

Essay Five:
Our Sense of Place

'Ele'ele Hilo ē, panopano i ka ua hana mao 'ole:
Dark Hilo, blackened in the rains that never cease.

– *Hawaiian Proverb*

It is only fitting that as we began our Institutional Report with an *'ōlelo no'ēau* (proverb) that we should end with one. The image of the rains of Hilo feeding the verdant beauty of the *'ōhi'a* forests are contrasted with the understanding that these same incessant downpours can weigh heavy on a place. The metaphor of rain is a befitting one in speaking of UH Hilo, for in many ways our “place” is both a source of strength and our greatest challenge.

On the one hand, there is no denying that the resources of this Island directly benefit the scholarship of faculty and the learning of students. Our diversity as a people, our dynamic mix of cultures, a thriving indigenous language, and our physical landscape (which hosts two of the world's tallest volcanoes, eleven of the world's thirteen recognized climate zones, and a range of plant and animal life found nowhere else) make for an educational experience that is unparalleled to that offered by other institutions of higher education. As Essay Three and the sampling of student narratives suggest, students thrive in such an environment.¹⁵³ For this reason, UH Hilo is a leader in many areas, including indigenous language, marine science, tropical agriculture and conservation, and pharmaceutical research.¹⁵⁴

And as the only baccalaureate and post-baccalaureate institution on our island of 4,028 square miles, we serve a special need for the community that hosts us – a community that relies on us as a major economic engine (as stated in the Introduction). That we offer a wide array of majors and degrees is a testament of our understanding of *kuleana* and *pono* – a responsibility to do what is right by the people of this Island, which also includes the many students from elsewhere who come seeking knowledge.

At the same time, our uniqueness is based on our physical isolation, which also has its drawbacks. Sharing our research with colleagues elsewhere, providing our students with access to the larger world, and simply maintaining our infrastructure are heavily impacted by cost which is exacerbated by our distance to the State Capitol in Honolulu, to the continental U.S., and to other countries. Travel to and from key venues (including WASC-sponsored events) becomes an expensive activity. The State of Hawai'i has the highest cost of living in the nation.¹⁵⁵ Everything from the cost of food to utilities has to be factored in and weighed vis-à-vis our educational goals and aspirations in ways many of our “peer” institutions may not experience. Retaining faculty due to higher costs of housing and research/travel has

¹⁵³ Anecdotes of student success can be found on our accreditation website under Item 1, Essay Three: <http://hilo.hawaii.edu/uhh/accreditation/documents/StudentSuccessNarratives.pdf>.

¹⁵⁴ For more information on research and scholarly activity, many of which involve students, please see “Keahou: UH Hilo Research in the News,” <http://hilo.hawaii.edu/keahou/uh-hilo-research-news/>.

¹⁵⁵ Treena Shapiro, “CNBC: Hawaii has best quality of life, most expensive cost of living,” *Honolulu Magazine*, July 16, 2013, <http://www.honolulumagazine.com/Honolulu-Magazine/Real-Estate/July-2013/CNBC-Hawaii-has-best-quality-of-life-most-expensive-cost-of-living/>.

been difficult at times. Another challenge is reaching out to the many communities on the Island that are far flung and still do not have reliable access to internet, telephone, or public transportation. Operating costs will increasingly weigh heavily on us, as will resources needed for maintaining quality assessment and adequate programmatic staffing. Moving forward, our biggest challenge may be in maintaining the revenue sources needed to ensure the quality of our programs.

Reconciling different visions of who we are and what we do will also take work. For example, two different sets of students are at risk of non-completion – local Big Island students who come in “academically underprepared” (incoming GPA of under 3.0) and local Big Island students who come in with “adequate preparation” (incoming GPA of 3.0-3.5). Responding adequately to both groups requires prioritization within the larger discussion of increasing graduating rates for all students in general.

Along with looking at who we serve, we must remain cognizant of other external pressures placed upon us. Coping with changes in secondary and tertiary education (including increased standardization) can be of concern, especially when certain initiatives run counter to our local sensibilities and distinctive needs. Meeting demands for national accountability while also remaining true to our uniqueness will require balance and finesse.

Come rain or shine, UH Hilo stands on a proud heritage and tradition of service and excellence. We will meet our challenges with the same fortitude as those who preceded us and who understood the duality of place: *hiki mai nō ka 'ino, a hiki mai ka mālie*, “bad weather comes, but good weather comes too.”