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“AKO ‘Ē KA HALE A PA‘A”: MENTORING FOR KĀNAKA FUTURES THROUGH HILINEHU EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP ADVANCEMENT

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“Ako ‘Ē Ka Hale A Pa‘a”: Mentoring for Kānaka Futures through Hilinehu Educational Leadership Advancement

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In this article, we explore our experiences as Kānaka faculty mentors in Hilinehu Educational Leadership Advancement (HELA), a federally-funded grant through the Native Hawaiian Education Program (NHEP) supporting Kānaka graduate students in the field of education. Through the exploration of our experiences, we consider how mentoring can matter for Kānaka graduate students and furthermore how graduate education can matter for our lāhui Hawai‘i (Hawaiian nation). Although graduate education historically has not been a priority for the Native Hawaiian Education Act (NHEA), we argue that it is vitally important to preparing Kānaka for educational leadership and nation-building. Finally, we offer reflections on our experiences as mentors through HELA and close with experience-based recommendations for policymakers and administrators, faculty mentors, and Kānaka graduate students.

Ako ‘ē ka hale a pa‘a, a i ke komo ana mai o ka ho‘oilō, ‘a‘ole e kulu i ka ua o Hilinehu.

Thatch the house beforehand so when winter comes it will not leak in the shower of Hilinehu. Do not procrastinate; make preparations for the future now.

Mary Kawena Pukui, *‘Ōlelo No‘eau: Hawaiian Proverbs and Poetical Sayings*

“The efforts put forth by the design team...envision a Kānaka Maoli community that is in constant preparation for the future. ‘Ako ‘ē ka hale a pa‘a, a i ke komo ana mai o ka ho‘oilō, ‘a‘ole e kulu i ka ua o Hilinehu.’ This ‘ōlelo no‘eau is the

model for what we do as HELA, and through constant revisits to the idea of preparation, I can see that I am here to support student preparation for what's to come.” Stacy, HELA Faculty & Mentor

In 2021, our small group of Kānaka faculty found ourselves overwhelmed with supporting our students through their degree programs and careers in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly among our Kānaka graduate students. The majority of these students were part-time students and full-time working professionals in Hawai‘i’s public school system, K-12 through post-secondary. Many were also partners and caregivers, to their own children and/or family members, and actively involved in the broader Native Hawaiian community. Among all these kuleana (responsibilities), we saw them particularly struggling with school. Not because they were ill-prepared; rather, they were struggling emotionally and psychologically from the anxiety and fear of living in/surviving a pandemic, the continuous adjustments to virtual working environments (as many of our students were PK-12 teachers) which, of course, were all exacerbated by the crushing weight of the kuleana many of them carried for their families. Our little faculty hui (group) talk story sessions provided us a space to debrief on our exceedingly concerning advising sessions with our Kānaka students and trying to figure out how to support them so they could finish their degree programs and be better prepared for their futures. Over our summer break, we decided to put these conversations into action by applying for funding from the Native Hawaiian Education Program (NHEP), the resource hale (house, home) for the Native Hawaiian Education Act (Native Hawaiian Education Council [NHEC], n.d.).

In this article, we explore our experiences as Kānaka faculty mentors to Kānaka graduate students in Hilinehu Educational Leadership Advancement (HELA), the result of our grant proposal through the NHEP. Through the exploration of our experiences, we consider how mentoring can matter for Kānaka graduate students and furthermore how graduate education can matter for our lāhui Hawai‘i. First, we provide a very brief overview of education in traditional times through to the Hawaiian Kingdom, framing Kānaka education as an ancestral legacy we continue to perpetuate for our collective future. Next, we historicize the Native Hawaiian Education Act (NHEA), the funding source for HELA, to demonstrate how educational priorities for Native Hawaiians have been largely determined through federal policy upholding conventional educational outcomes rather than through the lens of nationhood, as did our kūpuna. We follow this discussion with an introduction to HELA, a program designed to holistically support Kānaka graduate student matriculation through academic and co-curricular activities, the foundation of which is mentoring for our students by Kānaka faculty. Historically, graduate education has not been an NHEA priority and, we argue, it is vitally important to preparing Kānaka for educational leadership and nation-building. Finally, we offer reflections on our experiences as mentors through HELA and close with experience-based recommendations for policymakers and administrators, faculty mentors, and Kānaka graduate students.

“Ua Ao Hawai‘i Ke ‘Ōlino Nei Mālamalama”¹: A Legacy of Kānaka Educational Excellence

Shared as part of a speech expounding on who are the beneficiaries of education and how they benefit from education, T. Puuohau of Lahainaluna evoked Kamehameha III’s (Kauikeaouli) “olelo kaulana” (famous words) as a reminder to the audience of the importance and value of education for Ke Aupuni Hawai‘i (Hawaiian Kingdom): “E na‘lii a me na makaainana, he aupuni palapala ko‘u, a o ke kanaka pono a naauao, o ia ko‘u kanaka” (Puuohau, 1868, p. 4). From “he aupuni,” Pukui (1983) translates Mō‘ī Kauikeaouli’s words as: “Mine is the kingdom of education; the righteous man is my man” (#553)², while Puette and NeSmith (2023) translate his words as: “To all ali‘i and commoners alike, mine is a literate country, and the just and intelligent man is my countryman” (book epigraph). These translations highlight Mō‘ī Kauikeaouli’s education (or literacy) edict as an “aupuni,” or kingdom-wide, priority, setting forth the kuleana of education upon each citizen as a civic duty for their country and a moral imperative to their Mō‘ī (sovereign).

