

Momoe Aku i Mua:¹ Educational Pursuits and the Decision to Leave Hawai‘i

Findings from the *Hawai‘i in Motion: Understanding the Decision to Stay, Leave, or Return* Study

December 2022

By
Wendy Kekahio, M.A.
Shawn Kana‘iaupuni, Ph.D.
Ciera Pagud, M.P.H

Kamehameha Schools
Strategy & Transformation Group

Summary

Continuing education is a decision many Hawai‘i residents face after high school graduation and a reason many decide to leave Hawai‘i. This paper describes findings from the study *Hawai‘i in Motion: Understanding the Decision to Stay, Leave, or Return*, in which over half of participants identified education as an important factor when contemplating a move away from the islands. This decision is complex, taking into account educational program and degree availability, quality of post-secondary institutions, and college and living expenses. These factors are influenced by Hawai‘i’s cost of living, the desire to live somewhere new and have different experiences, and financial supports that may be needed by siblings for their own college journeys. Findings show strong financial supports for post-secondary education, availability of desired programs and degrees within the islands, and strong institutional reputations would influence many to stay within Hawai‘i to attend college. Among those who leave for college, many return upon completion of their post-secondary program as originally intended. Relatedly, the decision of where to attend college affects, and is affected by, those close to the college-goer. Some participants move because of their partner’s decision to attend a college on the continent. Similarly, parents consider moving either away from, or back to, Hawai‘i depending on where their children decide to attend college. Parents also consider moving from Hawai‘i in search of better K-12 education opportunities for their children.

¹ Tr. Move ahead with determination

Recommended Citation:

Kekahio, W., Kana'iaupuni, S., & Pagud, C. (2022). *Moemoe Aku i Mua: Educational Pursuits and the Decision to Leave Hawai'i*. Kamehameha Schools, Strategy & Transformation.

Acknowledgements:

This study was conducted with the support from SMS Research and Auriga WPS Consulting.

Correspondence:

Correspondence concerning this article may be sent to Wendy Kekahio at wekekahi@ksbe.edu

Study Overview

Hawai'i in Motion: Understanding the Decision to Stay, Leave, or Return is a large-scale, statewide study conducted in 2019 to understand reasons why Native Hawaiian families and others leave, return, or remain in Hawai'i. This study explores the connection between movement out-of-state and key individual and systemic economic, environmental, education, health, and social factors. This research illuminates the deep connections and cause and effect dynamics of policies, relationships, resources, power, and values within our state that contribute to, or deter, families from voluntarily and involuntarily moving away.

This study captures perspectives prior to the COVID-19 pandemic which altered the lives of Hawai'i residents and reshaped the social and economic conditions in which we live. Overall study findings highlight many conditions vastly affected by the pandemic: the availability of jobs, high cost of living, digital and in-person educational opportunities, and the strength of social, cultural, and family ties. Through understanding these critical aspects, a better normal can be created in which Native Hawaiians, and everyone in Hawai'i, have opportunities to thrive wherever they choose.

Study Participants

In addition to examining U.S. Census Bureau data to calculate migration rates and trends, personal stories were gathered from individuals who have left Hawai'i. In some cases, these individuals moved away and later returned to Hawai'i; in other cases, individuals were still residing out-of-state at the time of the study. Individuals who chose to remain in Hawai'i and did not move away were also interviewed. Stories were gathered through phone interviews from approximately 250 individuals born in Hawai'i.

Demographically, participants represent all education levels, counties in Hawai'i, and range in age from 18 years to over 75 years. Native Hawaiians were oversampled and comprised two-thirds of participants.² See Appendix A for more information.

This Brief

This brief is a part of a series that presents findings from the *Hawai'i in Motion* study. It focuses particularly on the influence of educational pursuits on the decision to leave or stay in Hawai'i; however, the influence of education is situated within many other factors that also impact decision making around where to live. Our broader analysis of interview data show that economics and social factors, in addition to education, play prominent roles in this decision. These topics are discussed in separate publications.

² For this study, participants self-identified and reported if they are of Native Hawaiian ancestry. Among the 253 participants interviewed for this study, 169 identify as Native Hawaiian, comprising 67 percent of respondents.

