

Youth Voice Hawai'i

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 report 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 report 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**, Appendix.

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 HIDOE, 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.

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

Roadmap: What you will find in this report

In this report, we present themes and findings from our conversations with 69 students from six schools on three islands (Hawai'i, Oahu, and Kauai); and interviews with seven adult stakeholders from four schools and three community organizations.

Our research revealed opportunities to better support students to achieve success in **three main areas** that we explore further in the following pages:

1. **Improving Postsecondary Exploration and Planning;**
2. **Supporting College-Going Aspirations;** and
3. **Bolstering Use of Existing Resources.**

In each of the areas, we describe the following:

- Our **vision** for this area - i.e. what would it look like to effectively serve students in this area;
- The **current context** - what we heard is happening in the system currently;
- **Promising practices** - examples of what is working well in some schools; and
- **Opportunities for growth** - places for system partners, school leaders, supporting community-based organizations, and others to focus their attention when thinking about making changes.

In pages 19-23, we offer our **Recommendations for System Partners** and those with decision-making power and influence at the system level. 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. School leaders (principals, teachers, counseling staff, etc.) may find these recommendations to be informative as well, though they are intended for those with most decision-making and financial power to implement system-wide changes that will benefit all schools. We hope that the findings in this report inform conversations and spark ideas about how to achieve the shared vision of student success.

System Opportunities

Improving Postsecondary Exploration and Planning

Supporting College Going Aspirations

Bolstering Use of Existing Resources



Improving Postsecondary Exploration and Planning



*"I'm in the construction pathway and in that class we do a lot of presentations about careers we want to do and we have to research what it takes to work in that career, like how long you have to go to school. And **that opened up my mind to what careers I want to take.**"*

- Student

*"At the end of the day, we tell the kids - if you realize that you want to be a nurse instead of an accountant, you can do that. It's kind of like sampling. **Instead of sampling in college, you can sample in high school.**"*

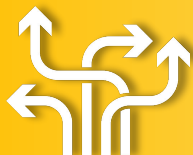
- School Staff

"Kids are coming out of high school with certain beliefs about themselves - 'I'm not smart enough. That's not for me.' Believing things about themselves that are not true."

- Community Organization Staff



Improving Postsecondary Exploration & Planning



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

Current Context

When discussing their future, many students seem to have a clear idea of the type of postsecondary pathways they would like to pursue, and they also report feeling a range of emotions about the future.

- Some students **feel intrigued and excited by the prospect of new opportunities and experiences** like attending college and/or moving to the continental US could provide.
- Some students **feel pressure from family, friends, and school staff to pursue a specific path** (e.g., attend a 4-year university, pursue a certain kind of career, or help support their family).
- Some students **feel pressure to decide their future path NOW** and that they do not have the time to explore a range of college and career options that could match their unique interests and skills, or are unaware of the opportunities to do so.
- Half of the students we spoke with feel “a little” or “somewhat” **confident they can achieve their future goals**, and half feel “very” or “extremely” confident they can.*

The mixed feelings, tensions, hopes, and fears that students are grappling with fall within two key areas of support in improving students’ postsecondary exploration and planning:

- **Students need more tactical support in navigating the range of postsecondary options.** Some students expressed difficulty with making decisions about their future. They need greater support in navigating the universe of available pathways and more opportunities to gain practical experience in those areas earlier in their high school career.
- **Students need more emotional support and skill building.** Staff named lack of confidence as a huge barrier, especially for students who would be the first in their family to attend college. They need the time, confidence, and encouragement to determine and pursue what is right for them, and the appropriate language skills to have these conversations about their future.

*In a short survey, students were asked to rate their confidence in their ability to achieve their future goals. This question will be asked each year of students to be able to measure any change in confidence year to year.

Promising Practices

Students and staff pointed to bright spots within their schools. Though specific approaches vary, these practices have worked well to support postsecondary exploration and planning.

