



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 Finance
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By

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HB 2196 HD1 – RELATING TO PUBLIC EMPLOYMENT

Chair Yamashita, Vice Chair Kitagawa, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on HB 2196 HD1, relating to public employment, and specifically the removal of the requirement of a college degree for any state position, unless the degree is relevant to licensing or certification as it relates to the duties and responsibilities of the position or when the position in question requires specialized knowledge, skills, or subject-matter expertise relevant to the degree.

The University of Hawai'i (UH) appreciates our legislators' desire to reduce the number of vacant positions within state agencies and acknowledges there are undoubtedly certain government positions for which a college degree may not be an absolute necessity. At the same time, it is crucial to emphasize the importance of a college education in preparing individuals for the complex responsibilities of running state agencies. We support and welcome the additional clarification language in HD1, Section 2, "or when the position in question requires specialized knowledge, skills, or subject-matter expertise relevant to the degree," which broadens the range of possible state positions where a college degree is required and alleviates some of the concerns previously raised in the original measure, which would have narrowly restricted state agencies that need those with college degrees.

In the current landscape, the responsibilities of state agencies have become increasingly sophisticated and multifaceted. While some positions may not explicitly require a college degree, most skills essential for effectively managing state agencies are acquired through higher education. Fortunately, despite the impact of the coronavirus pandemic, the percentage of Hawai'i's working-age adults who possess a post-secondary degree has risen from 41% in 2005 to 48% in 2022, expanding the pool of college graduates available to pursue state employment. Our comments highlight the broader value of a college degree in cultivating the skills and knowledge necessary for effective public service, and we hope this proposed legislation will consider the overarching role of education in shaping individuals who are equipped to handle the challenges inherent in public administration.

Examples from existing state agencies further underscore the significance of a college degree in performing job functions effectively. Consider the role of a program or construction manager responsible for overseeing complex initiatives within a state agency. Although a license or certification is optional, state agencies should be able to require architects to possess a degree in engineering or a related field. The same should be said for an auditor or fiscal specialist, where state agencies should be able to require a degree in accounting, business, or a related field. A college education provides individuals with critical thinking, problem-solving, and analytical skills indispensable in strategizing and executing successful programs.

Moreover, a comprehensive understanding of public policy, budgeting, and organizational behavior, often acquired through college coursework, is instrumental in navigating the intricate landscape of state governance. Similarly, while some positions may not necessitate a degree within law enforcement agencies, those with a college education often demonstrate more advanced communication skills, cultural competence, and the ability to comprehend and apply evolving legal frameworks. These attributes contribute significantly to the effectiveness and accountability of state law enforcement.

In the health services field, professionals with college degrees are better equipped to comprehend the complexities of healthcare policy, epidemiology, and public health management. This understanding is vital for making informed decisions that impact the community's well-being.

At the University of Hawai'i, certification or licensure is not required for most faculty. However, in most cases it is essential to possess a degree at the Master's level or higher, as faculty are expected to be experts in their fields of study, with the intent to pass along critical knowledge through teaching, research, and service, to future college-level learners, exposing them to the academic rigor of which they have first-hand knowledge.

In conclusion, we urge the committee to carefully consider the broader implications of removing the college degree requirement for state positions. For example, one can foresee state agencies needing to invest more in training and development programs to ensure that employees without degrees possess the skills to execute their duties effectively. Removing degree requirements may also result in the loss of individuals with specialized expertise, potentially harming the operational effectiveness of the employing agency. While acknowledging the flexibility needed to fill particular vacancies, it is essential to recognize that education plays a pivotal role in developing the skill set required to navigate the intricate responsibilities of public service. Our office strongly supports the pursuit of policies that enhance the qualifications and capabilities of individuals serving the state, ultimately contributing to the efficiency and effectiveness of our state agencies.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments and we are available to provide any additional information or clarification if needed.