

Building a Culturally Aware Native Hawaiian Health Professions Workforce

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Abstract

The Native Hawaiian Health Scholarship Program (NHHSP) strives to build a culturally aware Native Hawaiian health professional workforce through coaching, mentoring, and networking, who are committed to serving the unique health needs of Native Hawaiians throughout the State of Hawai'i. As of October 2020, 302 scholarships have been awarded to 277 recipients across 12 health disciplines with 90% remaining in Hawai'i. In 2019, NHHSP began re-imagining how to build a vibrant, culturally aware workforce, committed to service, leadership, and improvement of Native Hawaiian health through program expansion. This article describes the transformation of NHHSP to Maui Ola Mālamalama (MOM), a success-oriented strategy-based Native Hawaiian Health Workforce Development Center of Papa Ola Lōkahi. Researchers conducted a qualitative assessment using surveys and interviews among alumni of the program to understand their experience of being a recipient and its meaning to them. Questions included work experience, challenges, solutions, impact of working in rural communities, mentorship, and legacy. The 5 themes identified by alumni were awareness, passion, inherent culture, reciprocity, and legacy. The overarching theme of the assessment, aloha, is embedded in the passion and desire to serve Native Hawaiian communities. Re-imagining the program from NHHSP to MOM began with examining the core values of suitability, commitment, and leadership. These values were then embedded in all aspects of the program and supports provided to recipients. MOM strives to ensure that recipients are culturally aware as they enter the workforce. This broader vision will help increase the number of Native Hawaiians in health care roles.

Keywords

Native Hawaiian, workforce development, health professionals

Abbreviations

MOM = Maui Ola Mālamalama

NHHSP = Native Hawaiian Health Scholarship Program

NHHWDC = Native Hawaiian Health Workforce Development Center

Introduction

Hawai'i has a shortage of healthcare providers across the state. However, the shortage is greatest for Native Hawaiian and other Indigenous providers. In an earlier article in this edition, it is demonstrated that while 21% of the population of Hawai'i are of Native Hawaiian ancestry, only 4.5% of the physicians are Native Hawaiian.¹ This must change to maximize the benefit of the healthcare system for all populations of the state.

For Native Hawaiian and other Indigenous students, the various barriers of post-secondary degree attainment and life outcomes

are attributed to the adverse effects of American colonialism and historical trauma.² Barriers for Indigenous students' post-secondary degree attainment include but are not limited to the following: difficulties of relationship building with non-Indigenous members; the need to adhere to the social protocols of the dominant culture; lack of financial support; underrepresentation of Indigenous peoples in academia; separation from country and/or land; and the external obligations Indigenous students may have to their families and communities.^{3,4}

The Native Hawaiian Health Scholarship Program (NHHSP) strives to build a culturally aware Native Hawaiian health professional workforce through coaching, mentoring, and networking. Established in 1991 under the Native Hawaiian Health Care Act of 1988, the NHHSP is a merit-based scholarship administered by Papa Ola Lōkahi, the Native Hawaiian Health Board responsible for the oversight of the Native Hawaiian Health Care Improvement Act.⁵ As a merit-based scholarship, NHHSP provides a comprehensive award to Native Hawaiian students seeking a degree in 1 of 12 primary care health professions including medicine, nursing, physician assistant, dentistry, dental hygiene, nutrition, social work, clinical psychology, optometry, marriage and family therapy, pharmacy, and public health.

Modeled after the National Health Service Corps, the NHHSP addresses the underrepresentation of Native Hawaiians in the primary health care professions.⁶ The goal of the NHHSP is to develop a skilled and culturally aware Native Hawaiian health professional workforce that is committed to serving the unique health needs of the Hawaiian communities and improving health access and outcomes throughout the State of Hawai'i.

As of October 2020, 302 scholarships have been awarded to 277 recipients across 12 health disciplines with an estimated 90% of recipients remaining in Hawai'i. The NHHSP receives an average of 60 applications each year and makes about 10 awards a year to Native Hawaiian students who demonstrate suitability, commitment, and leadership to serve the Native Hawaiian and non-Indigenous underserved communities within the State of Hawai'i. Recipients' awards include tuition, other reasonable costs, and a monthly stipend. The award amount ranges from \$35,000 to \$379,000 and is dependent on the number of years remaining in education. All recipients are required to serve a minimum of 2 years and maximum of 4 years in return. The service requirement is dependent on the number of years of support.