Indeed, Kānaka ‘Ōiwi have embraced learning and enlightenment as a way of life since time immemorial. Regularly traversing the vast Pacific in large voyaging canoes, sustaining thriving populations of people in the most isolated group of islands in the world, and creating a vibrant arts culture clearly illustrates a society that prized and encouraged lifelong learning. Among the abundance of cultural artifacts we have communicating these values are ‘ōlelo no‘eau (wise sayings) about learning, enlightenment, and wisdom. Among the many available to us, the following is one of the most well-loved in our community: “A‘ohe pau ka ‘ike i ka hālau ho‘okahi. *All knowledge is not taught in the same school. One can learn from many sources*” (Pukui, 1983, #203).

Even with the advent of westerners to Hawai‘i in the late 18th century, Kānaka continued pursuing their love of learning by enthusiastically embracing and then adapting western modes and tools of education, like reading, writing, and the printing press, to Hawaiian societal and cultural norms, immediately recognizing the potential and the importance of these new technologies and literacies to a rapidly modernizing Kānaka society (Goodyear-Ka‘ōpua, 2013). To be sure, early Kānaka scholars, like Thomas Hopu and Henry Opukahaia, played critical roles in developing these technologies (like the alphabet) for their lāhui as they served as teachers and translators for missionaries and other English-speaking westerners to Hawai‘i (Goodyear-Ka‘ōpua, 2013). A prominent example of this enthusiasm for literacy is the numerous Kānaka-run³ Hawaiian language newspapers published in the 19th through the mid-20th centuries. Between 1834-1948, over 100 Hawaiian language newspapers were published documenting everything from nūhou kūwaho (international, foreign news) and nūhou kūloko (domestic news) to mele (songs), oli (chants), and mo‘olelo (history) to political debates and social announcements (Bishop Museum, n.d.; Ulukau,

¹ *Hawai‘i is enlightened, for the brightness of day is here. Hawai‘i is in an era of education.* (Pukui, 1983 as cited in Armstrong-Wassel, 2018)

² We often use the number of the ‘ōlelo no‘eau from Pukui’s collection to reference the proverb instead of the page number.

³ Not all nūpepa were edited and published by Kānaka. Like the media of today, there were a variety of folx engaged in publishing nūpepa representing a variety of political, economic, and cultural interests.

n.d.a). “‘Ōlino nei mālamalama” aptly describes this era of the Hawaiian Kingdom as demonstrated by the abundance of literature, musical compositions, active political engagement among the populous, bureaucracy making, and a rise of student enrollment in educational institutions and initiatives established across ko Hawai‘i pae ‘āina (Hawaiian archipelago) (Armstrong-Wassel, 2018).

Although small, community-based “schools” were also established throughout Hawai‘i, Kamehameha III, whose words open this section, clearly identified education for all his subjects, again, as a civic duty and moral imperative to securing his country’s independence. In 1840, he fully invested in public education by committing Kānaka leadership and resources into developing one of the first universal and compulsory public education systems in the world (Goodyear-Ka‘ōpua, 2013; Sai, 2018). Through the efforts of ali‘i (chiefs, royalty) and maka‘āinana (common citizens) themselves, the Hawaiian Kingdom established a robust public education system (Balutski, in process) and, by the end of the 19th century, illiteracy was practically unknown in Hawai‘i (Laimana, 2011). Unlike previous accounts centering missionaries as the primary architects of the educational system in the Kingdom, it is important to note that it was Kānaka who led the development, building, and implementation of the Kingdom’s educational system serving as, for example, the majority of teachers throughout the Kingdom and leaders on the Board of Public Instruction (Balutski, in process; Goodyear-Ka‘ōpua, 2013; Laimana, 2011)⁴.

However, the end of the 19th century brought another tumultuous time for the Hawaiian Kingdom. In 1893, the Hawaiian Kingdom, under Queen Lili‘uokalani, was illegally overthrown by a group of non-Kānaka citizens and foreigners with the support of the U.S. Minister to Hawai‘i and the U.S. Marines. Then, in 1898, Hawai‘i was subsumed under the mantle of U.S. manifest destiny through an illegal annexation, despite vigorous and sustained protests by Kānaka and non-Kānaka alike (Beamer, 2014; Sai, 2018; Silva, 2004).

“The Dance of Legislation in Congress”⁵: A Short Historization of the Native Hawaiian Education Act

Even as Kānaka continue(d) to advocate for the restoration of the independent Hawaiian Kingdom, the impact of U.S. colonialism⁶, particularly through militarism and its local agent, the State of Hawaii, was evident in the socioeconomic conditions of Native Hawaiians in the 20th century. A particularly telling socioeconomic indicator of Native Hawaiians’ vulnerability continues to be educational outcomes, like literacy.

⁴ This is not to say missionaries and their descendants did not have a role in its development and administration.

Rather, recent research demonstrates the much more influential role Kānaka played in the success of the literacy movement as well as the conceptualization, leadership, and management of the Kingdom’s public education system.

⁵ Subtitle taken from an article written by then Representative Daniel Kahikina Akaka titled, “The Native Hawaiian Education Act: The Dance of Legislation in Congress” which chronicles the history of NHEA to its eventual passage in 1980 (even though its funding was, subsequently, rescinded the following year (NHEA Project, 1983)). Akaka borrowed “the dance of legislation” phrase from President Woodrow Wilson.

⁶ There is some criticism of the use “colonization” in the Kānaka community, particularly when referring to the actions of the United States in Hawai‘i. We use this term similarly to Trask (1999) as “Behaviors, ideologies, and economies that enforce the exploitation of Native people in colonies” (p. 251) and not as defined by International Law. However, other scholars use “occupation,” a concept from International Law, to describe the state of the United States in Hawai‘i. This discussion is definitely beyond the scope of this article, but for more information, please see The Hawaiian Kingdom (n.d.) and Kauai and Balutski’s article “A Hawaiian Place of Learning Under U.S. Occupation” in this issue.

Though it was a skill once easily grasped and embraced by our kūpuna (elders, ancestors), it became a sign of our struggle in contemporary society.

