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Cultivating a Cultural Kipuka: Pacific Islander Practitioner Reflections

PACIFIC ISLANDERS (PI) continue to be under-represented in all sectors of higher education, including students, staff, and faculty. For example, data from the 2010 Census reveals that less than 20 percent, or one fifth, of Pacific Islander adults aged 25 or older hold a bachelor’s degree (EPIC & AAJC, 2014). These data point to an urgent need to support higher education attainment for the Pacific Islander community.

More recently, a 2019 report coauthored by researchers from Asian and Pacific Islander American (APIA) Scholars and the Institute for Immigration, Globalization, and Education at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), revealed a high concentration of PI enrolled at Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs). While AANAPISIs enroll 14.1 percent of all undergraduates nationally, they enroll 38.1 percent of the total PI students (Teranishi et al., 2019). Based on existing research, and our own experiences, we know that AANAPISIs are in a prime position to support PI students and that certain kinds of support are needed.

We are PI practitioners who have navigated and worked in various sectors of higher education. In this article, we share our reflections on how institutions can be more inclusive of PI. This chapter is intended for educational institutions overall, but is especially pertinent for AANAPISIs. We write this from our respective locations on Turtle Island, which hosts a large and growing population of diverse Pacific Islander communities, many who have migrated or have become displaced to these lands. We offer a metaphor for our

work—a cultural kipuka, or place of growth in ‘ōlelo Hawai‘i, Hawaiian language. Our goal is to create these cultural kipuka on campus in order to nurture the empowerment and success of PIs and other Indigenous students in higher education. We also reveal the multiple strategies and processes that have been important in sustaining us, our students, and our work. We offer these humble reflections to ignite conversations rather than as a how-to guide. We hope these discussions can inform the work of educators at AANAPISIs and higher education institutions overall.

Our Positionality

AS EDUCATORS AND COMMUNITY advocates, we bring a wide array of experience and skills to support PI student success. The following is a brief personal introduction from each of us.

I, Kēhaulani Vaughn, am Kanaka ‘Ōiwi residing on Turtle Island currently hosted on the lands of the Ute, Paiute, Goshute, and Shoshone nations and people. I am an Assistant Professor in Education, Culture & Society and faculty for the Pacific Island Studies Initiative at the University of Utah (U). At the U, I have established the Pasifika Scholars Summer Institute—a higher education bridge program between the U and the local Pacific Islander community. Before my role as faculty, I worked as a practitioner in higher education. Some of my practitioner roles included undergraduate/graduate advising, a Coordinator for Trio and Tribal TANF, and an Associate Dean and Director of a cultural center. For many years, I taught community-engaged

courses at the Claremont Colleges that directly worked with the Saturday Tongan Education Program (STEP), a tutoring and mentoring program dedicated to the academic success of the Tongan community. Being Kanaka 'Ōiwi from Turtle Island inspires my work toward improved educational access and resilience of PI, Indigenous, and underrepresented students in higher education. I am also a founding board member of Empowering Pacific Islander Communities (EPIC), whose mission is to empower Pacific Islander Communities through advocacy, research, and leadership development. Additionally, I am the Vice President of the board of Mana Charter Academy, a Pacific Islander based charter school in Utah.

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I, Natasha Saelua, am Samoan with genealogical ties to the villages of Leone and Tafananai, American

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Samoa. I served as a community advisory board member of Santa Monica College's AANAPISI program and also led leadership activities for the University of Hawai'i, Hilo Pacific Islander Student Center (an AANAPISI-funded program), in 2010. As a practitioner, I have worked with PI high school and college students for over 20 years, most recently with EPIC's Pacific Islander Leaders of Tomorrow (PILOT) culture-based leadership development program. My research and advocacy agenda centers on the experiences and success of Pacific Islander students and the institutions that serve them, with an emphasis on the colleges and universities in the U.S.-affiliated Pacific. I am honored to join my sisters in community, Kēhau and Asena, to reflect on our work with, and for, Pacific Islander students.

