

The interweaving of hula and academics provides reciprocal benefit to both institutions: hula can re-enchant academia with spirit and deep transformation; and scholarship can broaden the reflective capacity and worldwide significance of hula. Keeping indigenous life-ways vibrant and relevant in a global community entails practitioners who can articulate the value of their practice to a wide variety of audiences. Moreover, when the commonalities between cultures can be conveyed through archetypal patterns, the explication of hula can function as a catalyst for global empathy and environmental kinship. Therefore, a fundamental component of our Unu experience is the simultaneous enrollment in an academic program of our choice.

As official volunteers of Hawaii Community College, Unuolehua frequently participates in kīpaepae, or ritual gatherings that utilize hula, chant and Hawaii protocols to activate the mythic resonance of important points throughout the year, such as the start of a term, at graduation, and upon visits from guests and college leaders. In thanks for housing our hālau on campus we offer hula as a vehicle for inspiring individual and collective reflection, and reaffirming community. And in so doing have interwoven cultural performance of endemic mythology into the educational journeys of every student at the College.

As an educational program Unu has travelled the world engaging with educators, scientists, world leaders and indigenous peoples interested in social and environmental progress. We have performed alongside other cultural practitioners at the Smithsonian Folk Life Festival, the World Conservation Congress, educational conferences and college campuses across the nation, and indigenous sites world wide, exchanging with communities wherever we go around the importance of maintaining our relationships with ourselves, each other, and the universe. The idea of a deeply relational educational experience has given cause to the sharing of our hula, both locally and globally.

While in many ways hula and academia seem counterpoised, both culturally and epistemologically, at their core they offer the learner a similar trajectory of actualization: separation from what is known, transformation through practical and inner trial, and a functional reintegration into community. Education was my “hua,” the calling which brought me into the Unu process. I literally packed my life into my car and shipped it here after seeing a performance by the group. And Unu, in turn, was the “hua” for my re-entry into higher education, as I ended a nearly decade-long hiatus to pursue a graduate degree that explores the potential relationships between hula and depth psychology, as an extension of my hula training. Hula has urged me to disengage my typically cerebral and analytical approach and surrender to an experience that is more embodied and spiritual. And my academic reflections have affirmed and deepened the relevance of the hula process to experiences in my own intrapersonal and interpersonal life. The intention, for me, is for the parallelism of hula and academia to culminate in my ability to host an authentic experience of hula, as well as to elucidate its significance as a mode of healing and integration on personal and universal levels.

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Hula as a transformative process: Glimpses into Unuolehua

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