Establishing a Legal Trust Relationship: Native Hawaiians in Native American Policy

The Hawaiian Renaissance of the late 1960s - early 1970s served as a pivotal period in the reawakening of “ua ao Hawai‘i ke ‘ōlino nei mālamalama” and the powerful advocacy we saw for Native Hawaiian po‘e (people) and ‘āina (that which feeds) (see Goodyear-Ka‘ōpua et al., 2014). Activism on our ‘āina and in Hawai‘i courtrooms propelled Kānaka to call governmental officials into account, demanding they address historically-rooted socioeconomic disparities in the Native Hawaiian community, particularly around health and education.

The advocacy by Kānaka for Kānaka could not be ignored by the government. Then Representative Daniel Kahikina Akaka (1980), the only Kanaka member of the Hawai‘i Congressional Delegation, identified three ways to establish a “legal trust relationship” with the United States as a strategy to demand governmental accountability toward Native Hawaiians: by legislation, by treaty, and by litigation in the courts⁷. This shift in legal/political status would provide Kānaka with standing wherein the United States would be required to support economic and social self-sufficiency for Native Hawaiians (Administration for Native Americans, n.d.). Thus, Native Hawaiians were first recognized as “Native Americans” in 1974 through Title VIII of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 (P.L. 88-452) called the “Native Americans Programs Act” (P.L. 93-644, “NAPA”). NAPA promoted “economic and social self-sufficiency” for Native people in the United States and first established the Administration for Native Americans (ANA), another significant source of funding for American Indians, Alaska Natives, Native Hawaiians, and Native Pacific Islanders. One of the activities arising from NAPA was the creation of Alu Like to “conduct a comprehensive statewide needs assessment of Hawaiians. Survey results indicated that education as the highest priority area requiring redress” (Native Hawaiian Educational Assessment Project [NHEAP], 1983, p. 1), which made perfect sense given the rising political/cultural consciousness of Native Hawaiians at this time (Native Hawaiians Commission Study [NHCS], 1983). This was the first step of the “dance” Akaka referred to in his piece, “The Native Hawaiian Education Act: The Dance of Legislation in Congress” (1980).

“The Dance of Legislation”: Passing the Native Hawaiian Education Act

Despite being included in NAPA, Native Hawaiians required a policy designed specifically for Kānaka communities to gain access to resources so that educational disparities could be meaningfully addressed and educational innovation would be supported. In 1977, Senator Daniel K. Inouye and co-sponsor Senator Spark M. Matsunaga introduced the Native Hawaiian Education Act (NHEA) to the Senate floor, where it passed by a voice vote but later died (Akaka, 1980). In 1979, NHEA was subsequently introduced once again to the Senate and passed unanimously (primarily

⁷ It is important to note here that the Hawaiian Kingdom had three treaties with the United States (see Sai, 2018). Additionally, the United States became the trustees of the Native Hawaiian Homes Commission Act once it was passed into law in 1920. However, it transferred its fiduciary responsibility to the State upon statehood in 1959. However, NHHCA remains federal law which only Congress may change (see Department of Hawaiian Home Lands). This is all to say, there was definitely a kind of legal relationship Native Hawaiians had with the United States.

because it was attached to the Higher Education bill). NHEA was also introduced to the House that same year, sponsored by Representative Akaka and co-sponsored by fellow Hawai'i representative Cecil Heftel, but it was "never reported to the floor of the committee" (Akaka, 1980). Instead, it remained stalled in the House Education and Labor Committee (Vobejda, 1980).

This stalemate was resolved in a House-Senate joint conference committee where, after much intense discussion, it passed. However, the original intent of the bill changed from one that would provide \$336 million over five years to fund a variety of educational programs and services for the Native Hawaiian community to one that would, instead, conduct a study to determine the educational needs and the magnitude of these needs for Native Hawaiians. This shift in focus brought the budget to \$500,000 to fund a group to study these educational needs since they were not yet satisfactorily established, according to Representative Akaka's congressional colleagues (Akaka, 1980; Vobejda, 1980). However, though the funding for this study was rescinded in the following year, the Senate Appropriations Committee still mandated the study to be completed by the Office of Education (NHEAP, 1983). Representative Akaka grimly ended his account of this legislative dance with, "Years of work relegated to a memory of things past in 30 minutes. Indeed, this is the dance of legislation." His "Post-Mortem," the final section of his piece, discussed his colleagues' call to prove the insufficiency of current resources in addressing educational disparities for Native Hawaiians through their conference debates. He wrote, "We also must make every effort to prove to the federal government that Native Hawaiians are not properly served by existing programs, both on state and federal levels" (Akaka, 1980). Needless to say, the tone of Akaka's piece reflects the frustration and disappointment of, once again, being required to demonstrate the harm being done to Native Hawaiians. Unfortunately, this study would be only the first of many Native Hawaiians would have to do to be seen as a worthy (or needy) dance partner in the eyes of the federal government.

In 1981, Kamehameha Schools/Bernice Pauahi Bishop Estate (now known as Kamehameha Schools) offered to financially sponsor and conduct the study. Consequently, the Native Hawaiian Educational Assessment Project (NHEAP) was borne to provide the documentation required by Congress to establish the need for educational resources directed to Native Hawaiians. Using Bronfenbrenner's⁸ "ecological model" (1979) as the primary framework, the report found eerily similar findings to the challenges Native Hawaiians continue to face four decades later (NHEAP, 1983):

- Overall, Hawaiian students score below parity with national norms on standardized achievement tests.
- Hawaiians are disproportionately represented in many negative social and physical statistics, indicative of special educational needs.
- Hawaiian students have educational needs which are related to their unique cultural situation.
- Existing Native American educational programs did not provide a ready match for Native Hawaiian needs within the scope of this study.

⁸ Urie Bronfenbrenner also served as a member of the Native Hawaiian Assessment Project.