The purpose of this paper is to describe the process of making the transformation from NHHSP to Maui Ola Mālamalama (MOM) a success-oriented strategy based Native Hawaiian Health Workforce Development Center (NHHWDC) of Papa Ola Lōkahi. The intent of this re-imagining was to increase the number of awards and support to be even more effective at building a culturally aware Native Hawaiian health professional and paraprofessional workforce. In this way, the chance of meeting the healthcare needs of Hawai‘i will be maximized.

Methods

The NHHSP has contributed to improving the health of Native Hawaiians by providing care in rural settings, establishing health care services in places they were nonexistent, and grooming today’s leaders. In 2019, NHHSP began re-imagining how to build a vibrant, culturally aware workforce of health professionals committed to service and leadership to improve the health of Native Hawaiians.

To understand its successes and challenges, NHHSP conducted a qualitative project with NHHSP alumni during the Summer of 2018. A series of open-ended questions were developed to understand the alumnus experience of being a recipient of NHHSP and included work experience, challenges, solutions, impact of working in rural communities, mentorship, and legacy. The open-ended questions were used both as the interview guide and provided through a link to an on-line questionnaire using SurveyMonkey software (Momentive, San Mateo, CA). In-person interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. On-line questionnaires were compiled by questions.

NHHSP has 235 alumni across 12 health disciplines spanning nearly 30 years. The research team decided to sample 15% (n=37) of alumni across discipline, cohort year, and available contact information (email and phone). Of the 37 contacted, 18 participated with 4 completing an in-person interview and 14 completing the online questionnaire.

A thematic analysis was completed by the primary author and 2 NHHSP undergraduate nursing students. Each member independently reviewed and identified codes from the interview transcripts and open-text responses from the on-line questionnaire. Codes were presented, discussed, and themes emerged. The themes were then utilized in the reimagining of the NHHSP to MOM NHHWDC.

Results

Five main themes emerged from the analysis. Themes included awareness, passion, inherent culture, reciprocity, and legacy. The overarching theme was *aloha* and how *aloha* is embedded in the passion and desire to serve Native Hawaiian communities. *Aloha* was the legacy that the NHHSP alumni described.

Awareness: Participants felt that NHHSP raised awareness of health issues Native Hawaiians face by exposing recipients to clinic and rural settings. This exposure encourages recipients to improve their work as well as develop a passion for improving the health of Native Hawaiians. One participant had this to say, “the scholarship really took us around the islands to meet all of the agencies that service Hawaiians. That’s how I built my connections. The scholarship broadened our horizons and gave us experiences.”

Passion was essential as participants began their service in rural communities. Participants described passion as the ability to provide health care to rural communities. One participant shared, “so what motivates me is that I know and accept fully my role and responsibility as a caregiver. And in doing so my heart lies with my people. So my heart lies with my family, my heart lives with the community-at-large, with any person that I come into contact, regardless if they’re Hawaiian or not, they’re still a part of me as I am a part of them. So that’s what motivates me, that’s what drives me. That’s what keeps me wanting to keep going every day.”

For participants, inherent culture was the ability to provide meaningful care from one Native Hawaiian to another Native Hawaiian. The participants agreed that inherent culture came down to how passionate the provider was in serving the community. One participant shared, “Our awareness allows us to connect to Native Hawaiians because we can relate to them. Non-natives don’t always understand the lifestyle and feel it’s easy to make simple changes such as not eating rice, although many natives have grown up with that as a staple. Unless you can connect and relate, it’s hard to make a change.”

Reciprocity is the ability to give back. This was commonly discussed among the participants. Reciprocity was encouraged by NHHSP to give back to the Native Hawaiian community. One participant shared, “Words cannot ever describe the blessing or encouragement of the NHHSP; they encouraged me through their transparency, truthfulness, contacts, and unwavering *aloha* for the scholars and recognizing their talents.”

Legacy lasts beyond any participant’s time as a provider. Legacy is seen as a lasting impact on an individual, family, and community. As one participant shared, “Being a healthcare provider requires passion to help, to serve, to make a difference. Sometimes making a difference is on a small scale, such as getting one person off diabetic medications. Other times the difference is huge such as establishing a non-profit organization in a rural area. Either way you’ve made a difference as long as you are passionate and genuine in your desire to serve, your legacy will live on.”

