

UH-Maui College

Community Needs Assessment

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Prepared by Islander Institute

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, important questions about the future of higher education have been raised by changes in technology, the economy, and the expectations of individuals. Educational administrators, policy makers, and community members are challenging long held assumptions and traditional models of college and the functions they serve in society. The COVID-19 pandemic (COVID) added uncertainty and urgency to an already vexing situation. Among these issues are student debt and the current investment value of an education, evolving attitudes toward the future of Hawai'i's economy and environment, increased reliance on ever-changing technologies for instruction and administration, novel attitudes of the generation born in the 21st Century, and a new array of social issues that require a new cadre of community leaders.

Amid these unprecedented challenges, the University of Hawai'i-Maui College (UHMC) saw both an opportunity and necessity to reimagine its strategic priorities, operations, and role in serving the Maui Nui community. The leadership of UHMC approached Islander Institute (Islander) in Fall 2020 to provide insights into the views of students and the needs of the communities they serve. Ultimately, this study, along with other efforts, are aimed at deepening UHMC's mission, providing a clear justification for its existence, integrating more deeply with community wants and needs, increasing UHMC resonance with students and families, and providing the guidance needed to build toward an exciting future of higher learning and dream fulfillment.

Holomua Roadmap and Community Assessment

UHMC started its reimagining process in 2020 with interviews and surveys of faculty and staff. The purpose of this effort was to assess progress in UHMC's 2016-2021 Strategic Plan, identify institutional strengths and opportunities, and generate recommendations. The result of this effort was the "Holomua: Roadmap Plan" released in early 2021. According to its own internal assessment, UHMC is making progress toward all of its goals, however challenges remain including in the areas of communication, outreach, success of Pacific Islander and Native Hawaiian students, and other community centered issues.

The report's first recommendation was to conduct this community needs assessment, with the intent that it would serve as a catalyst and guide for the next Strategic Plan scheduled to commence in 2022. To best serve the Maui Nui community, UHMC knows it has to better understand the current needs of the community in light of COVID, while also reflecting on the longstanding and emerging needs of Maui Nui and its people.

PROCESS

Beginning in Spring of 2021, Islander conducted one-on-one and small group interviews with 68 people, including prospective students, current students, faculty and staff, employers, high school students, and community organizations. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes to one hour and were done by video conference due to COVID precautions. The informal nature of the interviews allowed for the participants to share their candid perceptions of and experiences with UHMC, the current needs of the community, and the role UHMC could play in serving all parts of Maui, Moloka'i, and Lāna'i. Islander conducted an analysis of all the responses to determine recurring themes and ideas, and to develop suggestions for how UHMC can capitalize on this opportunity to better serve the Maui Nui community in these times.

Student voices

Islander designed a process that centered around capturing student voices in Maui Nui, including Hāna, Lāna'i, Moloka'i, Lahaina, and Central Maui. The discussions were informal and semi-structured to allow for students in groups of three to eight to dive deeper into their personal stories and perspectives. Islander chose to work with existing student groups in the cohort model because these students were already comfortable with one another, creating a space more conducive for candidness, vulnerability, deeper conversation and follow up questions.

These groups represent a diversity of students, including those who entered college right after high school, students who entered the workforce before going back to college, students who juggle both work and school, and other experiences. These groups ranged among students who were in certificate programs, associates, and bachelor degree programs.

The student groups convened included:

1. Current UHMC students in the automotive cohort
2. Current UHMC students in the culinary program
3. Current UHMC students in the dental hygienists program
4. Current UHMC students who serve as tutors
5. Current UHMC students who work as student assistants
6. Current UHMC students on Moloka'i
7. Current UHMC students on Lāna'i
8. Youth in the Boys and Girls Club of Maui, Lahaina program
9. Hāna High and Elementary School students

Questions to students included:

- If you could look into your future, what are your hopes for yourself? (Where are you living? What are you doing? What's important to you?)
- Why did you decide to go to college? Why did you pick UHMC? (or why not?)

- When you think of UHMC, what do you think of? (What words come to mind?)
- What did you expect of college and is it meeting your expectations?
- Do you feel you are getting a quality education?
- Where did you mostly learn whatever you know/think about college?
- Do you see a future for yourself in your community? (Why or not?)