- **Hands-on learning opportunities allow students to explore different potential pathways.** Some students attending Career Academy schools cite this as one of the biggest benefits of the model. The exposure, structure, and real-world relevance help students feel prepared and confident in pursuing their particular career path.
- **Students are exposed to and have the opportunity to explore different options through trusted relationships.** Students we spoke to noted that counselors are a key source of information about various options for postsecondary pathways (e.g. college, trade schools, technical certification programs, etc.). In some schools, counselors provide one-on-one support for students and are able to build a real connection and sense of trust with students. They feel these adults care about them and their future, and so they may be more receptive to their guidance. Many students are also learning about different postsecondary options from trusted friends, family, and community organizations who can provide them with other learning opportunities (including jobs, volunteer opportunities, and mentorship).
- **Students receive support that nurtures their emotional growth.** One school implemented a program that aims to support students' social and emotional learning (SEL), in which a counselor prepares SEL lessons for teachers to do during homeroom 3-5 times per week to help students build confidence in their ability to set goals and make decisions about their future that are right for them. Additionally, one staff member at a community organization spoke to how their program supports students to build basic life skills, like public speaking, in order to help build self-esteem and social competence.


Opportunities for Growth

Students and staff were asked what support youth need in achieving their goals, including changes to existing approaches and new opportunities they recommend. Their responses inform the following areas for growth.

- **Students need more varied, hands-on learning experiences that center ‘āina-based educational practices.** Students and staff shared that learning experiences should focus on the community, the environment, integrate Native Hawaiian culture more, and take place in and outside of the classroom. For example, the Future Farmers of America program is popular with students, but they wish it was more specific to Hawai‘i and Hawaiian plant life. Furthermore, staff shared that multimodal learning opportunities are important to reach students who learn best outside of the classroom. These types of experiences help students see learning as relevant to their lives, and may enable them to envision themselves in future career paths.
- **Students need more guidance and information to understand and explore non-college pathways.** Many students spoke about college attendance as the prevailing focus of resources and messaging at their schools, and that they desired more focus on careers and transition plans for non-traditional pathways. Staff suggested there should be a specific counselor for students interested in learning a trade or other alternatives to a 4-year college. Without balance in the resources and guidance offered, it is difficult for students to explore and develop clear plans that do not involve college.
- **Students need more emotional support in general, and specifically in the context of planning for the future.** Students and staff emphasized that conversations with students about their postsecondary plans need to address how students feel about the future, and ways for students to honor their values in the choices they make about their lives, not just the logistics around planning for specific pathways.
 - The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the mental health of young students, a point that was mentioned by several students and underscores the need for dedicated mental health resources for students. Some students who started high school during the pandemic also expressed feeling a lack of empathy and support from school staff. These students felt that some staff didn’t understand the unique difficulty posed by transitioning back to “normal” learning and engagement for students with no reference of what this looked like prior to COVID.
 - Staff highlighted the need for more social-emotional support and skill-building to help students build the self-awareness and self-management skills required to succeed beyond high school. These basic life skills are an integral part of students tapping into their internal motivation and self-confidence to make decisions about which postsecondary pathways they would like to pursue.



Supporting College-Going Aspirations

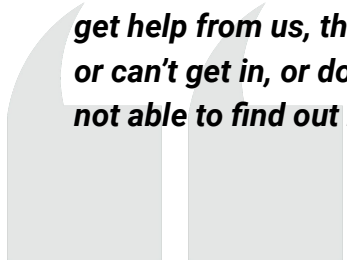


"My whole family hasn't gone to college. I don't know where to start cause they don't. I have had to pave my own path. [It's] hard without guidance."

- Student

"[We want to support] the type of students that aren't as strong academically and aren't aware of other options for college where they could do more hands-on training. They just think of college as math and all that. They lack awareness of other college options."

- School counselor



"There is a group that could have gone [to college] and just weren't informed enough about the eligibility in the process and weren't able to get themselves the help they needed. Maybe first gen. college students. If they don't come in and get help from us, they may feel like they can't go or can't get in, or don't have the GPA. [They are] not able to find out how eligible they are."

- School Staff

Supporting College-Going Aspirations



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

Current Context

High school students have a range of feelings and expectations about college:

- Many students **see college as a launchpad** for them to pursue a diverse range of career pathways that align with their dreams. All the students we spoke to are considering college among their postsecondary options.
- Many students are **eager to attend a school in the continental US**, which they see as an opportunity to travel and broaden their experiences, while also accessing a larger range of academic programs. Others **plan to stay closer to home**, their families, and communities.
- Despite general enthusiasm for college, it is clear through the data and conversations with school staff, that **interest in college does not always equate to enrollment**.