- Educational research and development projects in Hawai'i and on the mainland have identified principles of effective schooling which can be applied to the unique needs of Native Hawaiian students. (pp. vi-ix)

Equally important were the recommendations they put forward, which informed the educational priorities of the Native Hawaiian Education Act:

- Continue to emphasize Basic Skills; build upon success with lower achieving students; build success for potential higher-achieving students.
- Develop interagency programs aimed at individualizing support for Hawaiian students and families with special needs.
- Support Hawaiian and Multi-cultural studies.
- Conduct further research into educational needs related to the unique cultural situation of Native Hawaiians. (pp. x-xi)

It is also important to note that another comprehensive study by the Native Hawaiians Study Commission was also submitted to Congress (P.L. 96-565), documenting in a two-volume report of over 900 pages the “culture, needs, and concerns” and recommendations of Native Hawaiians including community comments on the reports contents (NHSC, 1983, cover page). These two robust reports provided Congress with ample evidence of not only the history, culture, and current conditions of Native Hawaiians, they also provided evidence of the ways Hawaiians were actively addressing these conditions on our own and in our own communities. Kānaka also offered their ‘ike (knowledge, insight) into how the government should aid in these efforts to address socioeconomic disparities of our people in our own homeland.

NHEA Purpose and Funding Priorities

After a set of hearings in subsequent years reviewing and recounting the plethora of evidence reaffirming the unique status of Native Hawaiians in the United States and the critical need for resources to support Native Hawaiian education, the first appropriated NHEA was passed in 1988, over a decade after it was first introduced. The priorities of the Native Hawaiian Education Program are to:

- (1) authorize and develop innovative educational programs to assist Native Hawaiians;
- (2) provide direction and guidance to appropriate Federal, State, and local agencies to focus resources, including resources made available under this part, on Native Hawaiian education, and to provide periodic assessment and data collection;
- (3) supplement and expand programs and authorities in the area of education to further the purposes of this title; and
- (4) encourage the maximum participation of Native Hawaiians in planning and management of Native Hawaiian education programs. (NHEC, 2022, p. 8)

Throughout the several reauthorizations since its establishment, the contours of its priorities have been fairly consistent, reflecting the original findings of the final report of the Native Hawaiian Assessment Project (1983). These priorities primarily focus on early childhood education, “Basic Skills” like early literacy, the needs of “at-risk children and youth,” and Hawaiian language medium education. Generally, higher education priorities are limited to scholarships and, broadly, workforce development.

Although the priorities have remained relatively static, the projects NHEA funds have expanded in terms of how these priorities may be achieved, such as by

establishing family learning centers. However, higher education remains one of the most underdeveloped aspects of this cornerstone policy for Native Hawaiians⁹. Our perspective of effective Native Hawaiian education policy envisions support for the whole educational pathway (in addition to those emerging, new, and yet unseen pathways), including higher education, because Kānaka needs support throughout this journey to be successful in modern Hawai'i society. Given this historical context and priority focus, it is truly a wonder HELA was funded to support Native Hawaiians pursuing advanced degrees (i.e., master's, PhD, EdD).

Preparing for Our Future: Hilinehu: Educational Leadership Advancement Program

Collaboratively developed among a collective of Kānaka faculty at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, HELA emerged from the urgent need to provide sufficient support for our Kānaka graduate students in the College of Education and, aspirationally, toward their leadership of Hawai'i's public education system. This was of particular importance since the majority of Kānaka students are enrolled in Hawai'i's public schools (K-12 and higher education). Furthermore, we also recognized that in our present society, successful matriculation to degree completion for Kānaka is critical to career mobility (and "economic self-sufficiency") (U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 2023) as it is to impacting the lives of Native Hawaiian students in public education and, more broadly, our lāhui Hawai'i.

Goal, Objectives, and Program Design: Centering Kānaka Mentorship

The overarching goal of HELA is to increase the number and quality of Native Hawaiian graduate level kumu (teachers) and educational administrators retained within the Hawai'i Department of Education and the University of Hawai'i System. To this end, we designed the program collaboratively between the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa (UH Mānoa) College of Education and the Graduate Professional Access Program, which is housed in the Office of Student Equity Excellence Diversity in the Division of Student Success also at UH Mānoa. Since UH Mānoa has committed itself to becoming a "Hawaiian place of learning" and, as the only Research I institution in Hawai'i, our campus was fertile ground for Kānaka graduate students to flourish. In turn, we developed three objectives to achieve our goal:

1. Building individual capacity to advanced degree educational success;
2. Cultivating a supportive network of academic, career, and community stakeholders; and
3. Creating a Hawaiian innovation resource center to support advanced degree success for Native Hawaiians.

These objectives reflect our approach, which attends to the individual as well as to our community/lāhui. Overall, we envisioned a "whole student" program providing academic and co-curricular support activities, including the development of a physical space for our graduate students.

HELA's program design mirrors the definition of the word "hela." The ethos of HELA is "to spread, as of the arms" (Ulukau, n.d.b) to welcome, embrace, comfort, and

⁹ We are heartened to read the Native Hawaiian Education Council's 2023 Annual Report which reenvisioned NHEA priority funding recommendations as more holistic and integrative of Kānaka worldviews like, "Explore community-drive definitions of student achievement in culturally-responsive vs. western achievement gap measurements and standards" (p. 4).