Faculty and staff

Islander also reviewed reports from UHMC’s post-pandemic strategic planning process, including the “Holomua: Roadmap Plan” that focused on interviews with faculty and staff. Insights from these interviews helped Islander develop the questions to get in depth, direct feedback from students. As part of this community assessment, Islander also interviewed UHMC faculty and staff to better understand the current operations of its degree and non-degree programs as well as its outreach offices on Hāna, Moloka’i, and Lāna’i.

Community members

Islander also conducted one-on-one meetings with members of the Maui Nui community, particularly employers, nonprofits, UHMC partners, government officials, elected leaders, and schools. Through these conversations, Islander hoped to learn about general community needs, the employment pipeline from UHMC to the Maui Nui community, and the quality of graduates as they enter into the workforce.

Limitations

Much of the student focus groups centered around people who have chosen to attend UHMC. While we also sought the opinions and stories of people who are choosing not to attend UHMC, we realize the difficulty of capturing all the many perspectives of this group. This includes students who opted to go to other colleges and universities, who entered into the workforce, who dropped out or “stopped out,” or who chose to do something else with their post-high school education. Because this population is large and diverse, this study lacks a complete picture of the experiences and needs of these community members.

TWO CRITICAL THEMES

Through our conversations with students, employers, community members, faculty, and staff, two critical themes emerged relating to the student experience and community needs of Maui Nui:

1) A sense of belonging, and 2) A sense of purpose.

These two themes encapsulate the fundamental elements of a UHMC that can attract students, retain students, provide a valuable and successful experience, increase campuswide pride and morale, develop lifelong relationships with alumni and their families, strengthen relevance throughout UHMC's communities, and make a longstanding positive impact on Maui Nui and the world.

A SENSE OF BELONGING

Perhaps the most significant distinction that emerged from our conversations with community members was the difference between those who felt they belonged at UHMC and those who felt they did not. We learned that this feeling of belonging can greatly affect whether UHMC is seen as an attractive option, whether a prospective student chooses UHMC and whether a student succeeds and stays at UHMC. Belonging is a function of school pride and identity, of school community morale, and of community relevance and integration.

Belonging is the most fundamental answer to the question: *Is UHMC the place for me?* It is the factor which could make all of Maui Nui see UHMC as *their* college—a source of unique pride and a sense of shared ownership. In order to generate a sense of belonging, UHMC must first have a clear answer to the question: *Who is UHMC for?* Once this target constituency is known, UHMC must then understand that belonging is not a static state of being, but rather an evolving condition that is regularly cultivated by faculty, students, and the entire UHMC community. Working together, the community can turn UHMC into a home.

The five key findings that we heard regarding a sense of belonging are:

1. Many students feel connected to Maui, their families, and their community

UHMC has one major benefit that no other college or university can offer—the ability for students to stay physically connected to their family and community in Maui. For many students, UHMC is hardly a last choice, but rather the desired choice because their priority is staying closely connected to family and to be physically in Maui Nui.

But this is hardly the dominant narrative or perception out there now about UHMC. For some students, they have to overcome the feeling that staying in Maui is considered “less than” or a

failure. When one says “MCC,” it can conjure negative stereotypes. From high school or younger, many students are taught the idea that going away is a measure of success.

For students who choose to go to UHMC, they want to stay in Maui because of a specific program, to remain close to family (to help with responsibilities such as younger siblings, to not create a bigger financial burden, etc.), to save money, and because they simply love the islands of Maui Nui.

Building a connection to place is obviously not just the kuleana of UHMC. That said, UHMC can play a pivotal role in helping to cultivate a sense of place. This includes knowledge and exposure to the physical environment of Maui Nui, understanding and retelling of place-based history and cultural practice, regular engagement with community members outside of UHMC, and strong partnerships with Maui-based institutions. Being located in Maui Nui is UHMC’s primary, distinguishing, unreplicable asset. Having students and faculty members who share that sense of home is equally valuable.

STUDENT VOICES...

As a student at Kamehameha Schools Maui, he was always taught that in order to succeed in life, he needed to go away to the Continent for college. But as he grew more immersed in his culture and explored his kuleana, he knew that he wouldn’t be able to get the kind of college education he wanted on the Continent. Making the decision to stay home wasn’t easy as he had to overcome the ingrained thinking that going away was the thing he was supposed to do.

“In my na’au, I felt I needed to stay home and pursue Hawaiian studies,” he said. “We need to change the stereotype of what it means to stay at home for college. You can get a great education on Maui.”