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 need more guidance and tactical support than they are receiving.** Conversations with students and school staff point to gaps in support for students who are the first generation in their family to go to college, and those living in rural areas. College enrollment data for Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, and economically disadvantaged students indicates these groups also need more help. These students may have fewer resources or guidance outside of school to assist with the steps necessary to prepare for and apply to college. Many students we spoke with who identified themselves as the first in their family to attend college shared that they often feel they do not know where to start with seeking support and resources. When school staff are stretched thin, they may focus their energy on students who show a lot of interest in college and have strong academic credentials, rather than on students who are less certain and confident about their plans - those most in need of relationship-based support.
- **Narratives about college can limit the pathways students pursue.** Some students believe that attending a 4-year university in the continental US is the only way to be successful, yet they may struggle with the financial, cultural, and personal implications of leaving Hawai'i. Many students discount community colleges due to stigma. Some schools focus on promoting vocational routes, which can contribute to beliefs that college is not for everyone. These limiting ideas of what success is or what students "should" do after high school can narrow the scope of what students pursue, or leave students grappling to navigate internal tensions.

Promising Practices

Students and staff pointed to bright spots within their schools. Though specific approaches vary, these practices contribute to students' college-going aspirations.

- **Direct exposure enables students to envision themselves in college.** Students are especially eager to learn about college opportunities through college fairs and field trips to college campuses. One school staff member spoke about how programs like Upward Bound not only support college preparation and skill building, but provide opportunities for students to stay in college dorms over the summer, which adds to their ability to see themselves on campus.
- **Students find value in hearing and learning from those closest to the college experience.** College-oriented peer mentor programs create an opportunity for students to get support from peers to complete college planning tasks. For many students, peer-to-peer connections offer a comfortable option for asking questions or sharing their doubts and concerns. Peer mentorship models have had the added benefit of supporting high school counselors in reaching more students. Students also spoke about the benefits of hearing from recent high school graduates and alumni. These interactions help them understand the challenges and benefits of college and see young adults like themselves in higher education.
- **Individualized approaches give students access to guidance tailored to their unique needs.** In some schools, college counselors meet with every 12th grade student individually to provide support to explore their college-related interests and identify concrete next steps to take. College counselors noted that they would like to start these conversations earlier, but they often only have capacity to focus on 12th grade students.

Opportunities for Growth

Students and staff were asked what support youth need in achieving their goals, including changes to existing approaches and new opportunities they recommend. Their responses inform the following areas for growth.

- **Targeted interventions and deliberate approaches to engagement are needed for specific populations of students.** Student and staff feedback made clear that efforts to support students should center the needs of students who experience greater barriers to applying, enrolling, and persisting in college. Students who will be the first in their family to attend college, live in rural communities, are Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, and those who come from economically disadvantaged families, should be prioritized when developing engagement strategies. These students often have received messages that they are not “college material,” and need multiple touchpoints with trusted mentors to explore whether college is an option they would like to pursue, and the steps needed to follow through on their college goals.
- **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.** Students spoke of feeling constrained by the way their schools define college success. In schools where there is already a strong emphasis on applying to college, staff should examine the degree to which one type of college path (4-year vs. community college, local vs. continental US) is emphasized in the resources and supports provided. In particular, schools should consider how they engage and advise students from groups that have low college enrollment rates. Showcasing different examples of paths to stability and security through college could help students see a college-going future that fits their needs and interests.
- **Graduating students need mentorship support in the summer following their senior year.** School counselors believe this is a pivotal time for students to maintain momentum to follow through on their college-going plans. For students who are graduating without a solid plan, ongoing support can help them get clear on next steps. This support could be accomplished, in part, through changes to the terms of college counselor positions.
- **Students need more opportunities that enable them to envision themselves in college.** College fairs, college campus visits, and opportunities to hear from college students, college staff, and industry leaders have been named as valuable by students, and should be available, accessible, and encouraged for everyone, regardless of the high school they attend. Many of these opportunities could be expanded with more staff and funding.



