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Embracing Education with Aloha

By Alex Souza Mon, Jan 02, 2012

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"We have to go beyond and focus on today's agenda of key events, including sustainability, language preservation, health care, and community engagement while embracing cultural diversities". Photo: Donna Vuchinich, President & CEO of the University of Hawai'i Foundation.



During times of economic hardship, when both federal and state funds become increasingly and unilaterally restricted, educational institutions have to rely on private support if they are expected to meet high academic standards, support education stakeholders and compete globally. However, these are not the only deliverables if you are meant to truly represent the Aloha spirit in Hawai'i's education system.

As pointed out by Donna Vuchinich, President and CEO of the University of Hawai'i Foundation, "we have to go beyond and focus on today's agenda of key events, including sustainability, language preservation, health care, community engagement, while embracing cultural diversities". Undoubtedly, this type of leadership approach adds value to the whole system but also makes this mission even more challenging.

Vuchinich has dedicated her professional life to non-profit organizations, developing, implementing, and directing programs that supported both students and educational institutions. Joining the Oregon State University Foundation in May 1991, as Director of Priority Projects, Vuchinich can't hide her feelings about how "powerful and rewarding" her career as a non-profit leader has been over the last two decades. Vuchinich still recalls; when she first started at the University of Hawai'i Foundation, how small and limited the infrastructure was compared to today's resources. With so much work to do, dedication and prioritization have played a significant role in Vuchinich's management style.

Since April 2004, when Vuchinich was appointed President and CEO of the University of Hawai'i Foundation, opportunities and threats have interchangeably been part of her ongoing responsibilities. Surprisingly, even though the recessionary time that we all live in nowadays has imposed several constraints to budgetary variables, Vuchinich is proud to emphasize that goals have been met and the Foundation continues to focus on supporting a world-class education system in the State of Hawai'i.

According to Vuchinich, the decision to invest in technology was imperative and significantly improved the Foundation's capacity to deliver its services, especially regarding the allocation of its financial resources. Through the purchase of new applications, the Foundation was capable of boosting connections and growing both its academic and professional networks.

Established in 1955, the University of Hawai'i Foundation is a private corporation designated as a 501(c)(3) organization and functions totally independent from all other University of Hawai'i affiliates. Nevertheless, by maintaining a close relation with the University of Hawai'i system and the University of Hawai'i Alumni Association, the UH Foundation has been supporting students through scholarships, grants and recruitment activities. With more than US\$9.5 million dollars distributed in the form of scholarships every year, the UH Foundation bridges the financial gap that otherwise would have prevented hundreds of students from pursuing their academic goals and, therefore, achieving their dreams.

In 2011 alone, the UH Foundation received over 31,000 gifts from a selection of different donors, including faculty and staff members, corporations, foundations, alumni and parents. According to its 2011 annual report, the total amount of funds raised from all sources surpassed \$46.7 million dollars; a near 10 percent increase over prior fiscal year, and was allocated to support fields of study such as medicine, astronomy, oceanography, energy sustainability and intellectual property law.



Photo: UH Foundation Director of Communications Margot Schrire, left, and President & CEO Donna Vuchinich.

The Isamu Shinshiro Scholarship for Sustainable Technology Education and Training Fund is one of many outstanding examples of how philanthropic donations support higher education in Hawai'i. Created through Mr. Shinshiro's \$1.6 million dollars state gift, this scholarship fund offers financial assistance to community college students who are enrolled in technology programs emphasizing the sustainability of Hawai'i's natural environment, ecosystems and resources.

For those who want to support education in Hawai'i, it is through the University of Hawai'i Foundation that they can reach out to students and change their lives. As of June 30th 2011, the UH Foundation's overall endowment reached over \$207 million dollars and yielded an annualized rate of return of 18.6%.