encourage Native Hawaiian graduate students at UH Mānoa through Kānaka mentorship. We also looked into the research on Indigenous graduate students to identify best and/or promising practices, specifically around mentoring. Indigenous mentorship responds to the disparate representation of Native students in graduate study by providing culturally grounded programming and professional skill development that supports students in successfully navigating advanced degree programs while keeping their Indigenous identity whole (Windchief et al., 2018; Windchief & Brown, 2017). Consequently, the centerpiece of our program is mentoring by and for Kānaka. Pukui (1986) shared: “An insightful ‘ōlelo no‘eau embodying our mentoring focus is, *I ulu no ka lālā i ke kumu. The branches grow because of the trunk.* Without our ancestors, we would not be here (#1261). However, this ‘ōlelo no‘eau can also be interpreted as a student’s connection to a teacher or mentor. “Kumu” has several meanings like “base, trunk, foundation,” and it can also mean “origin, source, teacher” (Ulukau, n.d.b). So, the kumu supports the growth of the lālā, or the teacher/mentor supports the branch/student, creating a strong connection between the two. “Ku‘u Kumu,” a song inspired by this ‘ōlelo no‘eau, was written for the Hawaiian language immersion preschools, Pūnana Leo (‘Aha Pūnana Leo, 1989). Although written for young children, “Ku‘u Kumu” reflects the ‘ano (character) of our mentoring, as it encourages the student to see their teacher as a model to learn from and rely on, particularly when things get difficult, as their teachers will provide support and comfort “a la‘i mālie hou” (until it is calm again). This mele also highlights the role of the teacher in helping the student recognize their “lau wehiwehi” (lush leaves), or their beauty, as they grow since, oftentimes, our students fail to recognize the amazing scholars they are becoming, particularly when they carry so much kuleana.

Unlike a conventional thesis or dissertation advisor who is primarily concerned with the student’s academic journey, HELA mentors provide culturally-informed whole person support, much in the way the ‘ōlelo no‘eau and mele above inspires, through support, encouragement, kindness, and strength. We created the following activities to actualize these values and strengthen pilina (relationships, connections): intentional pairing of students with mentors; consistent student and mentor meetings; professional development for mentors in areas such as culturally-responsive student mental health support; mentor-led professional development for HELA students; conference travel with mentors; and building a scholarly network developed through our mentor collective.

“I Ulu no ka Lālā i ke Kumu”: Reflections on Our Roles as HELA Mentors

As our time with the HELA program draws near to an end, we mentors have taken some time to reflect on what we have gleaned through our experiences, which have been rich and rewarding. We developed a set of questions, which we each thought about and responded to in writing. Though we each bring unique perspectives and voices to the table, we have shared many values and goals in common. We share our collective mana‘o (thoughts, ideas, intentions) in what follows.

Why We Mentor

Each one of us came to our kuleana as mentors for HELA with a sense of purpose. We recognized the importance of a wrap-around support program for Kānaka graduate students in education and wanted to play a part in it. For some of us, our sense of purpose changed or grew as we spent more time with the program. This was the case for Eō, a specialist faculty member in Curriculum Studies:

Initially, my focus for this project was really supporting Department of Education (DOE) employees. I have been so concerned with the attrition rate in the DOE that I thought we needed to be able to retain the teachers who have the most experience. I think, however, my view of supporting students has changed. I really view my kuleana now to give students concrete examples of success, how to do a proposal, and how to put comprehensive examination questions together. I think, at times, the doctoral journey still seems a bit abstract, so having the ability to give them a supportive network of peers and examples has really been helpful.

As one of the primary investigators of the HELA grant, Eō first conceptualized HELA as a means for addressing very real retention issues for Kānaka teachers in our public school system. While the goal of improving Kānaka teacher retention may have remained a driver for Eō, she also realized that, more immediately, like other graduate students of color who are new to academia (Carales et al., 2019), HELA students needed support in demystifying and navigating the academic paths in front of them. As mentors, we found that we could play key roles in providing information and encouragement through various graduate school milestones for our students.

However, we also have come to recognize how important it is to provide our students with holistic care. In other words, it is not enough just to ask questions and to offer information regarding students' academic pursuits. Māhea, the Director of the Graduate Professional Access (GPA) Program, a doctoral student in Educational Administration, and a primary investigator of the HELA grant, put this in perspective as she stated:

I recognize and honor that our scholars juggle many different roles and kuleana outside the demands of higher education. I make it a point to check in with my mentees about all of the kuleana they are responsible for because, based on my experience, it is the things outside of their school kuleana that can have the biggest impact on their academic and personal success. Thus, my goal is to help our mentees by listening to their successes and struggles, assisting them in negotiating their contending kuleana, and supporting them in creating a plan (or strategies) on how they might address their kuleana. I personally want our mentees to look to us as folx who they can confidentially receive aloha and support with whatever they need.

Oftentimes in academic spaces, people are expected to silo different aspects of their lives. If they are to be considered as "serious scholars," they are expected to devote all of their time and thought to their studies, unencumbered by other responsibilities or burdens. They are to be always laboring, and always producing if they are to merit their space within the academy (Salis Reyes et al., 2023; Shajahan, 2015). However, in her reflection above, Māhea, coming from a background as a former mental health professional and social worker, is troubled by such expectations. Our Kānaka graduate students are more than just students – they are mothers, fathers, caretakers, teachers, practitioners, artists, leaders, and the list goes on. As mentors, we must not only acknowledge but honor these various kuleana, helping our students to manage them while also managing their kuleana as students.

Ultimately, we chose to act as mentors through HELA because we believed in our Kānaka graduate students and wanted to foster their capacities to serve as leaders for our lāhui into the future. Stacy, a junior specialist faculty member in Curriculum Studies and a doctoral student in Educational Administration, further clarified what that meant to him by saying:

While my own futuristic visioning is pretty imaginative, I have found that my mentorship is not about preparing students for a future I see, but helping them envision how their research, coursework, and degrees help them on their way to a future they want to see happen. Often times these futures are not just their own, but sometimes they have been carrying it for a generation or two, so I try to never lose sight of the bigger picture of supporting Kānaka Maoli through not just school programs, but also through this complicated time of balancing school, community, family, spirituality, and a history that causes both pain and liberation. As a mentor, I simply try to support student efforts.