2. Many students like the close knit, small community feel of UHMC

For some students, especially ones from rural areas, there was some anxiety about going to college because of their perceptions of big campuses and rigorous courses. But many found that UHMC is much more inviting than they expected and they received individualized support and care. One said that UHMC is a friendlier environment and is slower paced in a good way that makes them feel like their goals are achievable.

Some students who went to other larger colleges before going to UHMC said other schools make them feel like a number whereas they felt valued and seen at UHMC. Much of this is thanks to the small community at UHMC and their personal connection to faculty, advisors, and other students.

While the media and the typical picture of college usually depict large campuses, that kind of environment is not ideal for everyone. The small, close knit community of UHMC can continue to get cultivated through more individual care and support for growing positive relationships.

3. No clear identity binds the campus as a whole

Students become close with classmates in their same cohort and have pride in their individual program. But that sense of pride and belonging typically doesn't extend to the entire campus of UHMC. Some of this may be because of the majority of their time spent at their program and their respective buildings, leaving little time or need to go to more general areas of the campus. Others said they simply don't know what else the campus offers outside of their program. As a result, it's more difficult to feel a sense of belonging to UHMC as a whole.

The same could be said from a community perspective of not clearly being able to understand the goals and identity of UHMC. A common theme from community members was that UHMC was trying to do too much—it was striving to be both a university and a community college and offering many degree programs. It became difficult for community members to be able to articulate the identity of UHMC and thus harder to be an advocate for UHMC's value.

4. Community embraces UHMC and its students, yet there could be a stronger connection between UHMC and community

Community organizations and members have a desire to be strong advocates for UHMC. Every community member interviewed expressed a desire to see UHMC succeed and were willing to be strong partners in the achievement of those goals. Help could range from providing learning opportunities, helping to recruit in high schools, partnering on community initiatives, developing curriculum, developing viable job placement tracks, and more. The community also recognizes the value of educating students at home. One local business owner said, "As an employer, I'll try to hire UH graduates because they have roots here."

The potential to grow community partnerships is substantial and remains largely untapped. As stated above, most community members could not easily articulate the identity of UHMC and didn't know all that UHMC could offer students, employers, and the community. Building stronger community relationships could also bolster the sense of belonging among the community so that all in Maui Nui could say that UHMC is *our* college.

5. Hāna, Moloka'i, and Lāna'i students experience UHMC differently than those in Central Maui

Students in the outreach campuses have a different sense of belonging than those living in Maui. In Hāna, Lāna'i, and Moloka'i, students shared that they feel they don't have the same access to classes, resources, and decision making.

For Lānaʻi and Molokaʻi, students commonly settle for a program that isn't their top choice, but one that allows them to continue taking courses without needing to move out of their community. On Molokaʻi, the recent announcement of the closure of the UHMC Molokaʻi Farm further exacerbated the feeling of not having a say in decision making of what happens in their community. On Lānaʻi, even getting books can be a challenge and a financial burden. One student said that it sometimes takes one engaged professor to special order books to alleviate this challenge.

Students living in these remote locations understand that the lack of access is part of the reality of living in these rural communities. They understand the tradeoff and make sacrifices on their education so they can stay close to home and family.

However, COVID presented students in the outreach campuses (along with all UHMC students) with more opportunities to take courses online. It enabled them to access more classes, including those at other UH System campuses, and many shared that they hoped more online courses would remain even after the pandemic. Students shared that they hoped the sense of flexibility and adaptability—principles that were necessary during COVID—would remain after COVID.

STUDENT VOICES...

Growing up on Molokaʻi, she was steeped in the values of family and community. When it came to selecting a college, she knew she wanted to stay home and help her family save money. Both her parents didn't go to college and she thought getting a degree would ensure a future with a better paying job.

She started off in digital media, but had to change her major because she would have to move in order to get a Bachelor's degree in her desired field. "It feels like to be successful, you have to leave but you don't want to leave because it's home. On other islands, you get to stay home and do what you love."

A SENSE OF PURPOSE

The second ingredient to the success of UHMC from the perspective of the community is generating a sense of purpose. The more that students are clear and committed to the value of UHMC in their lives, the greater the likelihood of success. Furthermore, this greater sense of purpose reverberates throughout the community in the form of more capable adults, more synergy with community partners, and more opportunities for community development and self-sufficiency.

