Founding History

Residents of Hawai‘i Island understand that research and education are essential to determining how to develop the island's economy in ways that are ecologically sound and culturally respectful. Island resources are abundant but finite, and island residents are struggling to address a need for economic development that does not further destroy the quality of the physical and cultural environment. Issues of community health, limited educational opportunity, and growing income disparity are at the forefront of local dialog and planning activities.

During a 1999-2000 community planning process in the northern region of Hawai‘i Island, extensive qualitative and quantitative data were collected about health and welfare issues in the Districts of Hamakua and North and South Kohala. Five Mountains Hawai‘i, a community health not-for-profit organization, convened a series of community forums to present the accumulated information to residents of the area. Forum members were asked to select the priority outcomes that would most effectively improve the quality of life in the region. Three of the five top priorities were to (1) increase the educational attainment of children and adults, (2) increase the percentage of local applicants considered qualified by employers for available jobs, (3) diversify the economy. The message was clear: education, more education, and a diversified economy. Furthermore, this message from the community was reinforced by current research indicating that educational attainment is the strongest predictor of positive health outcomes (see James Lynch, A Cry Unheard: Bancroft Press, c. 1999) and that educational services have a greater economic multiplier effect than any other significant industry in Hawai‘i (Paul Brewbaker, Bank of Hawaii).

The community planning process was complemented by a leadership survey that ultimately involved 30 private and public sector leaders in fields that range from the visitor industry to ranching to healthcare to county government and education. Leaders were consistent in their vision of strengthening the educational and research infrastructure on the island as a way of investing in multigenerational assets. Leaders wanted to build on the recent national and international visibility of the North Hawai‘i Community Hospital, the nation's first hospital to credential non-Western practitioners of medicine, as a way to attract global research and teaching interests to Hawai‘i Island; thus, an early interest in ethnopharmacology and ethnobotany was established. Further, leaders wanted to build an undergraduate educational program that would foster a sense of respect for Hawai‘i Island's spectacularly beautiful natural landscape. And, finally, leaders were interested in connecting the teaching and research programs with K-12 schools in order to bolster science education. They envisioned young college scientists mentoring even younger scientists, and they envisioned professional development opportunities being created for K-12 instructors. Leaders also felt that the connection to K-12 schools would remind scientists of their obligations to the future.

Through this inductive process, the idea of creating an independent academic institute with a focus on the environmental, ocean, and botanical sciences emerged. Given the new academic institute's closeness to island communities, island leaders felt it was necessary to orient all new teaching and

research programs to Hawai‘i Island's cultural and spiritual landscape, as well as its natural landscape. By fostering a respectful approach to the engagement of Hawai‘i Island's cultural and natural environments, the founders of The Kohala Center hoped to inspire science by integrating science with culture and community.

Very early on in the process, Native Hawaiian leaders such as Robert Lindsey, Jr., Noe Noe Wong-Wilson, and John DeFries, brought forward the possibility of realizing the Island of Hawai‘i as a living classroom while also highlighting the value of Hawaiian culture and science in the contemporary world. Through their efforts, relationships were built with prominent organizations such as the Kamehameha Schools, the Edith Kanaka'ole Foundation, and Na Kala‘i Wa‘a Moku o Hawai‘i. The boldness of their vision and the idea of creating a new academic institute based on the expressed needs of the island community immediately caught the attention of the world scientific community.

By late 2000 the idea of building an independent academic institute that would respectfully engage Hawai‘i Island's natural and cultural environments was taking firm shape. Early organizers of the project met with several dozen senior members of the faculty and administration at the University of California at Santa Barbara and at least the same number at Cornell University. It was only through those meetings that it became absolutely clear that Hawai‘i Island, the land itself, was a truly valuable intellectual asset … a far cry from viewing the land for purposes of extraction and/or commercial development only. It also became clear that the challenges to the natural environment were, in and of themselves, intellectual assets: those challenges could draw research programs that could produce new solutions to global environmental challenges, as well as heal the island's natural environment. And these applied research programs would further build the science and education sectors of Hawai‘i Island's economy. Indeed, it was the scientific community that named The Kohala Center's four programmatic areas: Ocean Sciences, Environmental Studies, Alternative Energy, and Global Health.

In January 2001 the birth of The Kohala Center was formally announced at a breakfast meeting in Waimea for Hawai‘i Island leaders. The keynote speaker, Professor Oliver Chadwick, presented work that had just captured the cover of *Nature*. The research team included Professor Peter Vitousek at Stanford University and Professor Louis Derry at Cornell University, as well as Dr. Chadwick, among others. The theme of the talk: "Hawai‘i as a Model Ecosystem of the World." Thus, The Kohala Center emerged in response to identified community needs and to the generous interest of the world's scientific community. It became clear that through The Kohala Center’s focus on research and education and its respectful engagement of Hawai‘i Island environments, The Center could sustain the natural environment, strengthen the social fabric, and develop the economy of Hawai‘i Island. The Kohala Center would help communities on the island and around the world thrive—ecologically, economically, culturally, and socially.

www.kohalacenter.org

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