The findings informed the re-imagining of NHHSP to MOM NHHWDC. The renaming broadened the scope of awards and support to build a culturally aware Native Hawaiian health

professional and paraprofessional workforce. Guided by the overarching theme of “*aloha* is embedded in the passion and desire to serve Native Hawaiian communities,” MOM works on awareness through alignment of scholar recruitment and selection; embedded passion, inherent culture, reciprocity and legacy through the development of programs focused on leadership, knowledge, and support through learning opportunities (Ola Nā ‘Ōiwi program) and mentoring (‘Ua‘u Lele); and innovative ways to reach and provide resources to more individuals pursuing health careers through a new initiative of Kāko‘o Ulu ‘Oihana program.

Alignment: Suitability and Commitment

Developing a culturally aware workforce begins with a holistic application process. Applicants are evaluated based on 3 areas: suitability, commitment, and leadership. These 3 areas correspond to the following Native Hawaiian values: suitability – *‘olu‘olu* (pleasant), *kuleana* (responsibility), *hoihoi* (cheerful), *pono* (right/correct), *a‘o* (to learn), *ha‘aha‘a* (humble), *hana ka lima* (hard working), *ka‘i* (to lead); commitment – *pono* (right/correct), *kuleana* (responsibility), *hoihoi* (cheerful), *a‘o* (to learn); and leadership – *ha‘aha‘a* (humble), *hana ka lima* (hard working), *ka‘i* (to lead), *a‘o* (to learn).

Applicants complete a comprehensive on-line application which includes letters of recommendation, a personal statement, a CV or resume along with other supporting documents. Eligible applicants are then interviewed by a panel comprised of NHHSP staff, Papa Ola Lōkahi staff, community, and employers. Applicants are then invited to submit a value-based video which demonstrates suitability, commitment, and leadership.

The emphasis on Native Hawaiian values as part of the evaluation process, ensures that applicants are prepared for the rigors of the award, from education to completion of service. As a recipient, individuals receive financial support including a monthly stipend while in school. Recipients are required to maintain a 3.0 GPA or better, complete monthly reports, and participate in face-to-face check-ins with their Coordinator. This generous award then requires the recipient to work at a Native Hawaiian Health Care System or a medically underserved area within the State of Hawai‘i for each year of award with a minimum of 2 years and maximum 4 years. While in service, recipients continue to do monthly face-to-face check-ins and complete quarterly written reports. Once complete with their service, recipients transition to an alumnus status and continue to engage as a mentor, practicum site, or presenter for NHHSP/MOM.

Leadership, Knowledge, and Support

Developing a culturally aware Native Hawaiian health professional workforce requires mutual commitment between recipients and the NHHSP. Recipients are provided resources and support to facilitate growth in leadership and knowledge throughout their award period and thereafter. The period can

be between 2 to 12 years and is dependent on the health profession and number of years awarded. The goal is to ensure that recipients are successful in education, service, and as alumni by providing them with knowledge and skills to provide culturally aware care in our Native Hawaiian communities. Recipients are assigned a specialist to support them, attend learning series, and are matched with a mentor to guide them through their education and professional career.

Recipients are assigned a specialist with whom they work with from contract signing to contract completion. The specialist works closely with each recipient to ensure that appropriate support and resources are provided to ensure successful contract completion. Support is provided through monthly meetings throughout the contract period. This allows the specialist to identify areas needing additional support in academia, post-graduate training, as well as during service employment.

Enhancing the growth and development of future Native Hawaiian health care professional leaders in the Hawaiian community is essential. ‘Ua‘u Lele, a formal mentoring program was established in 2019. The intent of ‘Ua‘u Lele was two-fold: first, provide an opportunity for NHHSP Alumni and Native Hawaiian health professionals to continue their legacy by nurturing upcoming Native Hawaiian health professionals and second, providing current scholars with the guidance, support, and connections needed to nurture best practices as new health professionals.

Ola Nā ‘Ōiwi focuses on professional development and seeks to increase awareness and understanding of Native Hawaiian health disparities. The series features Native Hawaiian health professionals from across all disciplines throughout the State of Hawai‘i, the continental US, and across the lifespan. Since launching Ola Nā ‘Ōiwi in 2019, NHHSP has hosted 24, 90-minute webinars with 1,688 registrants. Ola Nā ‘Ōiwi has reached individuals locally, nationally, and internationally. Attendee comments have guided the selection of topics and speakers who address Native Hawaiian social-cultural determinants of health within the context of Native Hawaiian values. The series continues to grow and will launch a podcast series called Social Hour. The podcasts will focus on interdisciplinary health care approaches, resources, and networking.