Introduction

At only eighteen, Kalei knew she wanted to establish her career at home in Hawai'i. However, as her high school graduation approached, it became harder to imagine balancing college and continuing to live in the islands. Between the cost of school, the commute to the university, and struggling to afford rent, Kalei realized it was not feasible to stay in Hawai'i. A university in the Midwest offered her multiple scholarships, making it the most affordable option. On top of that, she couldn't help but be drawn to unique programs she couldn't find in Hawai'i. As Kalei prepared to move, she told herself she would come home as soon as possible and eventually make enough money to live in Hawai'i. Once away, she found herself lonely and aching for connection with her culture and other Hawaiians. There was no one that looked like her or spoke like her. She persisted, staying longer than she had planned and earned two Master's degrees with minimal debt. It was the loss of a parent that finally brought her home. Although she knew it would not be easy, she wanted to be near family and community again. She shared, "I got to travel all over the world. My heart and soul want to be in Hawai'i. This is home. I'm going to work as hard or do whatever it takes to be able to stay here despite difficult times, despite difficulties with finding housing, despite cost of living, whatever that may be. I put myself in a position that I'm going to fight to thrive here. There's no other option for me."³

Kalei's story is typical of many others' experiences in pursuing higher education following high school and highlights the multitude of factors that go into the decision to leave or stay within Hawai'i. The pursuit of a college education has long been a catalyst to relocate to areas outside of one's hometown. In a study conducted in the 1970s, college was highlighted prominently as an important reason to leave Hawai'i following high school (Wright, 1979). Subsequent studies showed that limited educational prospects in Hawai'i can influence decisions to leave the state (Wright, 1979; Malone, 2004; Ishibashi, 2005; Nakatsuka et. al, 2013; Kamehameha Schools, 2013). In the context of higher education, obtaining a post-secondary degree or certificate is linked to stronger future workforce opportunities, higher income, and advanced skills and knowledge. Relatedly, the decision of continuing with higher education is often tied to anticipated economic and employment gains (Schultz & Higbee, 2007). Coupled with continued learning through higher education, attending college can present an opportunity to have new experiences, establish independence, and see and live in places outside of Hawai'i.

Educational opportunities during both compulsory and post-secondary stages for oneself, a partner, or their children continue to play a strong role in deciding where to live. Findings presented here provide an expanded discussion on the educational factors that influence the decision to leave Hawai'i.

³ This story is based on an interview conducted through the *Hawai'i in Motion* study with changes to names and other identifying information.

Findings

The pursuit of education plays a prominent role in the consideration and, for some, the decision to leave Hawai'i. Over half of participants report education as an important factor when contemplating a move away from the islands. In the broadest sense, educational reasons to leave Hawai'i encompass seeking compulsory or post-secondary education for themselves or someone close to them. Specifically, participants describe the following areas related to education as reasons to leave the islands (Figure 1):

- (1) Personal higher education pursuits;
- (2) Supporting another's education;
- (3) K-12 education opportunities.

Within this section, each area is described along with the role education plays in deciding whether to leave or stay in Hawai'i.



Figure 1. Education-related reasons for leaving or returning to Hawai'i

Higher Education Pursuits as a Catalyst for Leaving Hawai'i

Pursuing higher education is one of the top reasons to leave Hawai'i. While some participants always thought they would leave Hawai'i for college, others consider several factors related to higher education prior to making the decision to leave. These factors include the affordability of education, the types of degrees and programs offered or not offered by institutions in Hawai'i and afar, the quality of education programs and institutions, and the opportunity to experience new things.

Affordability and General Cost of Living

The affordability of a college or university is a prominent factor for most when deciding where to go to school. Participants consider financial aid packages, tuition waivers, and scholarships and compare offers from institutions on the continent to those in Hawai'i. In addition to the cost of attending college, participants account for all costs of living. One participant describes this by saying "it was cheaper to go out of state than it was to go to [a college in Hawai'i] if you took into account housing." Another says that they "wanted to go to a state where it was relatively affordable to be a college student with no real job or source of income." These statements, representative of many others, highlight the significance of college affordability and general living costs when making the decision of where to attend college following high school.

Additionally, some describe considering their siblings' current or future post-secondary plans. One participant had a brother who was already going to an expensive school and also a younger sister who still needed to go to college. This person explains that their

“sister never got to go to the mainland [for school] because of [me and my brother], so there was guilt.” Another participant echoes this, saying their decision about where to go to school accounted for a “younger brother who still had to go to college.”

