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State ranks high in college accessibility

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While much of the country is seeing fewer low-income students going on to college, Hawai'i is showing that the doors to higher education can remain open for the most disadvantaged.

Nationwide, declining federal financial aid and rising tuition have combined to discourage low-income students from seeking a college education, but Hawai'i institutions are bucking the trend with dramatic increases in access in recent years.

"We're doing an increasingly better job in encouraging students from low-income families to apply (to school)," said Linda Johnsrud, interim associate vice president for planning and policy at the University of Hawai'i.

Hawai'i trailed only Nebraska in the percentage increase in college accessibility for low-income students between 1998 and 2001 (the most recent year available), according to a new national survey. Access for low-income students rose 7.4 percent in Hawai'i, while the nationwide average declined 3.5 percent among the country's approximately 17.4 million college students. Access rose 11 percent in top-ranked Nebraska.

The numbers cap a substantial increase that saw Hawai'i go from 9 percent participation in 1992 to 30.9 percent in 2001, making the state 11th in the nation for overall access for low-income students. The national average is 24 percent.

Hawai'i owes its success to several factors:

- Low tuition at state community colleges;
- Tuition waiver support throughout the UH system, including special support for Pacific islanders and at the community-college level;
- A range of need-based scholarship support for Native Hawaiian students;
- Successful local programs such as the 3-year-old Bridge to Hope that is subsidized by the state Legislature; and heavy use of the federal TRIO programs for low-income, first-generation and disabled college students, as well as national programs such as Upward Bound and Talent Search to inspire high school students to seek higher education.

LuAnn Haia, an 18-year-old Hau'ula freshman attending Windward Community College, says if not for Upward Bound, she wouldn't be in college — or dreaming of someday pursuing a master's or doctorate at Stanford University.

"Before, I was thinking I could never get there; it's ridiculous amounts of money," Haia said. "My parents never went to college, and I had no clue where to start. I've always heard you could get scholarships, but I really didn't think it was possible. But Upward Bound helped us. And everything this year was paid for."

But many low-income students don't ever start college, whether it's because of a lack of money or emphasis on education.

"When you're talking about students from low-income families, or those where neither parent has a bachelor's degree, they don't have the luxury of the same frame of



Curtis Washburn, director of Academic Achievement Programs at Chaminade University, goes over financial options with criminal justice student Melanie Ledges, 20. The school handles a chunk of students from low-income families.

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Tools for students

- **Upward Bound and Talent Search:** For students living on

reference for college," said Sandra Matsui, dean of student services and head of Upward Bound at Windward Community College.

While the state's 10-campus public college system is providing many of the opportunities for low-income students, these aren't the only Hawai'i colleges opening their doors to students with the most need.

At Brigham Young University Hawai'i, part of the mission is to provide access to low-income students. Between a special work

/study scholarship program and financial aid, an estimated 78 percent to 80 percent of the school's 2,300 students receive assistance. And the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints subsidizes every student by about 50 percent of the school's total cost per year.

At Chaminade University of Honolulu, more than one-third of the new student population each year comes from low-income families. Fully 20 percent of that group comes from families with annual incomes of less than \$20,000, and those who qualify for federal PELL grants (for financial need) also qualify for additional aid from the school.

"We did a look at family incomes and our average income is weighted to the lower income side," said Eric Nemoto, associate dean of enrollment management and director of financial aid at Chaminade.

Angela Pucci, a 20-year-old Chaminade junior with majors in business administration and environmental science, would have had to carry a full-time job or go deeply in debt without the help of school scholarships and loans that cover all her costs. After a car accident a few years ago, her mother declared bankruptcy and hasn't been able to help financially.

"I have a 'need' grant, so that helps me out," Pucci said. "That's almost \$3,000 a year from the government. And also the Regents' Scholarship from the school based on my high school GPA. That's \$5,000 a year. I also have loans in my name, and a PELL grant."

Even so, Pucci works 20 hours a week to pay her living expenses.

The biggest obstacles to success for low-income students nationally have been diminishing federal aid, a shift in federal resources away from grants for the poor to loans to middle-class students, and hefty tuition increases in many states reeling from economic downturns. At the same time, tax breaks for higher education seem more beneficial to upper-middle class students than the poorest.

But Hawai'i has run counter to the trend, leading the nation in its increase in the share of PELL grants, with a hike of 8.2 percent between 1992 and 2001, as the national average fell by 1 percent.

Local programs such as the legislatively supported Bridge to Hope also provide a counter-balance, making college possible for single welfare parents who couldn't go to school without subsidies.

While small, Bridge to Hope has made it possible for 32-year-old Estrella Devera-Cruz, a single, welfare-dependent mother, to go back to school for a bachelor's and then master's degree in education, work on campus and still care for her young son.

"You would never find the work requirement of four to eight hours a week in the private sector, but with Bridge to Hope (run jointly by UH and the State Department of Human Services) they find you the job," Devera-Cruz said.

Even for those without the additional responsibilities of family, freshman year can be the most vulnerable for those who may not have good high school preparation, who come from families with no history of college attendance or where cost is a major factor. That's where Hawai'i schools are focusing attention.

Windward O'ahu, recruiting is under way for the Upward Bound and Talent Search programs that assist high school students in their junior and senior years with college preparation. To apply, call 235-7335 for Upward Bound and 235-7388 for Talent Search. On the Big Island, see the [Upward Bound Web site](#) or call (808) 974-7337.

- **GEAR UP Hawai'i:** This free program encourages middle school students to start thinking about college and helps with college resources, scholarship opportunities, tutoring and parent activities. See the Web site gearup.hawaii.edu/ or call 956-3879 from O'ahu, or (866) 808-4327 (toll-free) from the Neighbor Islands.

- Or contact your high school guidance counselor.

"In some cases the students are really not academically ready," said Curtis Washburn, director of Academic Achievement Programs at Chaminade. "They need a lot of hand-holding. Nationally, half of all the students who start college aren't going to graduate, and of those who drop out, two-thirds drop out by the end of freshman year."

While early counseling and other academic intervention helps keep these students in school, those of Native Hawaiian ancestry also are finding a new safety net of programs provided by agencies all the way from Alu Like to Kamehameha Schools.

"Our Native Hawaiian Center is active about getting this information out," said Jannine Oyama, financial aid officer at Honolulu Community College, which tops the UH system in providing access for low-income students.

But there are concerns that the gains in low-income access here will slow because of financial commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan.

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[Back](#)

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