Stacy's reflection underlines that it is important for us as mentors to acknowledge and honor our Kānaka graduate students' various kuleana not only because doing so will help them to reach their academic goals but also because doing so can serve to empower students to dream and to build new possibilities for our lāhui. We cannot simply imprint our own expectations on our students, as doing so can limit their possibilities and growth. Rather, as mentors, we must create space for our students to connect their worlds – academic, home, and community; to imagine new possibilities for our lāhui; and to work toward bringing the big, bright futures that they dream for our lāhui to fruition.

Challenges for and Strengths of Kānaka Graduate Students in Education

As we work closely with Kānaka graduate students, we often recognize that higher education institutions, including ones like UHM that espouse aspirations to be Indigenous serving, were not made for Kānaka 'Ōiwi (Kame'eleihiwa, 2016; Lipe, 2016). This means that these institutions, structurally and systematically, espouse dominant white stream values, ways of knowing, and practices (Lipe, 2016; Salis Reyes et al., 2023). As such, they often do not accommodate Kānaka 'Ōiwi and can make us feel as though we are lacking. Ku'ulei, a professor in the School of Teacher Education, spoke about how this mismatch can present challenges for Kānaka graduate students:

Our NH graduate students may lack a sense of belonging to graduate programs that may not be "Hawaiian specific" type of programs. There may be feelings of imposter syndrome or stereotype vulnerabilities. Higher education institutions and programs do not reflect Kanaka perspectives. Thus Kanaka scholars may sometimes be undervalued, or their perspectives may not be validated. Also, non-Hawaiian faculty may not understand that westernized educational institutions have inherent barriers that don't serve Hawaiian grad students in an optimal way. Therefore, they may not know how to best support Native Hawaiians. They may have values and expectations in academia that differ from Native Hawaiian graduate students.

Thus, though Kānaka graduate students can be made to feel as though they do not belong, both in the social sense and in the sense that they may question their worth and

merit in the academy, this is not due to some pathology on their part. Rather, these feelings are a symptom of the hold that colonialism and racism have on institutions of higher education (McGee et al., 2022).

Indeed, we have found that those ways of knowing and being that are most marginalized within the colonial academy are also among Kānaka graduate students' greatest assets. To this end, Julie, a professor in Curriculum Studies, shared:

I think one of the greatest assets that our Kanaka 'Ōiwi students bring to the field of education and to research in education is that they're deeply committed to and passionate about our Kanaka community. So their research is important. It's timely. It's significant. But the challenge is that, on the flip side, it often takes them a lot longer to complete their work. Which I don't necessarily think is a bad thing. But, as you know, we often see our students running up against the university's timelines for completion and being threatened with dismissal because of all of these other important kuleana that they're taking on.

Julie's reflection reveals that, because our Kānaka graduate students are so committed to and passionate about Kānaka communities, they seek to conduct their research and to meet their other community obligations in good relations with others (Goodyear-Ka'ōpua, 2016; Wilson, 2008). They do not want to engage in predatory or extractive practices that inflict harm in Kānaka and other Indigenous communities (Smith, 2022). However, while relational approaches to research and practice can take considerable time to cultivate and carry out (Goodyear-Ka'ōpua, 2016), the academy places pressure on scholars to use their time efficiently and expeditiously, to be in constant production (Shahjahan, 2015). This is but one example of the ways that the sensibilities that Kānaka graduate students bring into the academy may be penalized or marked as less than.

Thus, an important task for us mentors has been to validate our Kānaka graduate students and to encourage them to ho'okūpa'a (remain firm, steadfast) in spite of the pressures that they may face. We must help students to see that what they bring into the academy is valuable (Rendón, 1994). Kahunawai, a faculty member in Educational Administration and another primary investigator of the HELA grant, spoke of the great assets of our Kānaka graduate students:

Goodness, they are such ipu kā'eo (full vessels, containers, or gourds)! They bring so much to education. I think the primary asset they bring is an unwavering kuleana for our communities and Hawai'i. They are eager to engage in learning and growing to strengthen their knowledge, skills, and abilities in service to their communities and the betterment of Hawai'i. In this work, I have found our students to be incredibly creative and grounded in 'ike kūpuna (ancestral knowledge) and 'ike Hawai'i (knowledge of Hawai'i), so they are seeing, thinking, and approaching chronic educational issues differently.

Kahunawai's enthusiasm for our Kānaka graduate students and the strengths that they hold is something that all of us mentors in HELA share. This further emphasizes the point made above that mentors must hold space for our Kānaka graduate students. Doing so may allow them to strengthen and sharpen the assets that they already carry with them (Yosso, 2005). These assets, including creativity and the ability to connect

‘ike kūpuna with what they learn through their graduate training, have the potential to lead us into the future.

Lessons Learned Through HELA

For many of us, HELA has provided a unique, intentional space for fostering mentor-mentee relationships. First, it has provided funding and resources for Kānaka graduate students’ professional development. Honing in specifically only the travel funding provided through the HELA grant, Eō reflected:

I was fortunate to have an advisor early on who promoted conference travel for us students. I think this has been the most memorable part of the HELA program. To travel to academic conferences and see students present their work and ideas that they are exploring and have the opportunity to have deep conversations about their research and what they are experiencing (in some cool places) makes it unique.

The travel funding provided through the HELA grant has opened opportunities for students to develop and share their research in new venues that might otherwise be cost prohibitive (Carales et al., 2019). Moreover, HELA has provided a structure through which Kānaka graduate students can prepare for and debrief on their conference experiences with their mentors and peers, contributing to the depth of their learning.

