

Youth Voice Hawai'i

Executive Summary: Year 2 Findings

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Prepared for:



Founded in 1962, the Harold K.L. Castle Foundation works to build resources for Hawai'i's future. We do so by investing in promising initiatives and organizations through grantmaking, using our convening power, and introducing and spreading new ideas and approaches to help solve some of Hawai'i's most pressing problems.

Prepared by:



Learning for Action's (LFA) mission is to partner with social sector organizations to strengthen their learning culture and practice in service of equity and justice. Since our start in 2000, we have engaged with hundreds of organizations across the United States and internationally to collect and interpret the data they need to design and implement strategies that achieve their desired impact.

The Harold K.L. Castle Foundation is committed to supporting Hawai'i's youth to fulfill their most ambitious dreams. In Hawai'i, many key institutions, community organizations, and people are devoting time, talent, and resources toward supporting student success. While a lot is known about how students are faring along college and career pathways (based on measures such as K-12 academic performance, high school graduation, and college enrollment and completion), these data do not tell the full story of the student experience, and what is supporting or getting in the way of success. Understanding the student experience, as well as the attitudes, values, and beliefs they hold about college and career, is critical to understanding what's working well, and what else is needed to better support student success. To this end, the Foundation has made a multi-year investment to deepen the field's understanding of the student experience to inform practice and policy at the school and system levels. This executive summary presents findings from the second year of this study, primarily focused on understanding the perspectives and experiences of high school students as they plan for their postsecondary pathways.*

Methods

The findings of this summary are based on qualitative data collected from youth and adult stakeholders. We conducted focus groups with **69 students from six DOE public high schools** and **interviews with seven adult stakeholders from four of those schools and three community-based organizations**. In addition, prior to collecting these data, a group of **13 students** were convened to inform our approach to the student focus groups.

Student focus group participants were predominantly (72%) in their junior and senior year of high school. More than half (57%) identified as young women and about one third (35%) identified as young men. Participants largely reflected Hawai'i's racial and ethnic diversity. Nearly half (42%) identified as more than one race or ethnicity. The three largest groups were Asian/Asian American (78%), White/Caucasian (30%), and Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander (28%).

We share more details about the research questions, participants, and our approach to the research in the **Approach and Methods section**, in the Appendix of the full report.

This research focuses on qualitative data, which is useful for understanding *why* and *how* people think about and experience different things. Focus groups are particularly useful for creating space for participants to learn from and build on what others share, generating new and different ideas. One limitation of qualitative research is that - while it is designed to surface useful insights, themes, and ideas - results cannot necessarily be generalized to a larger population (e.g., we can't infer that *all* students in a certain demographic group or in Hawai'i share the same opinions or experiences).

*The Year One report (2022) can be found [here](#).

Vision for Student Success

The Castle Foundation, the Hawai'i Department of Education (HIDOE), Hawai'i P-20, high school staff, community-based organization partners, and high school students themselves all want students to succeed after they leave high school. But what does the vision for student success look like? At the highest level, the vision is inclusive of both professional and personal aspirations, including:

- the ability to provide for oneself and their family
- a stable and meaningful career at which they excel
- the potential to help others and impact their community
- the chance to maintain their strong connection to Hawai'i and the land
- happiness, self pride, growth, and balance

Several students spoke of a profound **connection to their community and to Hawai'i**, so much so that they can't imagine leaving. If they can, it is as a temporary departure with an inevitable return, or a forced departure due to gentrification, the high cost of living, and a lack of opportunity. Students in Hawai'i hold a deep value of responsibility to one's community, to support the people and place one comes from. This manifests into different visions for students. For some, it's about finding a career that allows them to give back, like being a teacher, a nurse or doctor, a lawyer, or an agricultural scientist. For others, it just means being able to stay in Hawai'i and finding a way to not have to leave.

In the near term, many students' visions begin with **college** (100% of the students we spoke with this year are considering college after high school as one option). Students noted that their attention is likely focused on college because that is what their schools, families, and society promotes, but in general many students see college as the means to achieve their goals of financial independence and a promising career. Notably, among the students we spoke with, there is a clear **preference to attend a 4-year university**. And for half of the students, they would ideally like to **attend college in the continental US**. Many students noted that standard ideals for success are attached to these very specific first steps - if you really want to "make something of yourself" and make your family proud, you need to attend a 4-year university, and even better if it's in the continental US.