I, 'Asena Taione-Filihia, am Tongan with roots to the villages of Utui, Tu'anuku, Veitongo, Ma'ufanga and Fangale'ounga in Tonga. I currently serve as an Assistant Director of the Asian American Resource Center at Pomona College. I have been a student and practitioner in each of California's higher education institutions. Following graduate school, I worked at Santa Monica College's (SMC) AANAPISI-funded program as a Community Specialist. We developed, "We Rise," a transfer student-focused conference demystifying the community college pathways to top tier research 4-year universities for PI and their families. Additionally, I co-created the Native and Pacific Islander Summer Intensive Transfer Experience at UCLA that is geared at supporting PI and Native community college transfer students. My education philosophy and my practitioner experience inform the work I do to transform programs and institutions through Indigenous-focused frameworks. I am humbled to join Kēhau and Tasha as we talanoa about our experiences in serving our Pacific Islander students and their families.

Turning now to our own experiences as Pacific Islander practitioners, we offer some of the principles and strategies we use to cultivate a cultural kipuka, honor and foster a genealogy of mentorship, and other institutional strategies to grow a thriving, resilient PI student body.

Carving Spaces for Cultural Kipuka

SETTLER EDUCATION SYSTEMS are intended to perpetuate dominant cultural values while simultaneously erasing and suppressing the experiences of nondominant communities (Ka'ōpua, 2013). Having been through higher education ourselves, we know that these places were never intended for us, and continue to be places that do not acknowledge or value our existence. For example, higher education institutions continue to be places where our communities and our cultural items are the objects of study rather than

researchers and teachers of study. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, a Maori Indigenous scholar, analyzes the history of research done on Indigenous communities, including PIs, and highlights the legacy of mistrust and harmful consequences in her groundbreaking work, *Decolonizing Methodologies* (Smith 2012). Smith situates research within the context of power and instructs institutions and researchers to engage in collaborative and reciprocal methods when working with Indigenous communities. This can lead to more community-engaged research and a greater pipeline of Indigenous researchers.

We continue to be some of the few Pacific Islander scholars and practitioners at any given institution. Therefore, we strive to carve spaces within higher education that are intentional for cultural kipuka—Indigenous cultural growth (Goodyear-Ka’ōpua, 2013). Goodyear-Ka’ōpua (2013) defines the Hawaiian term kipuka as an oasis within a lava bed where vegetation can grow and compares it to spaces that foster cultural and academic growth for students). We equate cultural kipuka to social-cultural spaces within educational institutions that can facilitate and nurture Pacific Islander educational success. In our experience, these intentional spaces have the power to cultivate academic, cultural, and social development and promote critical growth. By creating groups, programming, and acquiring of physical spaces, we cultivate cultural kipukas on campus that center our cultural values and nourish students. In these spaces, we teach students about community cultural wealth while introducing and normalizing cultural practices within academia: practices such as the way we acknowledge the land, our Native hosts (Vaughn, 2019), our ancestors, and infusing our work with our Indigenous languages, and music. We have found that these spaces are essential not just for students but also serve a similar purpose for PI staff and faculty.

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Honoring and Fostering a Genealogy of Mentorship

OUR HIGHER EDUCATION JOURNEYS are shaped by those who have come before us—those who created and

sustained a cultural kipuka for our development (Meyer, 2003). These include mentors on campus as well as in the community. Genealogy, and the acknowledgment of ancestry, is a cornerstone of Pacific Island cultures. It connects us to our ancestors and teaches us to find our relationships with each other through our shared genealogy as PI (Ka’ili, 2017). Therefore, we engage in this work as part of a shared genealogy of mentorship.

