

# 14 YEARS LATER

## Project Ho'oku'i's Impact on Hawai'i's Students

*39th Pacific Rim International Conference on Disability and Diversity*



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*Photo (left to right) Dr. Caryl Hitchcock, Lisa Uyehara, & Dr. Kelly Roberts.*

On February 28, 2024, three senior faculty, Lisa Uyehara, Caryl Hitchcock, and Kelly Roberts presented at the 39th annual Pacific Rim International Conference on Disability and Diversity. Uyehara, Hitchcock, and Roberts took a linear approach from when the project began in 2009 until the current time, and what lies ahead. Roberts, a former CDS Professor, is currently the Director of the Institute for Human Development at Northern Arizona University, and the founding principal investigator of Project Ho'oku'i. Roberts discussed why the project was started and the original intervention to support Native Hawaiian *na haumana* (students),

who are often first-generation college bound in their families. She was the principal investigator during the second iteration also, and expanded the project to include the islands of Maui, Hawai'i, Lānai, Moloka'i, and O'ahu.

## In 2017,

*Uyehara became the principal investigator and added the island of Kaua'i, making the project statewide.*

As a graduate (student) assistant under the tutelage of Dr. Robert Stodden, founder of the Center on Disability Studies, it bothered her that when research projects ended, there was also a sudden halt to the research and progress made during the project. This fact was the catalyst that motivated Uyehara to write Project Ho'oku'i III: Na Kumu Alaka'i with a "train the trainer" intervention for Hawai'i Department of Education (HIDOE) high school teachers and counselors. Under project staff, teachers were trained through modules that changed monthly on how to prepare Native Hawaiian students for college utilizing the original intervention model and new curriculum that connected Native Hawaiian values, culture, and activities to academic subjects and college preparation.



*Lisa Uyehara presenting.*



*Photo: Ho'oku'i Team & Educators*

A PDE 3 class was also offered for HIDOE teachers to earn professional development credits for promotion. At this time the project was closely aligned with HIDOE's *Nā Hopena A'o* and Uyehara partnered with Hawai'inuiākea, School of Hawaiian Knowledge at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, directly working with Native Hawaiian Student Services.

Project Ho'oku'i continued to evolve, and in 2018, under Uyehara, Project Ho'oku'i IV: 'Ohana Lōkahi, was developed to include na haumana, teachers, and families. At this time, Hitchcock, a curriculum developer, and trainer in family engagement, with a strong background in psychology and a Ph.D. in education, developed the family engagement curriculum.

Continuing to utilize the original intervention model developed by Roberts, we trained families, HIDOE faculty, and na haumana through the module system via Zoom and utilizing Slack, a technology tool, to communicate with all involved statewide. The modules changed every six weeks and focused on five critical areas aligned with HIDOE's Nā Hopena A'ō framework. The five critical areas included: college preparation, nutrition, well-being (physical and mental), *Kanaka Maoli* (Native Hawaiian) culture, and family engagement.

Throughout the program the theme would change per module cycle, and consistently cover the five critical areas. Activities encouraged parents and their *nā keiki* (children) to engage with each other and open "academic conversations" for their keiki's future goals and plans. *Ha'awina* (homework) was collected at the end of each cycle. By meeting once through Zoom per cycle, families, students, project staff, and high school faculty were able to connect and share their *mana'o* (opinion) and learning, and ask questions.



Photo: Three students in cultural practice.

## New Era of Growth



Photo: students exploring culture significance.

Throughout her experience as principal investigator during iterations III and IV, Uyehara realized that she was leaving out a demographic of the Native Hawaiian student population – gifted and talented students. Gifted and talented students often get overlooked in the classroom because of their grades. Continuing to serve at-risk, and students with disabilities, she developed a new component to the project, understanding and supporting the unique needs of gifted Native Hawaiian students that often suffer from cultural dissonance navigating back and forth from home to school and back home to their community.

Uyehara started small, with Project Ho'oku'i V: Kūlia i ka Nu'u, by offering 10 competitive scholarships and mentoring to high school students to begin their first semester at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. She also increased the number of college classes project students could take in a semester during high school.

**As a result, in 2022, 14 high school students received their associate degrees prior to finishing high school. At the date of this publication, in May 2024, another 13 Farrington High School students will receive their A.A. degrees prior to graduating from high school. However, we anticipate more students will achieve this accomplishment from other project high schools as well.**



*Photos - four student graduation ceremonies across the state.*

Project Ho'okui VI: E Ho'omau was funded at the end of 2023. The project will continue the original intervention, serving the same demographics of at-risk, students with disabilities, and Native Hawaiian students, but expand the gifted and talented student supports. Recognizing not all students want to enter a four-year university and due to the serious lack of skilled employees in Hawai'i, the post high school competitive scholarship, will be offered on a limited basis at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, the University of Hawai'i at Hilo, and all University of Hawai'i community college career, technical education (CTE) programs.

On the evolution of Project Ho'oku'i, the original principal investigator, Kelly Roberts said, "It is rewarding to see the progression of the project from the initial focus on students and their Ohana to being inclusive of educators and the community. The increase of Hawaiian students engaging in early college experiences has been extensive over the past decade and Ho'oku'i has been instrumental in facilitating and supporting this growth."