



# 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 and Technology  
Wednesday, February 7, 2024, at 2:00 p.m.

By

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

#### HB 1535 – RELATING TO THE UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII PROMISE PROGRAM

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

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of HB 1535, which expands the University of Hawai'i (UH) Promise program, currently only at the community colleges, to qualified undergraduate students enrolled at a four-year campus of the UH.

UH advocates for accessible higher education and the well-being of economically disadvantaged students. The proposed expansion is crucial in helping students most in need and setting them up for lifetime success.

The Hawai'i Promise Program, established in 2017, has proven to be a valuable resource for UH Community College students, providing "last-dollar" scholarships to cover direct costs that remain after other contributions and aid have been exhausted. Students who have received Hawai'i Promise scholarships in prior years have demonstrated higher credit earning, improved grades, and increased likelihood of continued enrollment at UH compared to their peers without the scholarship.

Expanding the Hawai'i Promise program to UH four-year universities can significantly enhance the educational journey for community college students, facilitating a smoother transition to four-year programs. This expansion is essential for increasing the number of economically disadvantaged students who can pursue and obtain bachelor's degrees, thereby contributing to closing the workforce gap that the state needs to fill.

Students transferring from the UH Community Colleges are often surprised to find that, due to the higher tuition rates at four-year universities, Pell grants and other scholarships may only partially cover their direct cost of attendance (tuition, fees, books, supplies, and transportation). A four-year version of the Hawai'i Promise program will help these transfer students afford to continue their education and can further extend benefits to additional Hawai'i residents needing support to pursue their higher educational goals. With expansion, we have the potential to impact nearly 4,000 students every year as they pursue their bachelor's degrees.

While the expansion does not eliminate all costs for UH four-year students, it alleviates a significant financial burden, making higher education more attainable for those who may not have considered it feasible. Since Hawai'i Promise is calculated based on direct cost items, the expansion still leaves students responsible for more than half of the full cost of attendance, including housing and food costs. Many students will still need to work and/or take out loans to complete their bachelor's degrees.

Family financial challenges have been a barrier to college-going rates for Hawai'i's public high school graduates, particularly those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The Hawai'i Promise Expansion can be a lifeline for potential students who may have yet to consider a four-year campus due to financial constraints, creating opportunities for upward economic mobility.

Research conducted by the Economic Research Organization at UH (UHERO) indicates that college completion is a powerful tool for mitigating the intergenerational transmission of socioeconomic status. The long-term returns for UH degree holders, regardless of socioeconomic background, are similar, highlighting the potential of higher education to create a more equitable and prosperous Hawai'i.

Furthermore, the expansion addresses the underrepresentation of Native Hawaiian, Filipino, and Pacific Islander students in higher education. These historically excluded groups comprise approximately 42% of the potential Hawai'i Promise Expansion recipients. By recognizing the importance of equitable access, the expansion seeks to bridge gaps and create opportunities for diverse communities, fostering a more inclusive and accessible higher education landscape for all.

HB 1535 represents a critical investment in the future of our State by providing opportunities for economically disadvantaged students and underrepresented populations to access higher education. This expansion aligns with the goals of creating a more equitable and prosperous Hawai'i and will contribute significantly to developing a skilled and diverse workforce. It will dramatically enhance the ability of Hawai'i Promise community college students to transfer to a four-year program.

As a "last dollar" initiative, Hawai'i Promise ensures that the State of Hawai'i can maximize federal support via Pell grants while simultaneously ensuring that our most vulnerable students can pay for their education. It is vital to extend Hawai'i Promise to the four-year campuses to effectively support our students' educational goals while addressing their financial needs through a combination of federal and state funding.

Expanding the program to qualified students in four-year degree programs at the UH would greatly assist students pursuing their bachelor's degree. It will also be a notable step forward in expanding access to economic opportunity for Hawai'i's students and preparing the educated workforce our state needs to grow in the coming decades.

Thank you for your consideration and the opportunity to testify in support of this measure.



## HB1535

### RELATING TO THE UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII PROMISE PROGRAM House Committee on Higher Education and Technology

Feb. 7, 2024

2:00 pm

Conference Room 309

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The Office of Hawaiian Affairs (OHA) **SUPPORTS** HB1535, which provides scholarships for the unmet needs of qualified students at any four-year University of Hawai'i campus who meet certain criteria, such as being Hawai'i residents who are in good academic standing and have demonstrated financial need as indicated by their Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form.

In 2020, the Office of Hawaiian Affairs began its 15-year strategic plan. We identified four strategic directions. One of them was education pathways. In this direction, we look to support development and use of educational resources for all Hawaiian learners in schools, communities and 'ohana. As we look to move the needle toward improving the educational pathways for Native Hawaiians, we are faced with some harsh realities. While Hawaiians graduate high school at a comparable rate as non-Hawaiian students, we have one of the lowest rates of bachelor's degrees here in Hawai'i. The reasons for this statistic are varied and complex. However, **we know that cost can be a major barrier for many students.**

**The UH Promise Program will help provide much-needed financial assistance for students who have unmet cost needs.** And, we know that the program will specifically address the needs of students from our community and others like ours who are underrepresented in the university system. The University of Hawai'i has reported that nearly 60% of Promise Scholarships go to underrepresented students, such as Native Hawaiians, Filipinos and Pacific Islanders. Further, the program does not stop at providing tuition costs. We appreciate the way the program supports students with tuition, books, supplies and transportation costs.

For the above reasons, OHA urges this committee to **SUPPORT** the UH Promise Program and advance this measure. Mahalo nui for the opportunity to testify on this important measure.



The House Committee on Higher Education and Technology  
February 7, 2024  
2:00 PM  
Room 309

RE: **HB 1535, Relating to the University of Hawaii Promise Program**

Attention: Chair Amy Perruso, Vice Chair Jeanne Kapela and members of the Committee

The University of Hawaii Professional Assembly (UHPA) appreciates the opportunity to **support HB 1535**, relating to the University of Hawaii promise program.

UHPA supports increased access to education and closing the educational attainment gap. The Hawaii Promise Scholarship Program is a “last dollar” scholarship, meaning it covers financial needs not met by other forms of financial aid, such as federal grants and scholarships from UH, employers and other private sources.

The continued support of this valuable program, as well as its expansion to the four-year campuses would lower the barrier for students to attain community college, baccalaureate, and/or advanced degrees, thereby strengthening Hawaii’s workforce and the economic future of its residents.

**UHPA supports and requests the passage of HB 1535.**

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'C. Fern'.

Christian L. Fern  
Executive Director  
University of Hawaii Professional Assembly