There is a large percentage of students who are also considering **getting a job** directly after high school (75% of students*). These students want to earn money to be able to support themselves and their families and/or they want to stay close to their home and community. Others spoke of it as a way to eventually attend college. They feel they need to work for a year or two and save up money for college.

*Students were allowed to select multiple options they are considering after high school, therefore the sum of percentages is greater than 100%.

Vision for Student Success

Going to college and completing a degree provides more job opportunities, higher earnings, and greater job security. [According to US Census data](#), Hawai'i residents with bachelor's degrees earn \$27,000 more annually than those with only a high school diploma, and are less than half as likely to be unemployed. Many students, their families, and system partners (including HDOE, Hawai'i P20, and the Castle Foundation) are focused on supporting students to attend college as a primary means of achieving their goals. There are also opportunities to find a stable and meaningful career without a bachelor's degree – [workforce projections](#) for 2020 and beyond indicate substantial growth in Hawai'i jobs requiring at least some college (65% of jobs in 2020), with more than 30% of jobs attainable with an industry-recognized credential, postsecondary certificate, or associate degree.

However, for all of the students who do aspire to go to college, we know that only [51%](#) of Hawai'i high school graduates enroll.* The early years of the COVID-19 pandemic saw declining enrollment rate in 2-year colleges (from 19% to 17% between Fall 2020 and 2021) and declining [enrollment rates](#) for specific groups of students such as Native Hawaiians, Pacific Islanders, and economically disadvantaged students. We know that the cost of college is one significant barrier for many of these students. Student loans are needed for many students to be able to earn a bachelor's degree – for example, [72%](#) of Native Hawaiians and [56%](#) of all other students take out education-related loans.

In order for students to achieve their greatest aspirations, they need to be aware of the multiple pathways to success, inclusive of, but not limited to, attending a 4-year university. The students we spoke with noted that they hear strong messages that equate success with attending a 4-year university in the continental US, and sense some stigma around other potential postsecondary pathways. Many feel anxiety related to whether attending a 4-year university is a viable path for them that also aligns with their values, goals, and available resources. If students are to achieve their most ambitious dreams, they need support to understand and explore the many postsecondary pathways available to them, and they need practical and emotional support and resources to reach whichever they are interested in. Ultimately, we want students to be able to make their own choices about their futures, aligned with their values and priorities.

Summary of Findings

Our research revealed opportunities to better support students to achieve success in three main areas: **Improving Postsecondary Exploration and Planning; Supporting College-Going Aspirations; and Bolstering Use of Existing Resources.**

In each area, we summarize

- *The Vision*: What it would look like to effectively serve students
- **Key Context**: What we heard is happening within the system
- **Promising Practices**: Examples of what is working well in some schools
- **Opportunities for Growth**: Places for system partners, school leaders, supporting community-based organizations, and others to focus their attention when thinking about making changes

For greater detail, we encourage readers to review the [full report](#).

*As compared to 62.7% nationwide in 2020. <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/hsgec.nr0.htm> Undergraduate enrollment declined an additional 4.2% between 2020 and 2022. <https://nscresearchcenter.org/stay-informed/>

Summary of Findings



Improving Postsecondary Exploration and Planning

Vision: All students explore a range of potential postsecondary options throughout their high school years.

Key context: Students experience mixed feelings, tensions, hopes, and fears when it comes to discussing their future. To ensure students can make choices about their future that are right for them, they need (1) more tactical support in navigating the range of postsecondary options and (2) more emotional support and skill building to build their ability and confidence to determine their own future pathways.

Promising Practices

- Hands-on learning opportunities allow students to explore different potential pathways.
- Students are exposed to and have the opportunity to explore different options through trusted relationships.
- Students receive support that nurtures their emotional growth.

Opportunities for growth

- Students need more varied, hands-on learning experiences that center ‘āina-based educational practices.
- Students need more guidance and information to understand and explore non-college pathways.
- Students need more emotional support in general, and specifically in the context of planning for the future.



