



# 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 Labor and Government Operations  
Thursday, February 1, 2024, at 9:00 a.m.

By

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

#### HB 2196 – RELATING TO PUBLIC EMPLOYMENT

Chair Matayoshi, Vice Chair Garrett, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on the proposed legislation relating to public employment, 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.

The University of Hawai'i (UH) appreciates our legislators' desire to reduce the number of vacant positions within state agencies, and UH acknowledges that 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 associated with running state agencies. 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 aim to highlight the broader value of a college degree in cultivating the skills and knowledge necessary for effective public service.

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, we believe that the majority of skills essential for effectively managing state agencies are acquired through higher education. The proposed legislation should 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 manager responsible for overseeing complex initiatives within a state agency. A college education provides individuals with critical thinking, problem-solving, and analytical skills that are 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 field of health services, professionals with a college degree 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 well-being of the community.

If this measure proceeds, we recommend that the proposed Hawai'i Revised Statute language found in Section 2 be amended to include the phrase "or when the position in question requires specialized knowledge, skills, or subject-matter expertise" at the end of the sentence. As written, the measure prohibits the State from requiring a degree, except under the limited circumstance in which a degree is relevant to a license or certification. This too narrowly restricts when a state agency requires a degree for specialized knowledge or skills that may not necessarily relate to a license or certificate.

At the University of Hawai'i, for example, certification or licensure is not required for most faculty, but UH must continue to require faculty to possess not only a college degree, but in most cases a degree at the Master's level or higher. A higher education degree is essential for this population of state employees. They 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.

Similarly, although a license or certification is not required for being a project manager or construction manager for the State, state agencies should be able to require architects to possess a degree in engineering or a related field. While a license or certification is not required for working as an auditor or fiscal specialist, state agencies should be able to require a degree in accounting, business, or a related field.

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 required to execute their job 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 your attention to this matter, and we are available to provide any additional information or clarification if needed.