



CAN 'ĀINA-BASED EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS IMPROVE A PERSON'S HEALTH AND WELL-BEING?

by Wendy Kekahio
Strategy Consultant
Kamehameha Schools Strategy and Innovation Group

He ali'i ka 'āina, he kauā ke kanaka.
The land is a chief, man is its servant.

The health and well-being of Native Hawaiians are critical factors in reaching our goal of a thriving lāhui.

Health disparities, however, continue to persist within the Native Hawaiian population. By expanding our understanding of the connection between the health of our land and the health of our people, we can further the work being done to reduce health inequities and increase well-being for the lāhui.

In research terms, this can mean studying the effect of participating in a community-initiated, place-based educational program on a young person's health.

Can being connected to the 'āina through such a program decrease health risk factors such as obesity and related diseases? And how do friends and family impact one another's health behaviors – and the likelihood of disease or illness?

These are the questions that University of Hawai'i researchers Dr. Ruben Juarez and Dr. Alike Maunakea are seeking to answer in a first-of-a-kind study, Maui Ola.

The place-based program at the center of the study is Ma'ō Farms and study participants are youth in Wai'anae participating in Ma'ō's Youth Leadership Training program, farmers, staff, and their social networks.

Ma'ō's Youth Leadership Training is a two-year program that connects youth to their community while they earn a college degree, an educational stipend, and contribute to the creation of a local food system.

With year one of the study completed through support from the HMSA Foundation, researchers have found that Ma'ō interns' biomarkers of diabetes risk significantly declined from pre-program participation to after. Researchers suspect that these changes may relate to the gut microbiome, which is altered by environment and lifestyle.



Although preliminary, results like this may be able to show a program's impact on an individual's health, contributing to increased individual well-being and a societal benefit through the reduction of health care costs.

Maunakea, of the John A. Burns School of Medicine Department of Native Hawaiian Health, talks about the connection between 'āina and ola (life) as a concept rooted in Hawaiian knowledge. "Our kūpuna have long taught us the concepts of mālama 'āina, where our environment in turn directly affects the health of us all. We are grateful to continue learning from their 'ike."

The interaction between health outcomes, lifestyle behaviors, and social networks (for example, friends and family), is also of interest. While previous research suggests the link between these factors, the

interaction of social networks and health factors within Native Hawaiian communities has never been examined.

This study is on-going and contributing to how we understand, design, and implement programs, which although not necessarily designed to directly impact health outcomes, can be linked to reducing health disparities and restoring equity.

The second year of this study is supported in part by Kamehameha Schools in order to promote community-driven research on topics related to Native Hawaiian well-being.

For more information, and if you are interested in participating in this study, please visit www.mauliola.net.