



# UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII SYSTEM

## ‘ŌNAEHANA KULANUI O HAWAII

### Legislative Testimony

### Hō'ike Mana'o I Mua O Ka 'Aha'ōlelo

Testimony Presented Before the  
House Committee on Judiciary & Hawaiian Affairs  
April 7, 2026 at 2:00 p.m.

By

Debora Halbert  
Vice President for Academic Strategy  
University of Hawai'i System

HCR 122 / HR 114 – REQUESTING THE UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII TO ALLOW AN  
OLELO HAWAII PATHWAY UNDER THE NIIHAU DIALECT.

Chair Tarnas, Vice Chair Poepoe, and Members of the Committee:

The University of Hawai'i would like to provide comments with suggested amendments on HCR 122 / HR 114 – Requesting The University Of Hawaii To Allow An Olelo Hawaii Pathway Under The Niihau Dialect. The University of Hawai'i (UH) appreciates the intent of this resolution and recognizes the importance of serving the linguistic, cultural, and educational needs of all communities across Hawai'i, including Native speakers and families connected to 'ōlelo Ni'ihau.

Instruction in 'ōlelo Ni'ihau at the University of Hawai'i requires careful consideration of both instructional capacity and intended student populations. Because 'ōlelo Ni'ihau is a distinct and highly localized form of the Hawaiian language, effective and appropriate instruction at this level can only be carried out by native speakers who possess the linguistic fluency and cultural grounding necessary to ensure accuracy, integrity, and authenticity. Any effort to offer courses in 'ōlelo Ni'ihau must therefore prioritize the recruitment and support of Native Ni'ihau-speaking instructors.

In addition, the Legislature should recognize that the design of such programs must be intentional with respect to audience—whether serving Ni'ihau native speakers seeking higher education in their home language, or non-Ni'ihau learners who may require different pedagogical approaches, supports, and safeguards to engage respectfully with this 'ike and linguistic tradition. Thoughtful planning in both areas is essential to ensure that instruction uplifts and sustains the Ni'ihau speech community while maintaining the highest academic and cultural standards. As 'ōlelo Ni'ihau is a dialect of a particular community, the input of those community members should also be considered.

We note that establishing any new academic pathway, concentration, certificate, or micro-credential is subject to UH's academic program and curriculum approval processes. These processes are designed to ensure that proposed offerings are academically sound, appropriately resourced, aligned with campus mission and student demand, and developed with appropriate faculty review and governance.

Accordingly, whether a specific campus is able to offer a pathway concentrating on the 'ōlelo Ni'ihau dialect would depend on that campus's academic judgment, available faculty expertise, resources, student interest, and successful completion of the applicable campus and the UH approval processes.

Finally, we respectfully request that the committee amend page 2, lines 20-22, to read: "that the University of Hawaii consider Olelo Hawaii micro-credentials focusing on the Niihau dialect."

Mahalo for the opportunity to provide comments on this measure.