Strong financial supports for a post-secondary education in Hawai‘i could increase the likelihood that people remain in the state. As one participant describes, “if I had been offered a better scholarship in Hawai‘i, I probably would have stayed.” Another shares that they would reconsider staying in Hawai‘i “if there was [an] educational program that fit my needs... and financially I could make it.”

Availability of Degrees and Programs

Another area of consideration in deciding where to go to school are the types of post-secondary degrees and programs offered by institutions in Hawai‘i or elsewhere. Many respondents say that their program or field of interest is not available in Hawai‘i. Another participant explains “the communication school was only available on the mainland, they didn’t have one here in Hawai‘i so I had to go to Baltimore. It was my only choice.” Similarly another participant frames the decision as involuntary: “Some of the degree programs I was looking at [weren’t] here in Hawai‘i. So [I] was almost forced to leave if I wanted to stay in that degree area.” This highlights a choice many residents face between pursuing a career of their choice and staying in the islands. Conversely, for one participant, their field of study was specific to Hawai‘i and therefore provided a reason to stay in the islands for school.

The issue of availability affects educational opportunities outside of traditional colleges and universities: “the education that I wanted was not offered in Hawai‘i so I had to move away. It was a trade school, so I had to move away to get that certificate.” Speaking about new opportunities in an up-and-coming field at the time of their decision, one participant shares “I knew that [we] were right on the cusp of computers and Facebook and Google and all of that. So, I knew it was going to be big. I knew I had to learn the software.” These experiences illuminate the need for a wide variety of post-high school education options, especially vocational and innovative career preparation.

Quality of Higher Education Opportunities

The perceived quality of post-secondary education opportunities here and afar influences decisions to leave Hawai‘i. Some participants feel schools on the continent generally are of better quality and are willing to leave Hawai‘i to receive that type of education. They express that the decision to leave “was mostly about the quality of education that [one] could have rather than staying home” and that going away is “what you need to get a good education and good future.” One participant sums it up by saying “all of this is a nice way of saying I didn’t want to go to [a school in Hawai‘i].”

Some people may consider staying in Hawai‘i for education if higher quality educational programming are available in their field of interest. A participant shares that if a college in Hawai‘i “had a stronger reputation for the degree program I was seeking, I would have considered staying.” These voices express the influence of the reputation of higher education in Hawai‘i broadly and that of specific programs on residents’ decision on where to attend school.

Seeking New Experiences and Opportunities

Historically for our kūpuna,⁴ travel has always been an avenue for learning as well as an opportunity to experience new things and see different places. As one participant states, he “wanted to explore the rest of the world, under the guise of going to school.”

⁴ Grandparent, ancestor, relative or close friend of the grandparent's generation, grandaunt, granduncle.

Another participant who left for college shares that she “wanted to pursue a career and see more than just this little place.” Sentiments around going to college on the continent for a “change of scenery” are echoed by participants who consider going away but ultimately decide to remain in Hawai‘i.

Some participants also frame moving as an opportunity for personal growth and independence. They see moving as an important coming-of-age experience where they can learn how to live apart from their families. As one participant shares, “My dad always said that for school you should go away and be on your own. I think for him it was [to] see the world, but it’s also like, ‘okay, make sure you know how to like do your laundry yourself.’” Another participant states, “It was about wanting to grow up, wanting to be out from under my parents’ influence, and the quality of education.” These quotes show that pressure to move away to achieve more independence can come from family members or from personal motivation.

For some, moving is always intended to be a temporary experience. They leave with the intention of returning after they complete their education and experience life afar. One participant shares, “I didn’t want to leave the islands, but I did want to see the world. I didn’t want to just stay on the rock, [but] I would come back.” When considering why this is so important in their decision they state, “I am only young once and I wanted to explore and see things if I had the chance to.” Having grown up in the islands, participants were curious to see more of the world, and then return to settle down and contribute to their community in Hawai‘i.

Following Completion of Higher Education

A common thread in our interviews is the idea of going away to school with the intention of coming back and bringing increased knowledge and skills to our islands. For example, people report that “my intentions were to get schooling and come back home,” “it was to get education and then come back,” and, “[I wanted to] bring new lessons and skills back to the island.” This sentiment of returning home are echoed throughout many of the conversations.

