Kukuʻena
Guiding by Walking the Academic Path as a Learner Community
Who we are

Cohorts of learners enrolled in Hawaii Community College hula courses representing faculty, staff, and traditional students from Hawaii Community College, UH-Hilo and our community

Under the direction of kumuhula
Dr. Taupōuri Tangarō
Kamaka Mahi Gunderson, Kulukuluā Coordinator Title III, Hawai‘i Community College

My continuing experience as a Kuku‘ena is that of learner, guide, listener. It has provided me the opportunity to delve deeper into the world of students and community. As I chant, dance and sit beside students and other faculty and staff, I understand that learning is both personal and corporate. If we do our part and contribute to the whole, everyone benefits. Mahalo.
Gail Mililani Makuakâne-Lundin, *Interim Vice Chancellor for Student Services, UH-Hilo*

My purpose for entering into the kukuʻena experience was my personal journey to reconnect with my culture and find new meaning to my hectic life. The experience has reignited my spirit that allows me to engage successful in the work I loving doing, connecting to students and helping them to seek their passion and goals in higher education.
Drew Kapp, Lecturer in Geography at Hawai‘i Community College and UH-Hilo

Aloha. I have been part of this unique cohort for several years and am grateful for my involvement. I’m an educator at both our College and University in Hilo, and am in the position as a Kuku‘ena to help to smoothen our students’ transition between the two institutions. Many students in our hula classes have also been students in my geography classes. It is a powerful thing to begin to dismantle structures of power in the academy, and being a Kuku‘ena has done this for me. I dance alongside my students; sometimes my own students become my teachers – reminding me of the Hawaiian concept of aʻo – in which the ideas of both learning and teaching are contained within the concept. Seeing my students as my teachers in hula has encouraged me to undergo a pedagogic shift, conveying more power and leadership to students in my geography classes. Being in an environment that expresses learning and knowledge through orality and movement has encouraged me to try to become more proficient in the practice of chanting, writing chants, incorporating chants into our ‘āina-based learning/experiences, and also into my everyday life. Being part of this special cohort has helped to strengthen my own leadership skills, which in turn serve to strengthen those of my students. As a Kuku‘ena I feel like I’m more part of a community than I’ve ever felt before in my adult life, and it is an honor to serve that community. Finally, through participation in this cohort I have chosen to pursue my Associates degree at the College, in Hawai‘i Lifestyles, a nice complement to my graduate degree in Geography! Mahalo.
Celia Bardwell-Jones, Assistant Professor in Philosophy, and Affiliate Faculty in Gender and Women's Studies and Filipino Studies Certificate Program, UH-Hilo

As a new faculty member to UH-Hilo, I was deeply interested in learning about the culture of Hawaiʻi and the practice of Hula. In my first year, I encountered a few students in my class who were enrolled or had graduated from the Hawaiian Lifestyles program at Hawaiʻi Community College. I was intrigued that there was a hula class designed for faculty and staff in this program. I signed up for the hula class and found myself placed in the situation of being a student learning something completely foreign to me. I struggled my first year in learning the dances and the chants. Throughout this process, I kept reflecting on how my students felt learning a whole new subject matter and struggling in the same way I was in hula class. Not only did this class introduce me to the Hawaiian language through hula and chanting, but it reminded me of the sacred process of learning that both my own students and myself were going through together.
Aloha mai…I’m Ginger Leialoha Wright Hamilton, originally from the island of O‘ahu, but have made the island of Hawai‘i my home for the past 30 years. As the Interim Director of Kīpuka Native Hawaiian Student Center I have found that being a part of Unukupukupu and the Kuku‘ena cohort has been an enriching experience for the work that I do with Native Hawaiians and other underrepresented students. This program has successfully been a bridge for bringing together a diverse group of people from the Community College and the University which has included students, faculty, administration and other staff. We come together for the purpose of hula and we’ve been able to strengthen the ties and relationship between the 2 and 4 years colleges through protocol and other activities. What I have learned that is most valuable from the experience is how we are able to “contribute in ways that foster community and civic responsibility. We are taught the values that are significant to maintaining our Hawaiian culture and traditions, including aloha ‘āina, mālama, kōkua, alaka‘i, and kuleana. We are tied to the past, planted in the present, and building the pathways for the future.” (Kaulana Moloka‘i: Perpetuation of Native Hawaiian Traditions)
Being a part of Kuku'ena has helped me to see the bigger picture in the classes that I teach. Going through the process of learning each mele and hula and how that translates into student success and well-being really helps in the application of that process to the content of my courses. How can I make linguistics and the Hawaiian language relative to my students and their journey here at UH Hilo? Being a Kuku'ena opened up and widened my perspective on teaching, which ultimately lead to a better learning experience for my students.
Misaki Takabayashi, Associate Professor in Marine Science, UH-Hilo

To a faculty person, walking the academic path as a student allows a first-person understanding of how convoluted a student life can be. The understanding of the Hawai‘i universe I gained through my Kukuʻena hula experiences has also helped me appreciate life as a Hawaiʻi student.
Joe Genz, Assistant Professor in Anthropology, UH-Hilo

My involvement with Kukuʻena has profoundly impacted my thinking about student success at many levels. As a guest in Hawaiʻi, I have entered into a learning space that is quite different from my previous experiences—learning is primarily through my own body’s choreography of hula and expressed through chanting, and this is finessed through personal reflections and testimonies. Through my participation, I have a newfound appreciation for the cross-cultural challenges students, especially first-generation college students, face as they embrace the (largely non-indigenous) culture of the university. Dancing side-by-side with my students is a humbling experience but also allows for me to connect with them in class at a much deeper level, in terms of my growing knowledge about a Hawaiian worldview and associated protocols, as well as promoting experiential learning that embraces learning through multiple intelligences.
Trina Nahm-Mijo, Professor and Department Chair of Social Sciences and Public Services, Hawai‘i Community College.

Aloha. My name is Dr. Trina Nahm-Mijo and I am Professor and Department Chair of Social Sciences and Public Services at Hawai‘i CC since 1979! I joined the Kuku‘ena cohort in 2009 because of my lifelong love of Hula inspired especially by studying with Aunty Edith Kanaka'ole and Halau ‘O Kekuhi in the late 1970's. I have gained so much by reviving my study of the Hawaiian culture through Hula and integrate the concepts into my teaching, lifestyle, and philosophy of education. Mainly, remaining a learner myself, in my 60's, is a constant reminder of staying student-centered by listening carefully and seeing the unseen.
Mahalo.