



UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII SYSTEM

‘ŌNAEHANA KULANUI O HAWAII

Legislative Testimony

Hō'ike Mana'o I Mua O Ka 'Aha'ōlelo

Testimony Presented Before the
House Committee on Higher Education & Technology
Wednesday, February 7, 2024, at 2:00 p.m.

By

Debora Halbert, Vice President for Academic Strategy
University of Hawai'i System

HB 1795 – RELATING TO COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Chair Perruso, Vice Chair Kapela, and Members of the Committee:

The University of Hawai'i (UH) is in support of HB 1795, a bill that recognizes the importance of higher education in individual and societal success and aims to establish a working group to evaluate the feasibility of making community college free for Hawai'i residents.

As noted in the bill, there is a well-established correlation between higher education levels and higher earnings for individuals, transcending racial, ethnic, and gender groups. Furthermore, investing in higher education is linked to lower unemployment rates, reduced poverty, improved public health, and a decrease in incarceration rates.

UH is committed to serving a diverse student population and believes that access to affordable higher education is a key driver for individual and collective success. We appreciate the legislature's acknowledgment of the financial challenges faced by working families, particularly those earning less than \$30,000 annually, and the efforts to address the college-going rates for Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, and Filipino students.

While the Hawai'i Community College Promise Program was established to alleviate the high cost of obtaining a college education for low-income families, more needs to be done to make community college affordable for all students who wish to enroll. We support the initiative to evaluate possibilities for making community college free for Hawai'i residents.

In addition to supporting the bill, we would like to offer recommendations for the working group's consideration:

1. **Public Awareness and Outreach:** Ensure that the working group engages in robust public awareness and outreach efforts to solicit input from diverse communities, students, and stakeholders.
2. **Sustainability:** Evaluate the long-term sustainability of the proposed program to ensure its continued success beyond the initial pilot phase.

3. **Alignment with Existing Aid Programs:** Explore how the proposed program aligns with or complements existing financial aid programs to maximize support for students.

In conclusion, UH supports the passage of HB 1795 and appreciates the initiative to create a working group to evaluate the feasibility of making community college free for Hawai'i residents.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of HB 1795.