Among participants who moved away from Hawai‘i, about one in five say they returned to Hawai‘i once they completed their educational program. For many, they always intended to return home and completing their education provided that opportunity. One person recounts, “I wanted to go away for education, but always wanted to come back home.” Another shares, “I never planned to move to any other place. I got my education—didn’t get the degree, but got the education I wanted—and came back home.”

In contrast, for others who went to college in Hawai‘i, graduating was a milestone that led them to leave the state. As one participant describes, “Graduation was the tipping point. I graduated mid-June and was gone July 1st.” For these participants, college graduation represents an opportunity to experience life outside Hawai‘i and pursue independence.

Supporting Another’s Education

For some individuals, moving outside of Hawai‘i happens when a partner is seeking to further their education at an institution out of state. For example, one participant describes leaving when their spouse enrolled in an art school on the continent even though they didn’t want to go. Others share similar statements such as, “my [spouse] wanted to finish their education,” “for my [spouse] to get their master’s degree,” and “getting an education was very important for their role as the breadwinner of the house.”

People also move away from Hawai'i when their children decide to attend college on the continent. One participant highlights the relationship between their children's educational choices and where they live: "[Our] oldest daughter graduated from high school and she was deciding if she wanted to go or stay [in Hawai'i]. Also, our son is a senior now and he was sharing that he [wants to go away]." In reverse, some participants decide to return to Hawai'i when their children attend a college in Hawai'i.

K-12 Education Opportunities

Another educational reason why some leave Hawai'i involves K-12 opportunities on the continent. Some households with school-age children move out of state in order to provide their children with a better K-schooling experience. One participant shares, "it was actually for the kids so that they had better schooling and education." Another describes wanting "to open up the same opportunity to my kids."

Others who consider moving but end up staying in Hawai'i echo the pull of educational opportunities afar. For example, as one woman indicates, "school options are better for children [elsewhere]. Education is readily available. [In Hawai'i] my kids go to private school which is expensive." Many Hawai'i residents consider how to provide their children with high-quality education while factoring in the cost of expensive private schools.

Covid-19 Implications

The findings shared in this report capture perspectives of study participants prior to the Covid-19 pandemic which altered the lives of Hawai'i residents and reshaped social, educational, and economic conditions. Emerging research shows that the impact on learning has been unprecedented. Nationwide, the closure of in-person schooling and switch to distance learning contributed to significant learning loss among K-12 students, despite extraordinary efforts on behalf of educators and learners to make the most of the situation (Dorn, et al., 2021; Kuhfeld, et al., 2022). This learning loss is exacerbated among historically disadvantaged and minoritized communities, who appear to be further behind in reading and math. These communities also experience higher dropout rates among high school learners and a decrease in those who go on to pursue post-secondary education (Dorn, et al., 2021).

Hawai'i has also seen learning loss among K-12 students and a decrease in college enrollment. The University of Hawai'i System continues to experience a downward trend in overall enrollment, more prominent in 2020 and 2021, with more young adults opting to find employment due to the financial uncertainty caused by the pandemic (Infante, 2022). With less students prepared for or choosing a college education, there are long-term implications on individual health and wellbeing in terms of decreased learning potential, fulfilling job placements, and overall resilience, in addition to impacts on the state's economy (Infante, 2022; National Science Board, 2022).

The factors surrounding quality K-12 education and the decision to pursue a post-secondary degree have greatly shifted in the wake of the pandemic. Understanding the educational reasons individuals and families consider in their decision to leave or remain in Hawai'i must now also be viewed in this context to identify the best path forward in ensuring Native Hawaiians, and others in Hawai'i, have opportunities to thrive wherever they choose.

Conclusion

Whether and where to continue education is a decision many people face following high school graduation. This decision is complex and involves personal calculations regarding the location of available programs and degrees, the quality of post-secondary programs, and economic factors of college and living. These elements are weighed relative to Hawai'i's high cost of living, the desire for new and different experiences, and financial supports needed by other family members for college. Findings show that strong financial supports for post-secondary education, availability of desired programs and degrees within the islands, and strong institutional reputations would influence many to stay within Hawai'i to attend college.

Among those who leave for college, many return upon completion of their post-secondary program as originally intended. Relatedly, the decision of where to attend college affects those who are related to the college-goer, including parents or partners who move to accompany their loved one. Parents also consider moving from Hawai'i in search of better K-12 education opportunities for their children.

