

Aloha,

I will not be able to attend in person to talk with the Higher Education task force. I am Kanaka Maoli (Native-Hawaiian), Black, French, Chinese, and Mexican, and my voice speaks for many people who matter. Thus, it's my kuleana (responsibility) to stand in solidarity with those who came before me and speak up on behalf of those who may journey this path after me.

Accessibility, or the state of doing something easily with little effort or hindrance, is not the case for underrepresented students. For example, I am the holy trifecta of non-traditional college students. I come from a low-socioeconomic background with limited access to quality education. Neither of my parents attended college (father was a citizen of Mexico; deceased); out of 8 siblings, I am the only one to attend college! Chronic childhood exposure to poverty and violence forced me to seek safety in the form of becoming a child bride. Prior to attending college, I dedicated my time to supporting a U.S Combat Marine of 21 years (husband) and raising our two children (one with severe medical issues).

I started my college career with low placement scores due to significant gaps in early education. I spent my initial years of college learning how to be around people that did not look, talk, and walk like me or share many similar life experiences. It's as if there wasn't a "whole-me" anywhere! I experienced extreme psychological distress, loneliness, and excessive levels of imposter syndrome daily, which significantly hindered my journey. The DRC services in college helped but were highly understaffed and funded. The lack of diversity, inclusion, community, transparency, and more felt like an intentional set-up my first term in graduate school (even if it wasn't). I am also mindful that much of the leadership in higher education is aware of the unhealthy traditionalist culture associated with higher education.

Affordable education is not the case either. For example, I accepted a Ph.D. offer that included a tuition waiver and a monthly stipend of \$1K. Thus, access and costs associated with higher education are not genuinely being recognized, precisely when we talk about underrepresented students. Low pay/stipend, no healthcare, and depending on what institution you attend, low quality of education and mentorship is not a fair trade-off. I've acquired extreme debt to relocate, provide food and shelter for myself, and purchase supplies for school. I can compensate for what my program doesn't offer, but that leaves me to consider people who are unable to acquire debt despite working hard to receive an offer from a graduate program. Is that actual access? I have

access because my husband has his retirement, he's a 100% working-disabled veteran, and he works full-time for the Transportation Security Agency (TSA) as an instructor. Without my spouse, I would not have had fair access despite being a competitive candidate.

It's patronizing to point out that I feel like an endured servant, but I do! I have healthcare through my husband, but Ph.D. students tend to have severe health issues directly associated with the stress related to the demands of higher education yet must join unions (and pay unions) to fight for healthcare. The assumption is that grad school builds grit or resilience. However, assuming a diverse nontraditional student like myself needs higher ed. to help me establish determination or grit minimizes everything I've endured. I'm gritty, and I've overcome things most could not live to tell. I do not believe that acquiring "academic grit" is why graduates are overworked, underpaid, and rewarded with subpar curriculum, mentorship, and learned marketable skills. It's also insensitive and retraumatizing to recruit diverse people to join a space ill-equipped to render them successful outcomes.

I am grateful to be one of the truly diverse graduates accepted into a partially funded program, but much is to be done! Moreover, I have no desire to place blame; I am just hoping for authentic conversations that lead to actionable change. I envision a standard within higher education that screams "we believe in knowing better and showing the world how to do better!" Honesty, transparency, and a heart for Ka Pono (righteousness) will be the best guide toward change.

Mahalo nui loa,

(Thank you very much)

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"Coming together is a beginning, staying together is progress, and working together is success!"

- Henry Ford