Bolstering Use of Existing Resources

*"We wish there were more college things. A class just for college. Going to college there is so much involved and we are all doing it independently. We don't have someone telling us what we need - resumes, FAFSA - **we don't have that guidance to get us ready to apply and go.** It would be helpful to have a little bit of help."*

- Student

*"We have an advanced guidance class which talks about a lot of things for preparing for college but you only get to take it one year, one quarter. When preparing for college it's an ongoing thing throughout all of school. **Considering we're all still worrying and thinking about college, that class shouldn't be a one and done kind of thing. It's something we probably need more of.**"*

- Student

*"Our school offers a lot, and **for those that are putting in the effort, you're getting a lot out.** So for our school at least, it's not what's available, it's getting more people to want to put that effort in."*

- Student

*"I think with the opportunities - **there is a lot available, but not always clear what is happening when.**"*

- Student

Bolstering Use of Existing Resources



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

Current Context

When asked about how high school is preparing students for their future plans, many students 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. For example, school staff shared accounts of scholarship money that was never applied for and presentations that were not attended. Conversations with students and staff highlighted two main issues:

- **Students are often unaware of the resources available to them.** School staff and counselors struggle to find ways to effectively communicate with students and share pertinent information. Even students well-versed in campus offerings report lack of clarity around the full scope of what is available.
- **Awareness of resources does not always translate to utilization.** Many students question whether the resources provided by their school are designed or meant for them. That question serves as a barrier, particularly for students in lower grades and those who are lower academic performers. These students face challenges in accessing resources or knowing where to start. We also heard that students who do not have a relationship with their high school counselors or a sense of next steps are less likely to take initiative in seeking out resources.

Promising Practices

Students and staff pointed to bright spots within their schools. Though specific approaches vary, these practices have been effective in addressing issues of resource awareness and utilization.

- **School staff are considering the medium and the messenger when communicating with students, and exploring creative options.** In one school, texting platforms have allowed high school counselors to cut through email clutter to communicate with students directly, and without giving out their personal numbers. In some schools, older students serve as mentors to younger students, sharing strategies and advice about what worked for them.
- **Schools recognize the importance of family support and engagement as students plan for their futures.** Some schools are including parents in communications and college-related events to expand families' knowledge and ability to help their students. One school moved their college fair to the evening so families could attend with their students. Another school hosted a FAFSA night with University of Hawai'i representatives and fed all the families as a way to promote attendance. Because of that event, more families are making appointments with school staff to talk through filling out the FAFSA.
- **Putting opportunities and counselors directly in front of students in their classrooms has increased awareness and broken down barriers.** One counselor went into classrooms to talk about applying to community colleges and found some students were then more willing to come to their office to work on applications. One student said their teacher had presenters come into class to share internships, which helped all their classmates see and consider those opportunities. Engaging students in the places where they already are is an effective strategy for sharing information, particularly for students balancing many obligations outside of school and students who may be uncertain if information and resources are "for them".
- **Schools have dedicated class periods in which students are guided to explore their college and other postsecondary interests.** In these classes, students receive support with resumes, applications, college essays, financial aid, etc. Integrating college and postsecondary planning into the curriculum has been an effective way to ensure that every student has access to these resources.

Opportunities for Growth

Students and staff were asked what support youth need in achieving their goals, including changes to existing approaches and new opportunities they recommend. Their responses inform the following areas for growth.

