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HIGHER LEARNING

How to get a life: college in the AI age

By Allison J. Gough

Tis the season of university orientations and new beginnings. Today's orientation programs increasingly focus upon orienting parents as much as students. We encourage parents to be co-partners in their student's success and help us ease their student's transition to college. Perhaps most importantly, we try to demonstrate that their tuition dollars will be well spent. It is, after all, all about the ROI (return on investment)!

A preoccupation with realizing a return on investment and ensuring that their offspring are launched into successful jobs and careers after spending tens of thousands of dollars on an undergraduate education is understandable. An entire industry of websites, blogs, experts, influencers, and Tik Tok stars now help parents make the "right" decision about their child's education by supplying "data" on which colleges "pay off."

It is an interesting moment to consider the value of college.

Artificial intelligence promises to upend the labor market, automating the entry level and junior professional jobs the average graduate has heretofore secured. Colleges are essentially educating students for a labor market that doesn't exist and one that is diffi-

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Allison J. Gough, Ph.D., is dean of Hawaii Pacific University's College of Liberal Arts.

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Isles can be tops for affordable higher ed

By David Sun-Miyashiro

This summer brought exciting news: Hawaii ranked 8th in the nation in the rate of students completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), the highest the state has ever achieved since national FAFSA tracking began.

With Hawaii students previously leaving as much as \$14 million in Pell Grant aid unclaimed, our increase in FAFSA completions is a mark of progress in making higher education more accessible. FAFSA completion is an important key to removing financial barriers to attending colleges and universities. According to the National College Attainment Network, high school seniors are 84% more likely to immediately enroll in postsecondary education if they complete the FAFSA.

While a recently streamlined FAFSA form increased rates around the country, Hawaii also leaned on our pilina — our connections and relationships — to climb the rankings for completion. In recent years, organizations like the Hawaii Community Foundation (HCF) and Stupski Foundation supported local non-profit partners in more effectively engaging families and partnering with schools.

Grants from the HCF enabled HawaiiKidSCAN and other community organizations to raise awareness about the FAFSA and address misconceptions. One aspect of our campaign

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David Sun-Miyashiro is executive director of HawaiiKidsCAN.

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Seat at the table helps spur student success

By Kiana Lei Vallente

In all honesty, I first applied for a research fellowship with Hawaii Community Foundation (HCF) and Stanford University's John W. Gardner Center because I needed the stipend to help pay for undergrad. The fellowship was based on a YPAR (Youth Participatory Action Research) model, a collaborative approach where youth investigate issues affecting their lives and communities.

I didn't know what to expect, but I knew I wanted to be involved in my community and work alongside other students like me. What I found was that the relationships I created with other fellows, along with the team at HCF and the Gardner Center, ended up being worth much more to me than anything else.

Hearing others' stories was powerful. Some of us were first-generation college students, some grew up in foster homes, and some were even homeless at times. Rarely do I feel welcomed into spaces where I feel like I can completely be myself, especially as a young mom. This fellowship made me realize I

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Kiana Lei Vallente is a recent college graduate, mother and Hawaii Community Foundation Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) fellow who contributed to research exploring the factors that help Hawaii students succeed in higher education.

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HIGHER EDUCATION

Test-optional colleges are seeing consequences of ill-prepared students

By David Blobaum

The Common Application for this college admissions cycle is now open, and roughly 1.5 million students will likely use it to apply. Many will aim for the “best” college, usually defined by some mix of U.S. News & World Report ranking, prestige and admit rate. They are not alone. Our culture focuses more on admissions than any other part of college. But getting in should not be the primary focus. “Admissions” names the first step, not the end goal. We need academic underwriters, not admissions officers, to vet students and ensure that they have access to positive outcomes. That’s the goal of college: to graduate and succeed in life. Yet most colleges do not even require information that would help them provide access to better outcomes. Grades, which have never been higher, are now disconnected from a student’s actual academic preparedness, which has never been lower. In 2024, according to the Nation’s Report Card, only 33% and 35% of 12th graders were considered academi-

