Ka Lei o ka Lanakila: A Letter to the Potential of Our Lāhui

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Higher education has been linked to a host of positive outcomes. While neoliberal discourses emphasize career preparation and monetary gains that may lead to individual upward social mobility (Cantwell & Kauppinen, 2014), other scholars have highlighted how higher education may contribute more to communal or societal benefits. Among Indigenous peoples and Native Hawaiians in particular, higher education has been identified as essential for increasing capacities for nation-building, or kuleana lāhui (Brayboy, Fann, Castagno, & Solyom, 2012; Wright & Balutski, 2016; Salis Reyes, 2017; Wright, 2018). For the potentiality of this kuleana lāhui to be realized, however, Kānaka ʻŌiwi must draw connections between the knowledge, skills, and networks that they gain through college to the needs of their ʻohana 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).

Recently, we (the authors of this piece) came together to discuss our own pathways into the academy and senses of kuleana given our identities as Kānaka women faculty. Through dialogue, we have come to understand our kuleana for creating, supporting, and protecting the potential of our lāhui in higher education. Learning from the example of Haumea, we see “the importance of constructing and consecrating spaces, through our relationships with lands and people, for potential to fully unfurl” (Salis Reyes & Wright, forthcoming).

With the focus of this special issue on Native Hawaiian well-being in mind, we reach out to and lift up our Kānaka college students in what follows. Building from themes uncovered through our dialogue and also supported through research, we write to our Kānaka students to take care of themselves through their higher education journeys and to know that we are with them.

MAI KA PIʻI A KA LĀ I HAʻEHAʻE A I KA MOLE ʻOLU O LEHUA, ALOHA MAI KĀKOU E NĀ MAMO KAMAHAʻO O HĀLOA Aloha mai! We want you to know that we are so proud of you and we are here for you. Your presence in higher education is an important testament to your excellence and resilience; it is also important to creating a Hawaiian place of learning in the University of Hawaiʻi system, a significant kuleana for our public institutions of higher education.

However, from our perspective as kumu, it is the potential each and every one of you hold in your naʻau to discover and enact your kuleana that is paramount for us. Your potential is your greatest asset if well-tended; potential gives us hope. And you, dear one, are integral to our being hopeful for the future of our lāhui and Hawaiʻi. Like Ka Hei a Haumea, or the net that Haumea sews to harness mana, your potential can be used to harness the richness of the University of Hawaiʻi. Alternatively, this hei can also entangle, ensnare, or let your potential slip away. Therefore part of our kuleana to you is to help you care for your hei, adjusting or repairing it when necessary, as well as to navigate the waters as you enter or continue on this journey through higher education. You have important work to do!

As you may well know from your experience or the experiences of your ʻohana, education can be a difficult place to feel successful. College may magnify these feelings, especially at larger campuses. It can feel impersonal, uncaring, and confusing. Yet, it can also be a place for tremendous growth, exploration, and transformation. It is in this aspirational spirit of minding your net and helping others to mind theirs, that we use our own experiences as former students and now teachers and researchers, as well as our ʻike kūpuna, to offer you but one map to help guide you through higher education.
BELIEVE IN YOUR OWN VALUE AND POTENTIAL

Unfortunately, in both implicit and explicit ways, we as Native Hawaiians have been told that we are not capable of knowledge production. As a result, many in our families and communities have been made to feel that we do not belong in western-style educational spaces, such as schools and universities and we have nothing substantial to offer within these spaces. We’ve seen that, for many of our students, messages like these have planted within them seeds of self-doubt that are difficult to shake. However, we are here to tell you that you belong here and that you are highly capable of being powerful learners and producers of knowledge. You have so much to offer. As our kūpuna said, “Ua lehulehu a manomano ka ʻikena a ka Hawaiʻi” (great and numerous is the knowledge of Hawaiians) (Pukui, 1983, ŌN 2814).