Supporting College-Going Aspirations

Vision: All students have the resources and support to explore and consider college as part of their postsecondary plans.

Key context: While many students aspire to attend college, there are systemic issues that limit schools’ ability to foster and support students’ college-going aspirations. Specific populations of students (those who would be the first in their family to attend college, live in rural areas, are economically disadvantaged, or who identify as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander) need more guidance and tactical support than they are receiving, and narrow ideas of what success is or what students “should” do after high school can limit the scope of what students pursue, or leave students struggling to reconcile personal, cultural, and financial needs.

Promising Practices

- Direct exposure enables students to envision themselves in college.
- Students find value in hearing and learning from those closest to the college experience.
- Individualized approaches give students access to guidance tailored to their unique needs.

Opportunities for growth

- Targeted interventions and deliberate approaches to engagement are needed for specific populations of students.
- To cultivate a college-going culture, schools should expand definitions of what college success looks like and actively work to disrupt narratives about who can and cannot succeed in college.
- Graduating students need mentorship support in the summer following their senior year.
- Students need more opportunities that enable them to envision themselves in college.



Bolstering Use of Existing Resources

Vision: All students are aware of and utilize the available resources geared towards supporting postsecondary plans.

Key context: Students often spoke about the extensive and meaningful resources, relationships, and opportunities their school provides. Yet, it is also clear that valuable resources and guidance are not reaching all students. Conversations with students and staff revealed that students are often unaware of the resources available to them, and awareness of resources does not always translate to utilization.

Promising Practices

- School staff are considering the medium and the messenger when communicating with students, and exploring creative options.
- Schools recognize the importance of family support and engagement as students plan for their futures.
- Putting opportunities and counselors directly in front of students in their classrooms has increased awareness and broken down barriers.
- Schools have dedicated class periods in which students are guided to explore their college and other postsecondary interests.

Opportunities for growth

- Students cite the need for diverse communication methods.
- Schools should leverage the voices of trusted messengers to communicate valuable information to students.
- Students need built-in time and space to be oriented to these resources and support to interact with them.
- Inclusive messaging and intentional outreach can counterbalance negative narratives.



Recommendations for System Partners

These recommendations are designed to provide concrete suggestions for those with decision-making power and influence at the system level, including school district officials, funders, policy/advocacy groups, and others invested in the educational landscape in Hawai'i to consider.

For all of the following recommendations, the focus should be on those students who experience the greatest barriers to identifying and pursuing a postsecondary plan. This includes students who will be the first in their family to attend college, live in rural communities, those who are Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, and those who are economically disadvantaged. Additionally, when developing and implementing interventions and approaches to support students, it will be important to leverage existing relationships with trusted adults and peers, including parents/caregivers, community-based organization staff, school staff, and fellow students.

- **Strengthen the utilization of and supports for Personal Transition Plans.** We recommend implementing stronger guidance and accountability structures to ensure students receive the recommended and ongoing support outlined by HDOE in grades 9-12.
- **Increase funding to support college-planning activities.** Direct exposure (e.g. campus visits) is the best way for students to “try on” the idea of attending college, and to learn about the colleges that they’re considering.
- **Integrate postsecondary planning into the curriculum, across the state.** This could include requiring that schools offer a postsecondary planning course, or a series of workshops that could be woven into an existing course. Students need dedicated time, information, and multimodal learning opportunities to explore both college and non-college pathways.
- **Integrate SEL into the curriculum, across the state.** Integrating an SEL-based curriculum may be one approach to support students with fostering self-awareness, self-management, decision-making, and other foundational skills.
- **Increase resources for school counseling in order to provide a smaller counselor-to-student ratio.** A smaller caseload would ensure counselors can develop relationships with each of their students, and have in-depth conversations about students’ interests, hopes, goals, concerns, and obstacles.
- **Equip every high school with at least one dedicated, year-round college counselor.** We encourage the state to develop a clear job description for the college counselor role, reclassify this role to a 12-month position, and structure the role such that counselors spend at least 80% of their time on direct and indirect student services.
- **Continue to strengthen students’ full network of support.** We recommend continued investment in a range of approaches to supporting students, including peer mentorship models and family engagement initiatives.