cally prepared for entry-level college math and reading, respectively. Yet rampant grade inflation hides this lack of preparedness. Colleges need an objective measure more than ever, but many remain test-optional, long past the initial justification that COVID-19 prevented access to SAT and ACT testing. The University of California even refuses to consider SAT and ACT scores if submitted, a step even more unreasonable than simply not requiring test scores. In the name of access, these colleges ignore the vetting process that determines whether they are providing access to positive outcomes. The result is predictable: When loan underwriters refuse to use information to evaluate an applicant’s financial preparedness for a loan, more of the loans they issue fail. We saw the disastrous consequences of lackadaisical vetting, which contributed to the 2008 crash and the Great Recession, and mortgage lenders are now required to verify income and assets. The consequences of test-blind admissions are similarly unsurprising: At test-blind Uni-

versity of California at San Diego, the percentage of incoming freshmen placed into remedial math went from 1% in 2016 to 12% in 2025, and more than 70% of those students were not proficient in middle school math. A quarter of the students in the most remedial math course had perfect 4.0 GPAs in high school math — their grades were worse than useless. Unvetted students suffered the consequences: Those placed in remedial math were more likely to fail or withdraw from the first required calculus class for psychology, biology, and science, technology, engineering and math majors. Test-blind UC Berkeley has had similar, predictable results. Like a loan underwriter who asks for financial documents after giving out a loan, UC Berkeley now discovers who is unprepared through math tests taken after students enroll. Students who arrived with “severe deficits” in math did not pass Calculus I, an early prerequisite for STEM majors, at nearly 12 times the rate of well-prepared students: 46% versus 4%. Preparedness is knowable — a standardized measure reveals

it. The only question is whether colleges look before admitting a student, when the information can still help, or after, when it’s too late. Test scores are not perfect, and they should never be the only factor, but they should be at least one factor seriously considered. They are one of the best tools colleges have to improve student outcomes. Harvard University think tank Opportunity Insights found that test scores are 3.9 times as good at predicting first-year GPA at selective colleges as high school grades. The University of California’s own testing task force found that scores predict performance for every demographic group it studied. Based on SAT scores, only about half of the least academically prepared students graduated within seven years; for the most prepared, 92% did so. All of the Ivy League universities (and many others) have now announced a return to requiring SAT and ACT scores during the admissions process because they found that they were less able to predict a student’s success at their institutions without this information.

The job of an admissions officer is not access. It’s academic underwriting: ensuring access to positive outcomes. No bank would issue a loan without underwriting it. No college should issue an acceptance letter without doing the same, especially when the stakes are so large. Between extra debt, delayed earnings and switches from STEM into majors that often result in less pay, hundreds of thousands of dollars often hang on a student’s college outcome, money that affects their families, communities and our country. It’s better to give no access than access to negative outcomes. When students fill out the Common Application this fall, they should apply to colleges that vet them, value their sacrifice of time and money, and put their success first. College is a lifetime buy-and-hold investment. No take-backs. Choose yours wisely.

David Blobaum is the CEO of Summit Prep and is director of outreach for the National Test Prep Association, a nonprofit that supports the appropriate use of testing in admissions.

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cult to predict: today’s “in-demand technical skill” may be redundant and usurped by AI by the time a student graduates while entirely new jobs will have emerged in four years that we don’t yet have names for. Add U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics data showing the lowest unemployment rate in decades for those without a college degree, and one might be prompted to ask, “what is the value of a college degree?” Here’s my answer, and it has always been the answer: Never let your degree get in the way of a good education. A good education is not single-mindedly focused upon training for a specific job. It is focused on helping you get a life. That mission has never been more vital than in the current maelstrom of uncertainty. If colleges don’t know what jobs are going to exist, it seems unwise to mold education around the jobs we think will exist. What we do know, with certainty, is that uncertainty will exist. The problem with “job focused education” in an era of rapid technological change is that a narrow focus can make education obsolete. Students need an education that can be applied regardless of context: one that helps them navigate complexity and use imagination and creativity where crystal-ball gazing about jobs has diminishing returns. It’s reinvention that becomes a valuable, “future proof” skill in this new world. But reinvention is a difficult skill to cultivate unaided and without the ability to imagine what is and is not possible ... or ethical ... or moral. And in this brave new world, it’s important to remember that reinvention is not merely an economic strategy: it is an expression of human capacity, our ability to imagine who we want to be and then to become it. The late, great Dolly Parton once said, “Find out who you are, and then do it on purpose.” A broad, liberal arts education allows students to discover who they need to be to have a career in a volatile marketplace, but more importantly who they are to have a life. It gives them a repertoire of possibilities, ways of imagining, and roads to finding what is meaningful to them. It provides them with choices. I see students navigating those possibilities every day at Hawaii Pacific University. We purposefully give students room to explore: our degrees provide substantial space for electives, allowing students to pursue interests beyond a single discipline. Our faculty are also engaging directly with AI — not simply teaching students about it but helping them learn how to use it thoughtfully as a tool rather than allowing it to use them. With AI as with everything else, our goal is not to insulate students from change, but to give them the knowledge, judgment, creativity and confidence to navigate it. And perhaps this is higher education’s most valuable contribution in this new age: not the ability to predict what the next job will be, but the capacity to imagine what is possible and the judgment and freedom to choose what comes next.