- **Students cite the need for diverse communication methods.** In particular, students named overhead and class announcements, updated bulletin boards, texting, and social media as helpful tools for reaching more students with resources and opportunities. Students agreed that multiple approaches for communicating with students are needed to ensure messages are received.
- **Schools should leverage the voices of trusted messengers to communicate valuable information to students.** Supporting the creation and development of peer mentorship models is a valuable approach, as students said they trust those who are closer to the experience and often feel more comfortable naming fears and barriers with peers. Additionally, parents continue to play a crucial role in shaping students' goals for the future. School staff's experiences suggest that equipping parents with pertinent information and involving them as a trusted partner increases the likelihood that students will receive the resources they need.
- **Students need built-in time and space to be oriented to these resources and support to interact with them.** Structured support could take the form of a college and career-focused class or be built into existing class structures. Many students who feel confident in their college-going plans say having time set aside for planning was useful. Additionally, when student engagement with certain tools and resources is compulsory (e.g. Personal Transition Plans, digital portfolios, etc.), support should be given to students early in their high school journey and be ongoing. Students say they need consistency in what is expected of them, and regular touchpoints to ensure progress, understanding, and relevancy.
- **Inclusive messaging and intentional outreach can counterbalance negative narratives.** School staff say students need to know that resources and opportunities are meant for them, and that they have the potential to succeed in the pathways schools are sharing. Explicitly welcoming younger students to visit a high school's college and career center, inviting student-organized groups to attend a college presentation, and bringing activities into first period classrooms can expose and engage students such that they see themselves differently. This would be particularly helpful for students who experience stigma around their group's "fit" with a college path, or those without many personal connections to people who have gone to college.

Recommendations for System Partners

Recommendations for System Partners

The recommendations that follow are intended to offer concrete actions for those with decision-making power and influence at the system level, including school district officials and Board of Directors, funders, policy/advocacy groups, and others invested in the educational landscape in Hawai'i.

Overarching Principles

Two high-level themes serve as guiding principles for system partners in developing and implementing interventions and approaches to support students in preparing for postsecondary pathways.

- **Focus on the unique needs and experiences of specific populations of students.** Any efforts to support and expand access to postsecondary resources for students should **focus 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.** These students are more likely to experience barriers to planning for college and career, including lack of familiarity with college and career options (Alcantar & Hernandez, 2020), and they are more likely to be balancing financial needs to support themselves and their families (Monaghan & Attewell, 2015).
- **Leverage relationships with trusted adults and peers.** Students thrive when they have a network of connections to adults who care about them, who care about their future success, and who are equipped with resources and knowledge to help them make plans for their futures. **Parents/caregivers** need to be connected to the guidance and resources that students are offered in schools in order to be a partner in supporting students to consider their options. **School staff** need adequate time, training, and guidance to support students effectively. In addition, **relationships with staff from community-based organizations, and peer relationships** can provide valuable connections for students.

Recommendations to Strengthen Existing Strategies

Hawai'i has many existing strategies that can be modified or expanded to provide the support that high school students need as part of their postsecondary planning and transition.

- **Strengthen the utilization of and supports for Personal Transition Plans.** Although PTPs are a requirement for high school graduation in Hawai'i, students did not bring them up as a source of support or as a resource they thought about in planning for their futures. While students are awarded credit for PTP in their senior year, we recommend **implementing stronger guidance and accountability structures** for ensuring students are receiving the recommended and ongoing support outlined by HIDOE in grades 9-12.
- **Increase funding to support college-planning activities.** Direct exposure is the best way for students to “try on” the idea of attending college, and to learn about the colleges that they're considering. We heard from some school counselors that they were not able to execute plans to take students on planned college campus visits due to lack of transportation. Another powerful method for exposing students to a range of college options is to arrange **visits from current college students to their former high schools to talk about their experiences**, and to compensate these students for their time and experience.

Recommendations to Enhance Curriculum Requirements

Some schools are already demonstrating success in supporting students with postsecondary planning as part of the curriculum. To ensure that **all students** can benefit from such approaches, HDOE can provide resources, guidance, and accountability structures to support all secondary schools to integrate postsecondary planning and SEL into the curriculum.

- **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.** Some schools have already adopted this approach with success, and they could serve as an example for other schools to learn from. It is important that these courses offer a balance of information and **resources about both college and non-college pathways.** Students often feel like they are pigeon-holed into either a college or non-college track, and need **space, information, and multimodal learning opportunities to explore a range of options.** Ideally, this course would include exposure to adults working in various fields, and opportunities to try out different skill sets.
- **Integrate SEL into the curriculum, across the state.** Many students feel a lot of fear and anxiety related to postsecondary planning, which may be compounded by the effects of COVID-19 and other mental health challenges. **Integrating an SEL-based curriculum may be one approach to support students** with fostering the self-awareness, self-management, decision-making, and other foundational skills needed to achieve their goals. Hawai'i students in grades 6-12 self-report their SEL skills to be **lower than the national average**, a marked decrease compared to the SEL skills of Hawai'i elementary students ([Panorama Education, SEL Assessment](#)).

