

The Best and The Brightest

Vibrant Hawai‘i youth address the narrative that Hawai‘i’s best and brightest are all leaving.

By: Amylia-Rae Gandolf, Benjamin Rudo, Cole Fuertes, David Freund, Ku‘uhiapo Jeong, and Makanaohaililani Waikiki.

Nearly 45% of Native Hawaiians reside outside the Hawaiian Archipelago, and the trend has accelerated in recent years. The high cost of living has led many to depart in pursuit of opportunities that will allow them to survive and thrive. This conjured a narrative of a brain drain among our youth that is reinforced in schools, communities, and families: “The best and brightest of Hawai‘i are *all* leaving.”

We’ve all heard it, and many of us have repeated these words. But have we ever considered the impact this narrative has on youth who choose to stay or return?

“I bought into the narrative that Hawai‘i had little to offer in comparison to the rest of the world and that I was doing myself a disservice by sticking around.” Amylia-Rae Gandolf of Waimea Hawai‘i, Vibrant Hawai‘i Fellow. Gandolf, who recently graduated with honors from the University of Hawai‘i at Hilo, recalls that despite being told that she would “go far” in life, it seemed attending college at home was never quite far enough. “While pursuing my undergraduate degree, I felt as though I was exactly what many of my peers and mentors believed me to be – wasted potential.”

Ku‘uhiapo Jeong of Waikahekahe, Hawai‘i, echoes this, stating that several high school teachers believed he was wasting his potential by choosing to attend college on the island. Jeong graduated in 2022 as a distinguished Overall Ka Lama Kū Leadership Award recipient at UH Hilo, and is currently enrolled in Biola University’s online Public Relations & Reputation Management graduate program. Equipped with a Bachelor of Arts degree in both Communications and Psychology, Jeong has already taken his first steps into the professional world in local government. “Even now, people ask if I will eventually leave.”

The value of local higher education

David Freund and Benjamin Rudo are Vibrant Hawai‘i Fellows from Puna, Hawai‘i.

“Staying in Hawai‘i gave me a unique opportunity for work based learning” says Freund. “I was able to get a headstart on my career and develop relationships with leaders of community organizations while obtaining my degree here. As a peer mentor at Queen Lili‘uokalani Trust, I

gained experience working with youth from my community where I hope to contribute as a high school history teacher.”

Speaking of his experience at Hawai‘i Community College, Rudo says, “HCC cultivates a deep understanding and connection with the ‘āina, which builds a foundation of respect.” He continued, “the geography of this place provides unique opportunities for hands-on learning in cultural and academic settings alike. Working in the sacred fishponds, or loko i‘a, was not only educational but also profoundly grounding.”

The best and the brightest return

Cole Fuertes, of Kapa‘au, North Kohala, serves as the Communications Coordinator for Vibrant Hawai‘i. He graduated from Menlo College with a degree in Business Marketing in 2021 and returned to Kohala to support his family and hometown community. Fuertes encourages others who attend college away from their hometown to remember where you come from and the values you were raised with. “We all have kuleana here. To our home and to our people.” He continues, “As the next generation of makua, it is our responsibility to think about future generations, and build pathways that enable them to thrive in Hawai‘i.”

Makanaohaililani Waikiki also decided to attend college abroad. A recent graduate of Western Oregon University, Waikiki shared once she left, she thought she wouldn’t return. While she was away, however, her mindset transformed entirely. Her love and admiration for her family, community, and culture deepened - reinforcing her connection to Hawai‘i and knowing that she could succeed anywhere. “Leaving Hawai‘i reminded me that Hawaiians measure up and so do I.”

Our role in shifting the narrative - and the trend

‘Oaka means to open, to sprout, and to flash. ‘OAKA is also an acronym for ‘Ōpio Alliance for Kuleana Advancement — a youth-designed and led coalition of Vibrant Hawai‘i that invests in leadership development and a sense of belonging.

In September last year, ‘OAKA led a series of islandwide summits that provided youth opportunities to network, identify skills and strengths, and connect with volunteer opportunities aligned with their passions, interests, and career pathways. The biggest impact however, was on youth participant’s sense of belonging and community connection: 96% reported that they built new relationships and deepened existing ones with the community, 87% grew in their sense of belonging and connection, and 90% reported that they believe they can make their community a better place.

Reframing conversations to focus on the positive aspects of staying, highlighting the unique opportunities available on the island, and challenging assumptions and stereotypes about what it means to be successful is another way to shift the deficit narrative. Parents and teachers play an important role in shaping youth's sense of belonging, kuleana to Hawai'i, and optimism of achieving success in their communities. 'OAKA provides these conversation starters to encourage a new narrative.

*What does success mean for our family, and how can I support you to be successful?
What concerns you about our community, and how might you one day be a part of the solution?
When you think about your life 10 years from now, do you see yourself here? Why or why not?*

The success stories of those who stayed or returned to Hawai'i are numerous and serve to dismantle the notion that the best and brightest are *all* leaving. For those who have stayed or returned, let's support their decision, broaden their definition of success, and deepen their sense of kuleana to Hawai'i by taking responsibility for our language and the power it holds.

Vibrant Hawai'i is a community building organization whose mission is to shift deficit narratives, systems, and policy that perpetuate poverty and inequity. We do this by facilitating forums for cross sector collaboration, resourcing community-led initiatives, and sharing community insight and truth with system change agents to create policy that advances equity and agency. Learn more about our work at www.vibranthawaii.org.