action and time to research a bridge that needs to be made to not only better the community but encourage the community members to have a chance to learn. I am honored to be a part of this fellowship and I can't wait to see what programs will be developed that can impact many students to continue their educational journey. Mahalo!