From the perspective of students, a strong sense of purpose is the answer to the fundamental question: *Do I have the commitment and determination to successfully make this investment in myself?* For students, purpose leads to motivation that is intrinsic; i.e. that comes from within the person, tied to their own unique story and circumstances. A sense of purpose means that students have both the direction and the drive to meet their goals. For UHMC, the question that must be asked is: *Do we provide the right programs and support to help students achieve their goals?* Has UHMC lined up career pathways that are realistic and rewarding, can the bumps along the way be anticipated and overcome, and are programs and services organized in a way that works for students?

The five key findings that we heard regarding a sense of belonging are:

1. There are numerous, significant obstacles to having a successful college experience

Obtaining a college degree can, of course, be one of the most valuable experiences in a person's life, but many factors can upend students on the way toward achieving that goal. This is particularly true at UHMC where, unlike their counterparts at more exclusive schools, students often lack societal privilege including healthy community environments, supportive families with previous college experience, sufficient preparatory educational opportunities, economic sufficiency and stability, a realistic and reinforced sense of hope for a better future, and/or access to critical services such as transportation, childcare, and healthcare.

Students shared many stories of factors that had to be overcome, or that continue to threaten derailment of UHMC student goals. These include work requirements that compete for time and energy, family priorities that force college to life's backburner, social pressures from friends and others outside of UHMC, as well as the common forces that can distract or demotivate a typical student. Students will implicitly ask themselves, *is this interesting, am I learning, is this important,* and ultimately, *is this all worth it.*

2. Students have practical goals related to jobs and their visions of a good life

The students with the clearest sense of purpose and strongest motivation seem to be those who are focused on a career related goal. They know why they are in college and can see a path (or have carefully designed a path) to achieving their goals. For the majority, graduation is not the end point, rather the goal lies beyond when the student enters the workforce in their desired career. Students wanted a future where they could have well-paying, stable jobs, good housing they can afford, and an ability to contribute to their families and/or live in their community.

This finding may be more descriptive of UHMC students than it is proscriptive for UHMC. It seems just a fact that many of the students at UHMC see the pursuit of education for education's sake as

a luxury that they do not possess at this point in their adult lives. Perhaps this is a practical fact of life, or perhaps it is just not a value that has been established in the community.

STUDENT VOICES...

She grew up in Wai‘anae and went to UH-Mānoa after graduating high school. At UH-Mānoa, the environment made her feel like a number, and she longed for something different. While working at a nonprofit, she discovered a love for oral health and wanted to go into dental hygiene. She wants to have a job with financial stability, one that would allow her to live comfortably and enable her to retire. So, she moved to Maui and enrolled in the dental hygiene program.

“I had no idea Maui had a dental hygiene program. This was one of the best decisions I made. All of us are super close and I have a new family here. I wish more people were aware of UH-Maui and that it would advocate this school to all islands. It’s a university but it’s more of a community college feel.”

3. The most motivated students see a clear pathway to their goals

Connected to the sense of practicality for students is the need for them to be able to see their futures beyond college, and the path to get from here to there. Students need to be able to see that the classes they are taking each semester will lead to their next step, to graduation, and ultimately a job that they could see themselves doing. Being able to map out an attainable path and the possibilities at graduation keeps students motivated and moving forward.

The power of a path to success seems even more pronounced in those who were introduced to their goals at an early age. Not everyone started their college career that way. Some said they were pressured into college by parents or societal expectations, but stayed because they figured out the path they needed to take in order to graduate. It is important that these pathways are sound so that they really do lead to the things they promise; but it is also important for the pathways to be flexible enough to accommodate a diversity of students with their individualized circumstances.

4. The cohort model helps build a close knit community and a support system that contributes to reinforcing a student’s sense of purpose

Although UHMC is already a small campus, having a small community of support within the campus provides additional help to students in their studies. Those in cohorts became like a second family to one another, supporting each other through their classes and career goals. Because many of the focus groups conducted for this assessment were done with existing

cohorts, this effect was particularly on display. It cannot be said that the close sense of community and strong peer support are not present for students outside the cohort model, as not enough evidence was gathered. But what is certain is that the cohort model is working for many as an effective structure for keeping students motivated, building a positive sense of community, utilizing the synergy of peers, and troubleshooting individual challenges that inevitably arise in one's college career.