Recommendations to Activate Students' Network of Support

School staff are invaluable to students' success in postsecondary planning. And yet, school staff are perpetually stretched too thin to reach all students and provide the level of support needed. Additional school staff are needed statewide, as well as continued investment in activating students' full network of adult support.

- **Increase resources for school counseling in order to provide a smaller counselor-to-student ratio.** School counselors provide a safe space for students to access support for challenges with interpersonal relationships, academics, and mental health. This support is critical to students' ability to explore their postsecondary plans with confidence. 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. The American School Counselor Association ([ASCA](#)) recommends a ratio of 250 students per counselor.
- **Equip every high school with at least one dedicated, year-round college counselor.** It is critical for students to have access to a trained counselor who is knowledgeable about the ins and outs of the college pathway, including the range of institutions that a student might explore, the application process, and financial aid options. Students also need this person's role to be dedicated **solely to supporting them to explore and pursue college-going aspirations, including during the summers**, as this is a critical time for graduating seniors to put into action their postsecondary goals. Schools with larger student populations may need two college counselors to meet the need. To ensure that this role supports student needs more equitably across schools, we encourage the state to consider the following: **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**, per ASCA's guidance (ASCA National Model, 2019).
- **Continue to strengthen students' full network of support.** The above recommendations serve as concrete ways that schools can be supported in their work to guide students with postsecondary planning. However, we know that students benefit from a **diverse network of support**, and rely on the encouragement and guidance from a range of people in their lives, including friends, siblings, parents/caregivers, mentors, staff from community organizations, and other community members. We recommend continued investment in a range of approaches to supporting students, including **peer mentorship models** and **family engagement initiatives**. As an example, the Stupski and Harold K.L. Castle Foundations have recently made investments in college and career readiness initiatives that focus on engaging students' families and networks.

Appendix

Approach and Methods

Goals of the Research

- To better understand how students' high school experiences set them up for future success (in college or career)
- To identify what helps or gets in the way of students' future success
- To engage and amplify youth voice and experience
- To collaborate with key system partners who are positioned to advance changes needed to better support youth
- To produce timely and relevant findings that contribute to positive change in the system
- To find ways in which the research can be *most useful to users*, including youth

Research Questions

Core Question: What supports are needed for high school youth in Hawai'i to understand and navigate postsecondary pathways successfully?

1. Why has college enrollment dropped in the past couple years?
 - To what extent are high school students in Hawai'i thinking about college as a **preferred** option in their current context?
 - To what extent are high school students in Hawai'i thinking about college as a **viable** option for them?
 - What factors are most affecting students' interest and ability to pursue college?
 - For students who do *not* plan to pursue college - what are their postsecondary plans?
2. What support is needed for interested students to enroll in college?
3. What current supports/resources are working well? To what extent are supports/resources responsive to youth's evolving needs?
4. What else is needed/what opportunities are there to improve? What resources/opportunities would students design?

Data Collection Methods

The evaluation included three types of data collection:

1. **Youth Focus Groups** - 6 focus groups with 7-12 students in each, 69 students in total
2. **Interviews with School and Community Organization Staff** - seven adults from four schools and three community organizations
3. **Review of Publicly Available Data**

Youth Focus Groups were conducted because of their potential to surface deep, rich stories about students' college and career goals and their experiences trying to achieve those goals. Youth Focus Groups were conducted virtually with three schools and in-person with three schools. To supplement and triangulate the stories collected from youth, the evaluation team conducted interviews with school and community organization staff and reviewed publicly available data.

Before beginning data collection activities the evaluation team worked with [‘A‘ali‘i Alliance](#) to convene two **Youth Advisory Groups** (one virtual and one in-person). The Youth Advisory Groups were comprised of 13 current and recently graduated Hawai‘i public high school students. Each group provided critical input on the design for the Youth Focus Groups, including facilitation ideas and how to frame and word questions. The protocol used for youth focus groups can be found [here](#).