AFFORDABLE

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included activating student volunteers by organizing sign-waving campaigns in communities across islands — from outside the Blaisdell Center to Molokai and Lanai. Schools like Lanai High and Elementary School (LHES) mobilized educators and community partners to get the word out about FAFSA, as well as social media contests and sign-waving. LHES’ 65% completion rate was a major jump from the prior year, with results from other rural schools like Molokai High School’s 78.5% completion also standing out. These schools are among many bright spots in how Hawaii is unlocking greater access to higher education for local students. This past session, the Hawaii Legislature passed a bill to revise the Hawaii Promise Scholarship, allowing students to make the most of their grant funding to cover educational costs as well as essential living expenses. These changes support the University of Hawaii System’s Direct2UH program, which makes it easier than ever for local students to understand and select from the 10 campuses in the system. The Legislature also passed a resolution calling for more rigorous graduation requirements in high school around financial literacy, since students must understand how finances work in order to even consider college or other long-term pathways. Building on this year’s momentum, Hawaii can and should keep pushing to be the top state in the country for FAFSA completions. The affordability needs of our students and families are more urgent than just about anywhere else, and our youth deserve paths to living wage jobs. With the kinds of quality workforce training programs available through the UH system — especially at our community colleges — our state wins when more people can access their dreams and financial stability. In a time of historic inflation, FAFSA completion is a critical tool for making college more affordable and accessible to high school students across Hawaii. No matter where a student lives, they should see college as a possibility.

STUDENT

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wasn’t alone, and that we were all fighting the odds to complete our degrees and be better for our communities and ourselves. A part of this research process also forced me to think deeply about what and who contributed to my own success. Internal motivation, family support, educators, school-based programs, and financial support were all determining factors in my journey, as well as the journeys of the 39 students we interviewed. At times when I felt completely isolated, I was relieved to learn that others had experienced the same struggles. We wrapped up the fellowship in August 2025 with a 43-page memo, titled “He Lohe Ke Ola – To Hear is Life.” The memo not only highlighted the challenges and struggles that students endure in their higher education journeys, but also shed light on what it means to listen to the voices of Hawai’i college students to strengthen our communities. About six months after the research memo concluded, I was invited back to join the YPAR Student Advisory Board, where we could build on the project and connect with organizations doing similar work. As a mom, I followed my na au by diving into research on intergenerational conversations and the environments that shape a student’s path to higher education. The research showed that early exposure was a major factor in encouraging young people to pursue post-secondary education. With the help of community organizations, we developed the recommendation to better equip caregivers with tools and resources to make this pursuit a reality. I am a firm believer that success starts in the household, so this was something I could immediately apply in my own home with my keiki and ohana. This is how I see change happen: like a ripple effect, first affecting small systems and then growing into something much greater than us. The fellowship and advisory board also taught me the importance of scholarships and financial support for Hawaii’s youth. I could not have completed my academic journey without organizations like HCF believing in and investing in me. The stipend I received through the fellowship helped me keep pursuing my degree and ultimately graduate. What was even better than that was the feeling of my 5-year-old proudly shouting, “That’s my mom!” when the University of Hawaii at Hilo called my name and handed me my diploma this past May. After being part of this fellowship, my voice not only felt heard, but valued for the first time. They didn’t just invite me to the table to listen; they pulled out a chair and asked me what I thought, how I felt, and what I believed could make a difference. I hope that this research encourages other organizations not only to value the voices of our youth, but also to offer them the opportunity to make the changes they want to see in their communities. I hope more young people feel inspired to share their experiences and have their voices heard. Maybe someday, my son will be one of them. He lohe ke ola — to hear is life.