Findings discuss multiple facets of compulsory and post-secondary education as important factors in deciding to stay or leave Hawai'i with implications for the school systems within our state. Another prominent factor in the decision of where to live is discussed in our companion brief focused on the cost of living and job opportunities within Hawai'i.

References

- Dorn, E., Hancock, B., Sarakatsannis, J. & Viruleg, E. (2021, July 27). COVID-19 and education: The lingering effects of unfinished learning. *McKinsey & Company*. Retrieved from <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/education/our-insights/covid-19-and-education-the-lingering-effects-of-unfinished-learning>.
- Infante, E. M. (2022, October 20). University of Hawaii enrollment dips as graduation rates rise. *Star Advertiser*. Retrieved from <https://www.staradvertiser.com/2022/10/20/hawaii-news/university-of-hawaii-enrollment-dips-as-graduation-rates-rise/>.
- Ishibashi, K. (2005). *Geographic and Social Ties to Hawai'i: Responses from the KS Alumni Survey*. Unpublished Manuscript. Kamehameha Schools, Strategy & Transformation.
- Kamehameha Schools. 2013. *Multi-Generational Alumni Survey 2013*. Unpublished Manuscript. Kamehameha Schools, Strategy & Transformation.
- Kuhfeld, M., Soland, J., Lewis, K., & Morton, E. (2022, March 3). The pandemic has had devastating impacts on learning. What will it take to help students catch up? *Brookings*. Retrieved From <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2022/03/03/the-pandemic-has-had-devastating-impacts-on-learning-what-will-it-take-to-help-students-catch-up/>.
- Malone, N.J. (2004). "Modern Hawaiian Migration: Brain Drain or Brain Gain?" *Hulili: Multidisciplinary Research on Hawaiian Well-Being* 1(1), 149-169. https://kamehamehapublishing.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/38/2020/09/Hulili_Vol1_10.pdf.
- Nakatsuka, N.J., Esquivel, L.M., Levin, M.J., Browne, C.V. & Braun, K.L.. (2013). "Identifying the Unique Challenges Facing Kanaka Maoli Kūpuna Residing Outside of Hawai'i." *Hulili: Multidisciplinary Research on Hawaiian Well-Being*(9), 133-151. https://kamehamehapublishing.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/38/2020/09/Hulili_Vol9_6.pdf.
- National Science Board. (2022). "COVID-19 and Higher Education". <https://nces.nsf.gov/pubs/nsb20223/assets/u-s-institutions-providing-s-e-higher-education/sidebars/nsb20223-covid-19-and-higher-education.pdf>.
- Schultz, J.L. & Higbee, J.L. (2007). Reasons for Attending College: The Student Point of View. *Research and Teaching in Developmental Education* 23 (2),69-76. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42802288>.
- Wright, P.A. (1979). *Residents Leave Paradise: A Study of Outmigration from Hawaii to the Mainland*. [PhD diss., University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, Hawai'i].

Appendix A: Participant Demographics

Demographic	Percentage of Participants
Migrant Status	
Stayers: Adults born in Hawai'i who have not lived outside of Hawai'i as an adult. Adults who lived outside of Hawai'i for less than one year are included in this group.	26%
Movers: Adults born in Hawai'i who moved from Hawai'i as an adult, lived on the continental U.S. for one year or more, and were residing outside of Hawai'i at the time this study was conducted.	20%
Returners: Adults born in Hawai'i who lived outside of Hawai'i for one year or more as an adult and subsequently returned to Hawai'i.	54%
Residence	
Honolulu County	39%
Hawai'i County	19%
U.S Continent	20%
Maui County	14%
Kaua'i County	8%
Ethnicity	
Native Hawaiian	67%
Non-Native Hawaiian	33%
Gender	
Female	56%
Male	43%
No response	1%
Age	
18 to 34	9%
35 to 44	15%
45 to 54	12%
55 to 59	11%
60 to 64	11%
65 to 74	23%
75+	18%
No response	1%
Marital Status	
Married	54%
Single, Never Married	20%
Widowed	13%
Divorced	9%
Member of an unmarried couple	2%
No response	1%
Separated	0%
Educational Attainment	
Less than High School	2%
High School (or equivalent)	23%
Some college or Associate degree	35%
Bachelor's degree	21%
Graduate degree	18%
No response	1%