Leadership Series with I Ola Lāhui is targeted towards training tomorrow’s leaders. I Ola Lāhui provides a culturally minded, evidence-based program focused on preparing scholars for career placement and beyond. Topics include stress management, self-care, career planning, and leadership. NHHSP has hosted nine, 2-hour sessions with 61 participants. The series is limited to only those in their first year of award. As the program continues to grow, a new program, “Growing leaders from within” will launch in 2022. This program will identify and provide leadership training to those working in Native Hawaiian Health interested in developing leadership skills.

Through Ola Nā ‘Ōiwi and the leadership Series with I Ola Lāhui, recipients are provided with support and programming to ensure success in both education and career. The emphasis is placed on being culturally aware as they prepare and enter the workforce. Through the support and programs, recipients are provided real life examples of the health status of Native Hawaiians and can use that as a trajectory to be leaders in the way they practice in their profession. More cultural topics and activities will be folded in as NHHSP grows in reach and subject area expertise.

The establishment of ‘Ua‘u Lele, mentorship program, is backed by literature that indicates support and programs ameliorate barriers to post-secondary degree attainment for Indigenous students.^{3-4,7-9} Foremost, recipients are provided financial assistance through NHHSP. ‘Ua‘u Lele expounds on the needs of the recipients by promoting *pilina* (relationship building). Recipients are paired with *kua‘ana* (older sibling, mentor) from similar career and cultural backgrounds. Research indicates that Indigenous students find negotiating mainstream culture to be isolating.³ Indigenous mentors who share similar backgrounds with their mentees can relate to pressures specific to Indigenous students, including the challenges that arise from conflicting worldviews and ways of learning and building relationships.⁷ ‘Ua‘u Lele *kua‘ana* are tasked with guiding *haumāna* (students, mentee) as they develop goals for the school year and provide constructive and supportive feedback regarding recipients’ progress toward achieving those goals. *Kua‘ana* are also responsible for fostering networking opportunities by identifying various resources for recipients’ benefit, introducing recipients to faculty and other health professionals, and connecting recipients with experts in the community who can provide career perspectives. Additionally, *kua‘ana* can share personal experiences with recipients that are specific to recipients’ needs and challenges.

These mentors act as culturally appropriate professional role models who can advocate for students with other academics or professionals.⁸ Thus, the purpose of ‘Ua‘u Lele is to foster dedicated leadership through relationship building that will ultimately improve the quality of health care and accessibility of health services within Native Hawaiian communities by Native Hawaiian health care professionals that are grounded in Native Hawaiian practices.

Discussion: Reimagining Tomorrow’s Workforce

In 2020, the NHHSP was re-imagined to Maui Ola Mālamalama: Native Hawaiian Health Workforce Development. This re-imagining allows for a greater reach to increase the number of Native Hawaiians in healthcare roles serving and supporting one another, primarily through removing financial barriers that may otherwise prevent Native Hawaiians from entering the workforce. In addition to offering financial assistance to applicants committed to improving the health of Native Hawaiian communities, we seek to identify and address gaps in educational attainment that exist for Native Hawaiian students by establishing additional health scholarship pathways and providing support and resources.

These pathways may include providing financial support for applications to programs or conferences, certificate programs, program materials, certifications, licensures, and/or examinations, living expenses, travel, housing, and childcare. Furthermore, we aim to provide a more holistic approach to student and professional well-being that focuses on emotional and mental health in addition to academic and professional pursuits. These initiatives will be carried out through our series, Ola Nā ‘Ōiwi and with I Ola Lāhui, as well as through ‘Ua‘u Lele and our upcoming Kōhi ‘Ulu, a podcast, where recipients, health professionals, and community members alike can connect to better understand how we can improve the health of Native Hawaiian communities.

The goal is to diversify the workforce, increase investment in the community as community members, expand reach into rural and underserved communities, and foster a sense of belonging and in-school community that ultimately serves to benefit the broader community. By extending impact beyond the NHHSP, the program can support and facilitate the continued development of Native Hawaiian health professionals to increase the economic prosperity, and thus improve the overall wellbeing of the Native Hawaiian community.

Conflict of interest

None of the authors identify a conflict of interest.

Acknowledgement

The authors want to acknowledge the Native Hawaiian Health Scholarship Program, summer interns, Bianca Paishon and Vance Miyamoto who collected data to inform the re-imagining of our program and S. Nani Espinda and Trina Jones Artis who worked closely with the recipients and assisted with the reimagining of our program.

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