Another important aspect of HELA is its centering of Kānaka ‘Ōiwi people and ways of knowing. In this regard, Julie expressed:

I think what’s special about our program is that we’re all ‘Ōiwi. I graduated with my PhD here almost 25 years ago now. And at the time when I was going through my program, I think I was one of two Kanaka students in the entire college...Fast forward 25 years, I recently attended a dissertation defense as a committee member for one of our HELA doctoral students. And this time, when I looked around me, the room was packed with Kanaka faculty, graduate students, family, friends, and colleagues, all decked out in our Hawaiian finest. It kind of reminded me of those pictures that we see of our kūpuna all dressed up at those Hui Aloha ‘Āina or Kū‘ē petition meetings. And there was just this really positive energy where you could feel that everyone was super proud to be there and learn from and celebrate one of our own. And, I thought, “Now this is a community of scholars.”

In her reflection, Julie underscored how having a critical mass of ‘Ōiwi scholars can contribute to a real sense of community, where members share pride and joy in one another’s accomplishments. Experiences like these can be impactful, especially when dissertation defenses can otherwise be shrouded in mystery and ridden with anxiety (Bloomberg, 2023). Stacy further elucidated how sharing a sense of Kānaka ‘Ōiwi identity with other mentors and mentees in HELA has contributed to the sense of community that he feels in the program:

For me, being a mentor has given me a different role to explore. I do not have to leave my Hawaiian identity at the door or constantly protect it from harm, and I can just speak to students from a shared understanding. This shared understanding helps us see beyond the hierarchical structures of other mentor-mentee relationships. We co-exist as community in this relationship,

understanding that each of us has assets that will provide opportunities that will continue to serve our lāhui.

Because most HELA mentors and mentees share identities as Kānaka 'Ōiwi in education and/or interests in centering Kānaka 'Ōiwi in education, these have become aspects of themselves that they do not have to explain to one another (Carales et al., 2019). Instead, such a shared understanding has served as a starting point for further exploration of ideas and building of pilina.

Stacy's reflection also relates to another important aspect of the HELA program: it's fostering of reciprocal, non-hierarchical relationships. Often, mentor-mentee relationships are thought to be unidirectional. Mentors, who are experienced and experts in their fields, are meant to share their wisdom with mentees, who are novices and empty vessels to be filled (Freire, 2017). However, the emphasis in HELA has been to see everyone – mentors and mentees – for their assets and their willingness to learn. Kahunawai described:

I think what makes HELA unique is the way we have approached building this program. Not only do we have established Kānaka scholar practitioners as mentors, but we also have utilized our mentors to help "do" the program in so many ways - providing holistic mentoring (i.e., concerned about our students' well-being, not just their student identity), lead workshops and talk stories, invite students to travel with them to conferences. It feels like our mentors are way more involved than other kinds of support programs, especially for senior faculty, which most of our mentors are. The other aspect of the grant that is awesome is tasking our students with serving as leaders for our programs, too. For example, our GRAs create and run workshops, our advanced students provide workshops for their peers, our students organize experiences for our program connected to their work. Our mentors attend these programs, too, and actively engage in this learning process.

In other words, through HELA, mentors and mentees alike approach participating in the program as partners in lifelong learning. These partnerships are grounded by and contribute to the building of meaningful pilina.

Staying Recharged and Connected as Mentors

Finally, though the focus of HELA is on the support of Kānaka graduate students, the program also provides opportunities for professional development and community-building among mentors themselves. Through the course of the grant, mentors met regularly to connect with one another and to discuss what we were experiencing as we worked with our students. Māhea indicated how these meetings allowed her to feel a sense of mutual support among other HELA mentors:

I found those group meet-ups and conversations during our professional development workshops invaluable to me as I mentor. I *truly* appreciated the sharing between the mentors. The kūkākūkā (discussion, talk story) helped me to see that the other mentors were having their own struggles, and I could go to the group to get support and understanding.

It was important for HELA mentors to have a space in which we could openly discuss the challenges we faced. Though engaging in this way required vulnerability, it contributed to our sense of community and our sense of efficacy as mentors.

At several meetings, we also were joined by licensed psychologist and executive director of I Ola Lāhui¹⁰, Dr. Aukahi Austin Seabury, who shared her expertise with us and engaged us in various reflective and role-play activities to help us to improve our helping skills in working with students. Stacy spoke about how these sessions were vital in helping him to shift his paradigm in working with students:

Dr. Aukahi Austin Seabury has been integral in helping me shift my mind and behavior away from what "instructors" are to a classroom and curriculum towards a more rounded and holistic approach to student support. She helped me to see my own tendencies as a support and hone the skills I bring to the program so that a wider need can be met. Her sessions often let me explore a cultural structure that made me think through a wellness lens, and her examples and activities let me concretely apply those structures. I can honestly say that internalizing what she has taught all of us has given me even more insight into how all students, not just Hawaiian students, are experiencing higher education. I would suggest every educator to make connections with health and wellness providers so that they can become better educators.

As Stacy's reflection indicates, Dr. Seabury's sessions helped us to hold a mirror up to ourselves and our mentoring practices. They also gave us listening and conversational skills that we could add to our mentoring toolkit. Māhea further emphasized the impact that this professional development had on her mentoring practice:

Being a mentor with the HELA program has *completely* changed how I approach mentoring with students. I've learned that as a mentor, it is important to show your students who you are and share with them what you have been through. It's our storytelling and sharing that can refill their gas tank, provide them the extra nudge they need, or we can be the spark that lights the fire.

In other words, as we practiced being reflexive and vulnerable with each other in our professional development meetings, we could also bring this openness into our interactions with our Kānaka graduate students. For, if we hoped to encourage our Kānaka graduate students to stand firm in who they were and what they could offer the academy and our lāhui, then we needed to demonstrate that in our own actions as well.