Collectively, our mentors taught us to value community responsibility and understand our education as an extension of this effort (Reyes, 2016). Community reciprocity and/or responsibility is known by culturally specific terms such as *kuleana* (responsibility, burden, right: Hawaiian), *chenchule’* (reciprocity: Chamorro), and *fa’alavelave* (reciprocity, obligation: Samoan). This community obligation shapes a large part of PI students’ college narratives (Reyes, 2016), including our own. Therefore, we believe that we have inherited a responsibility to perpetuate our mentors’ work and create opportunities and environments that sustain PI and other underrepresented students. This is a way to honor those who have come before us and improve the experiences of those who come after us. These values are embedded through a genealogy of mentorship (Saffrey, 2016) that links us back to our communities with the responsibility and accountability to those we serve.

Support Pacific Island Studies/ Indigenous Studies

WHILE WE STRIVE TO CREATE cultural kipuka to nourish our students outside of the classroom, it is imperative to also promote growth inside the classroom. Pacific Island Studies needs to be an important curriculum consideration for higher education institutions. PI students, like other underrepresented students, want and need a culturally relevant curriculum and pedagogical practices. Having a culturally relevant curriculum holds many benefits for a campus: PI studies empower PI and non-PI students; explore the diversity within the PI population; provide a more ethical and reliable source of Indigenous research methodologies (Smith, 2012); and contribute to a diverse learning environment.

In our experience, institutions often justify Pacific Island Studies offerings, or the lack thereof, based on PI student enrollment. We believe this logic to be short-sighted. It assumes that non-PI students will not benefit from Pacific Island Studies. We believe that everyone benefits from Pacific Island Studies and that offering such courses could attract more PI. Pacific Island Studies curriculum can serve as a cornerstone to empower students while dispelling the misrepresentations that continue to affect our community negatively. Therefore,

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Several institutions, some of them AANAPISI-funded, have developed Pacific Island Studies as a method for PI student success. The City College of San Francisco, for example, recently approved a Critical Pacific Islands Studies program. Similarly, PI studies minors and certificate programs have been implemented at San Francisco State, the University of Washington, and the University of Utah. These initiatives are responsive to and supportive of the demographic shift in states that host a large and growing Pacific diasporic population. We applaud these efforts and advocate for even more institutions to follow their lead. Furthermore, for these programs and others to achieve success, institutions must invest in hiring tenure-track PI faculty, and in addition, full-time staff dedicated to wrap-around services to support student outreach, retention, and community engagement.

Hire PI Staff and Faculty and Pay for PI Expertise

ONE OF THE EASIEST WAYS that higher education institutions can foster inclusive environments and promote success for PIs is to hire diverse PI staff and faculty. Education scholars have argued the importance of seeing and relating to mentors with similar backgrounds (Museus, 2014). Hiring more PI faculty and staff can provide PI students with mentors of similar backgrounds that have successfully navigated higher education, and provide non-PI students essential experiences with diverse faculty and staff. Having

PI faculty and staff will strengthen the cultural environment for all students while demonstrating institutional commitments to our communities.

Hiring PI staff and faculty is important, and also, there is a need to consider multiple facets of this strategy. First, PIs are not monolithic and have unique experiences and backgrounds across ethnic groups. For example, some PIs are US citizens because of ongoing settler colonialism, while others are immigrants or migrants. Therefore, we caution against tokenization. Second, we caution against performative engagements with our community that does nothing to address the roots of our underrepresentation in higher education. For example, having cultural performances as the sole method of community engagement can perpetuate notions that our cultures are experiences that are easily consumable and that our people and communities have no other place in the academy (Trask, 1993). Institutions need to promote PIs as both knowledge and cultural bearers, and examine practices to ensure that engagements are authentic and rooted in the empowerment of Pacific communities.

Work with Local Community Organizations

INSTITUTIONS THAT ARE seeking to increase PI students, staff, and faculty should find ways to partner with and support community-based organizations. These organizations can assist with the development of pathways and serve as paid consultants. Educational institutions can engage in reciprocal relationships with community organizations by providing various resources, including financial and technical expertise that can assist with the goals and missions of the organizations. Students can become interns and gain valuable experience that is both praxis and research based. This can create a pipeline of emerging leaders who are community engaged. Additionally, many PIs rely on and invest in strong faith-based networks. This could be another avenue to pursue when thinking about outreach, engagement, and successful pathways.