High School Partners

- Campbell High School
- Honoka'a High and Intermediate School
- Kohala High School
- Waimea High School
- Waiākea High School
- Wai'anae High School

Community Organization Partners

- GEAR UP Hawai‘i
- Ho'okua‘āina
- Kupu

Youth Focus Group Participants

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%). Participants were from the islands of Hawai'i, Oahu, and Kauai. (We attempted to recruit youth from Maui, though we did not ultimately achieve representation from this island due to schools being unable to participate in this year's study.)

Figure 2. Gender Identity

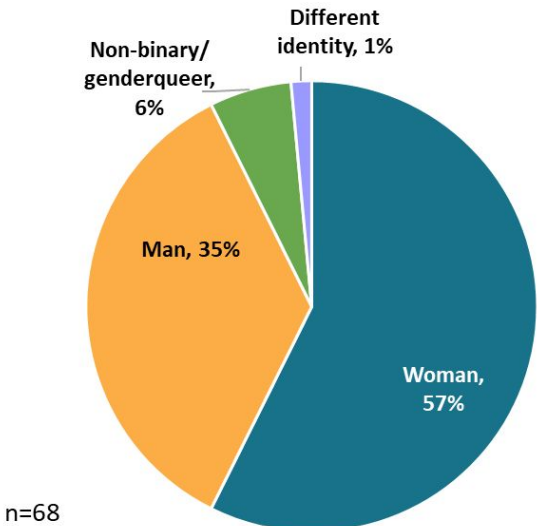


Figure 1. Grade Level

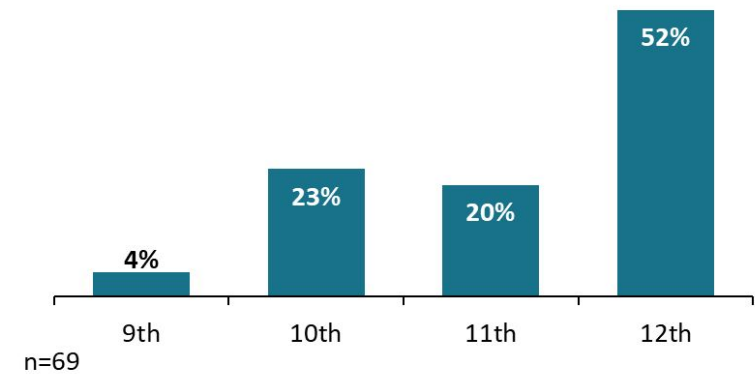
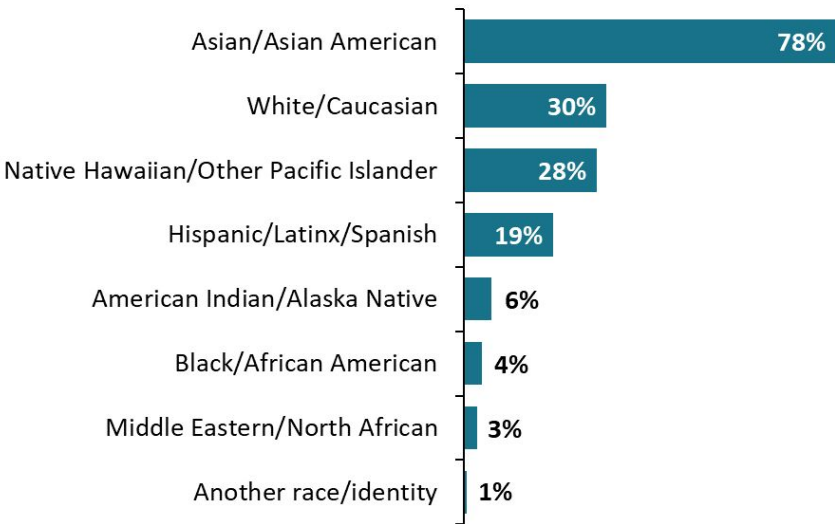


Figure 3. Race & Ethnicity



*The total for the race and ethnicity categories do not add up to 100% because participants could select all identities that applied.