5. Students feel supported by their program and instructors

Many students said their ability to enter into UHMC and to stay involved was due to the support of one supportive person. The impact of having at least one positive interaction with a UHMC faculty or staff member could determine whether the student decided to apply and to continue. Students could point to the one staff member who personally answered the phone and their questions and were a part of their college experience today. Sometimes that staff member was a faculty member, a student assistant, or an advisor. Also, in some cases, the UHMC member is also a member of the community and within the industry the student is pursuing so there was more support in helping to find a job after graduation.

The ability for prospective and current students to have a caring, responsive UHMC community member was instrumental in their decision to attend and succeed at UHMC. This kind of nurturing relationship and responsiveness can be further cultivated for all programs and the campus as a whole.

SUGGESTIONS

This community assessment revealed a number of opportunities for improvement and enhancement. Because there are many factors outside the scope of this study, these opportunities are presented as suggestions for consideration rather than recommendations:

1. Lean into the reasons people choose UHMC

Students choose UHMC because of its small town feel that makes them feel seen and valued. They choose UHMC because of its unique-in-the-world location and kuleana to the people and place of Maui Nui. And students choose UHMC to stay in community with family and friends and the place they call home. If these are the reasons why people go to UHMC, then it follows that these are the critical causal factors for developing a more robust and sustained flow of students now and into the future. UHMC can develop ways to deepen these features to make them stronger realities and selling points.

2. Take a stronger role in the kuleana of building a sense of place

Once seen by many as merely an outpost of a system centered on O‘ahu, UHMC is now in position to be an institutional fixture that helps define, preserve, and strengthen Maui Nui. So what is Maui Nui? What has it been and where is it going? UHMC can take a stronger role in perpetuating the things that make Maui Nui special by working with community leaders to ensure the continuation of important stories, neighborhoods, and environments. In so doing, UHMC can strengthen its position as a leader that is looked to in order to help write the story of Maui Nui going forward. Working with others to strengthen a sense of place will deepen the sense of belonging at UHMC and may even inspire a sense of purpose in its citizens.

3. Create a stronger sense of community ownership of UHMC

Community members are rooting for UHMC. And unlike mere spectators at a game, community members can play an active role in UHMC’s success. In order for this to happen, UHMC can do more to instill a sense that it belongs to the community. When more people feel like UHMC is *their* school, there will be more resources to provide successful opportunities for all members of the UHMC community. Not every partnership will bear fruit, so it is important to get beyond mere transactional relationships with the community and enter into an environment of shared ownership. Rather than UHMC being a place where individual students make an individual investment in their individual futures, work can be done to ensure that the Maui Nui community sees their college as an opportunity for them to make an investment in their own people, funded by their dollars, supported by their efforts, enhanced by their cumulative knowledge and experience, and focused on the fact that Maui Nui has aloha for its people—particularly its young people—and wants them to succeed.

4. Continue to improve distance learning opportunities

One silver lining of COVID has been the expansion of distance learning capacities and opportunities. Many students valued having the option to take courses offered at Mānoa, Leeward Community College, Kapi'olani Community College, and other campuses. UHMC can continue to expand and improve in this area as a supportive resource for their students, particularly those in rural areas, helping them stay on track and motivated.

5. Consider the next steps in rebranding

UHMC has no doubt done a lot in recent years to rebrand in order to present the most attractive and accurate portrayal of its offerings. Nevertheless, some of the less appealing feelings toward Maui Community College linger in the minds of students, and perhaps more significantly, in the minds of their parents, teachers, and role models. UHMC can take further steps to promote a new image based on the real stories and experiences of students, alumni, parents, educators, employees, and community members. In keeping with its values and selling points, UHMC can rely more on relationship building to change minds, rather than impersonal public relations and commercial activities.

6. Concentrate on doing a few things very well

Given the motivational factors that seem to be most important to students, it may be wise for UHMC to begin focusing on doing fewer things with a higher degree of efficacy. The most important fields for students seem to be those that are backed with career opportunities, long term career success, and tracks that contribute to the overall wellbeing of the community. At a minimum, UHMC might consider discontinuing anything for which it cannot also provide students with adequate support to have a high probability of success.

7. Make "community assessment" an ongoing part of operations

The strongest mission-oriented community institutions are in close touch with their constituencies. UHMC can make a regular practice of being in conversation with their students and members of their community, much like the honest and meaningful conversations that informed this study. As needed, UHMC can enlist third parties to provide additional outreach, perspectives, and access to relationships. Ultimately, UHMC can do a better job of involving students in the creation of their own experience to increase the senses of belonging and purpose that are so important to having a positive experience.