PARTICIPATE IN ACTIVATING EXPERIENCES

Higher education can be an ‘āina momona, a place of abundance. In the University of Hawai‘i, our campuses are full of opportunities, particularly for Kānaka ʻŌiwi students, to participate in higher education. Decades of research show that the more students engage in their college journeys, through participation in student government, cultural centers, or even intramural sports, the more likely they are to stay in school. So we encourage you to enthusiastically identify these opportunities to explore your interests; connect with peers, faculty, and staff; and make new discoveries about yourself and your community. Moreover, there are spaces and services designed to support your college journey and Kanaka identity through what we’ve come to think of as culturally conscious support services, where culture and academics are parts of the same whole. Culture is a rigorous endeavor and relevant to all aspects of life, including college-going. This mana’o can be encapsulated in the ʻōlelo noʻeau, “Ma ka hana ka ‘ike” (in doing or working one understands) (Pukui, 1983, ŌN 2088).

FIND YOUR EDUCATIONAL ‘AUMĀKUA

For generations, our ʻohana have been guided by our ʻaumākua. ʻAumākua are our guardians, our kahu, who come to us in various forms. So their kuleana is to guide us especially in times of uncertainty and doubt. In college, you’ll undoubtedly feel discouraged or find yourself in need of guidance. Thus, finding academic ʻaumākua, or mentors, is essential to help you along your college journey. Our kūpuna say, “ʻAno lani; ʻano honua” (a heavenly nature; an earthly nature) (Pukui, 1983, ŌN 119) to encourage us to be makaʻala identifying these special folks. Use your observational skills to identify traits and characteristics you admire. Use your relationships to ask for recommendations and feedback. Use your naʻau to guide you in the right direction to cultivate and tend to these precious relationships.

REMEMBER THE BIG PICTURE

Our kūpuna survived untold atrocities to bring us here today. So when you’re feeling down, first remember to ask for help. There are several places offering support like Native Hawaiian student centers, your peers, trusted faculty, and student affairs professionals (e.g., advisors, health care professionals). Second, remember you’re part of an ever-expanding constellation of Kānaka traversing higher education as students and professionals, all endeavoring to succeed in a place not created for our people. Yet, we continue to make strides, transforming ourselves, our ʻohana, our communities, and our lāhui on a daily basis. Our kūpuna were noted for their keen powers of observation, critical to understanding the ways in which each part of their lives influenced the whole. They’d say, “ʻIke i ke au nui me ke au iki” (know the big and little currents) (Pukui, 1983, ŌN 1209). Thus, part of identifying the relationship of your potential to your kuleana is to also overlay it with the health and well-being of our lāhui. You play an essential role in building a vibrant and dynamic lāhui.

TRUST YOUR NAʻAU

It seems that western-style educational spaces often tend to emphasize certain ways of knowing. They suggest that we only know through our heads, through “rational” thought. However, Kanaka scholar Manulani Meyer (2003) has argued that this entails only a limited view of knowledge. We also know through our naʻau. Trust that knowing. There will be times when you will not be able to foresee or to plan for what lies ahead. There will be times when unexpected windows of opportunity open. And, there will be times when you will reach what seem to be crossroads. When you reach these points, reflect carefully then trust and follow what feels right. Your naʻau will lead you to where you are meant to go and, through that process, your path in life, your kuleana, will become more and more clear.
We wish you well along your college journey and hope that you find strength and knowledge along the way. As we said before, we are proud of you and we are here for you. We do our work in the academy because you, as the hope and potential of our lāhui, are worth it. This is only the beginning.

Me ke aloha,
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REFERENCES
Nuʻuhiwa, Kalei. 2012. HAUMEA - Establishing Sacred Space, Female Ceremonies, and Heiau. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z8x7dpp3IME

ENDNOTES
1 Kalei Nuʻuhiwa, HAUMEA - Establishing Sacred Space, Female Ceremonies and Heiau, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z8x7dpp3IME