From personal experience, we know that these strategies can be successful through the connections and relationships forged by institutional partners with Empowering Pacific Islander Communities (EPIC). EPIC's leadership development series, the Pacific Islander Leaders of Tomorrow program (PILOT), has been offered on several college campuses whose staff have committed to serving Pacific Islander students. Student Affairs units such as the Community Programs Office at UCLA have forged agreements with EPIC to provide community and research internship opportunities for PI-identified students. We encourage campuses

to sponsor such programs facilitated by community organizations in their support of PI students.

In pursuing community relationships, we recommend the following core principles. Engage mindfully with the understanding that building successful relationships is a commitment that takes time. Connect with local organizations not just to pursue institutional goals but also to build your awareness around the political, social, and cultural dynamics within the local PI community that may influence how students respond or show up. Across all these strategies, trust is a vital component. Follow through, stay present, and come with humility and transparency to our community spaces.

Disaggregate Data on AAPIs

AS DISCUSSED WITH the importance of hiring PI faculty and staff, representation matters. PI experiences within higher education continue to be obscured by the Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) racial category. Many have argued that the category is inadequate to address the large number of communities contained within the category (Teranishi, Le, Gutierrez, Venturanza, Hafoka, Gogue, & 'Uluave, 2019; Chang, 2016; Kana'iaupuni, 2011; Kauanui, 2008). The practice of data aggregation influences policy decisions that continue the invisibility and erasure of PIs as Indigenous people (Hafoka et al., 2020; Kauanui 2008). The AAPI rubric racializes PIs as ethnic minorities while suppressing Indigeneity and self-determination (Kauanui 2008; Vaughn, in press; Wright & Balutski, 2013). Linda Smith (2012) states, "Representation is an important concept because it gives the impression of truth" (p. 37). Thus, we caution institutions that rely on AAPI data sets—they do not accurately represent PIs. Without intentional efforts to involve the PI community in their representation, institutions of higher education contribute to the continued erasure of PIs.

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In short, we strongly caution institutions and ask them to reconsider practices of aggregating smaller populations, including PI, for the sake of inclusion

(Vaughn, in press). Instead, we urge institutions and researchers to focus on the ways that data can be used to uplift the realities of students whose voices are often overlooked (Vaughn, in press). We encourage data collection efforts to include PI and our community organizations. They can assist with the strategies necessary to improve data collection efforts in and for our community.

Conclusion

WE CONCLUDE WITH a simple request for those working as scholars and practitioners: Engage Pacific Islander students and communities in meaningful and liberating ways. Administrators and faculty in leadership roles, please seek, create, and provide tangible resources to support such programs and initiatives. Higher education institutions and, by extension, practitioners can address PI underrepresentation by establishing programming, policies, and practices that empower PI students and their communities while contributing to a genealogy of mentorship.

As we engage in ongoing work to create cultural kipukas for Pacific Islander students, we are grateful for the opportunity to pause, reflect, and share these humble thoughts. Our hope is that we have provided useful frameworks and strategies to those who are operating within AANAPISI and non-AANAPISI institutions. There continues to be few Pacific Islander scholars and practitioners in higher education because many institutions are not knowledgeable about our community and have not invested in us. There is much work to be done in order to better serve communities within the margins. Large-scale programs may not meet the needs of smaller communities such as Pacific Islander that have a specific history and relationship with colonial education. PI like other Indigenous communities need specific policies and culturally relevant strategies to address our underrepresentation in higher education. This requires institutions to learn, listen, and to invest in long-term relationships with Indigenous communities including PI. However, there have been successes in better meeting the needs of PI students in a diversity of institutional settings from private liberal arts, community college, state schools, and Minority Serving Institutions (MSI) and non-MSI institutional settings. The research is only beginning to tell the story of the importance of transformative spaces in higher education. Our experience and the collective experience of a whole network of PI scholars/practitioners reveals the importance of creating cultural kipukas that promote Indigenous and PI cultural growth.

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