In the end, these meetings and professional development sessions provided us HELA mentors with opportunities to sharpen our skills and to recharge ourselves. Along these lines, Coco, a faculty member in Educational Administration, reflected:

Kānaka 'Ōiwi faculty, like other Indigenous faculty and faculty of color, often carry more service responsibilities than their White counterparts. While I believe that many of us find enormous value in engaging in service activities, including mentoring, I also know that this work can be tiring too. We do these things because we care deeply about our students, and we put in a lot of time and energy because we care. However, it's important for us to recognize that we are not bottomless wells. We have to do things too that help us to fill our cups, or we

¹⁰ For more information about I Ola Lāhui, please visit <https://www.iolalahui.org/about>.

will not have anything left to give to others. That is one of the things that has been special to me as a mentor in HELA. Our mentor meetings provided space and time to reflect and recharge in ways that we don't often have access to in the academy. For me, through the mentor meetings, I felt like we recognized that we were human too and that we had a lot to process and learn so that we could take care of ourselves and serve our students the way that they deserve to be served.

Thus, the opportunities that HELA provided for mentors to participate in professional development and community building with one another served to provide some sense of respite from the demands of the academy. In this way, mentor meetings protected our time so that we could discuss and grow with regard to issues that mattered to us.

Closing Thoughts

As Kahunawai and Coco, along with Noe Goodyear-Ka'ōpua and Kapā Oliveira, asserted in a previous manuscript (Wright et al., 2019), our Kānaka 'Ōiwi students are the potential of our lāhui. Yet,

[f]or the potentiality of [their] kuleana lāhui to be realized,... Kānaka 'Ōiwi must draw connections between the knowledge, skills, and networks that they gain through college to the needs of their 'ohana and broader community (Salis Reyes, 2016). They must maintain strong senses of who they are and develop a strong sense of who they can become as leaders (Wright, 2015). (Wright et al., 2019, p. 10)

For some of our Kānaka students, this journey of learning and development stretches beyond the completion of high school or the completion of undergraduate studies. As has been revealed through our reflections, HELA fosters a supportive space in which Kānaka graduate students can develop as scholars and as leaders for our lāhui. They are practitioners and producers of knowledge who can dream of hopeful futures and work toward making them a reality. In what follows, we provide our experience-based recommendations for supporting the potential of our lāhui.

Recommendations for Policymakers and Administrators

To policymakers and university administrators, we implore you to think expansively about the educational needs and interests of Native Hawaiians. Our educational priorities cannot be limited solely to addressing educational gaps or to the PK-12 sector of education. While these areas are worthy of support, so too are aspects of education that may contribute to our capacity as a lāhui. Higher education can be impactful in preparing Native students with knowledge, skills, and networks that can be bent toward Native nation-building (Brayboy et al., 2012). As we have learned through our experiences with HELA and more broadly at UH Mānoa, graduate education, in particular, can prepare Kānaka with advanced, specialized knowledge, skills, and networks that equip Kānaka graduate students to become the emerging leaders of our lāhui. In this way, graduate education support initiatives are vital to the capacity-building of our lāhui and are well worth financial and administrative support.

Recommendations for Faculty

For faculty who mentor or aim to mentor Kānaka graduate students, we hope that you will start with recognizing that not all advisors are the same and neither are all Kānaka graduate students. This means that different Kānaka graduate students may

have different needs and interests and that what you might best be able to offer as a mentor might be different from what someone else does. That is to say that positive mentoring relationships can vary.

One important place to start with mentoring, though, is to listen to Kānaka graduate students regarding their needs and interests, including those that lie outside of academia. It is important for mentors to understand and appreciate the many kuleana that Kānaka graduate students may carry. In this way, mentors show that they care about graduate students as whole people. In doing so, they can build rich pilina with Kānaka graduate students, better understand how a students' studies fit into the broader tapestries of their lives, and provide support accordingly. By listening first, mentors can serve to create space for Kānaka graduate students to discern what it is that they want for their futures and help them plan toward those ends. This process of pilina-building and planning often also takes vulnerability on the part of mentors; it can benefit from mentors sharing who they are as whole people as well.

While mentors seek to serve students, it is important that they tend to their own needs as well. This can be done by connecting with a community of like-minded scholars and engaging in their own learning and professional development.

Recommendations for Kānaka Graduate Students

For our Kānaka graduate students, our hope is for you to believe in yourselves and what you can do. Along these lines, Kahunawai shared:

I feel like the one piece of advice I would share with our Kānaka is that we belong in higher education. Our kūpuna (elders and ancestors) were amazing scholars, and we continue to have this rich, robust, and brilliant mo'okū'auhau (genealogy, lineage) of scholars. Our students are part of this legacy, and they have to think about themselves as integral and important parts of this legacy for our kūpuna and our mamo (descendants). So, quit feeling like "imposters" and ho'okō (fulfill) your kuleana.

To this, Ku'ulei added:

[E] ho'omau, ho'opa'a (persevere and remain steadfast). I would like to encourage my mentees that they are gifted with 'ike (knowledge) and skills that are unique and can support the lāhui. Their contribution to the scholarship from a Native Hawaiian's point of view is vital in elevating the lāhui. When it seems that higher education "systems" are unsupportive, I'd like my mentees to believe that the talent that they bring to education is unique and cannot be replaced.

In short, to our Kānaka graduate students, we hope for you to believe in yourself and what you bring both to academia and to our lāhui, but also to know that you are not alone. Take your 'ohana and your community along with you on your educational journey. And, as intersectionality scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (2024) recently advised Black women to do in academia, "Find your people." In other words, find mentors and peers in your institution and beyond who value you as you are and yet also encourage you to grow and develop. Draw on your na'au and your pilina, past, present, and future, as sources of strength, even when your academic programs and disciplines can sometimes feel isolating and marginalizing. Ask questions and utilize all resources available to you to navigate your path. Through it all, dream. Dream the futures you

would like to see for yourself, for your 'ohana, and for our lāhui. Let those dreams guide you in the preparations that you make today. Now is the time to thatch your hale (house).

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