

THE ECONOMY: A WESTERN TOOL TO ACHIEVE OUR NATIVE GOALS

Robin Puanani Danner

“The Western tool of hoarding dollars and of building financial strength is *not* the endgame—that is not the reason we seek to build wealth. We build it for the native endgame: to spend it on and to invest it in native goals, to achieve language revitalization, to attract our native youths and immerse them in native cultural values that will serve them to be economically self-sufficient, and to set a foundation for Native Hawaiian well-being. . . . In your deliberations and your future research topics and data compilation, the *economy*, that single word, should automatically be a consideration in your work, no matter which goal you are addressing.”

CORRESPONDENCE MAY BE SENT TO:

Robin Puanani Danner, 33 South King Street, Suite 513, Honolulu, Hawai'i 96813.

Email: robin@hawaiiancouncil.org

Hūlili: Multidisciplinary Research on Hawaiian Well-Being Vol. 1 No.1 (2004)
Copyright © 2004 by Kamehameha Schools.

The topic of research and Hawaiian well-being is direct, it is meaningful, and it is completely relevant for our community and our people. I hope to share a little bit of my *mana'o* (thoughts and feelings) on the tools of data collection and reporting, particularly the relevance of the economy, and of our native place in our economy in achieving native goals.

I think back to almost 20 years ago, to my own baptism and immersion in that word—*economy*. To the nuts and bolts of economic activities; to the cause and effect of economies, local, regional, and otherwise; to the basic elements of economies—supply and demand, commodities, and the granddaddy of them all, *kālā*, the dollar bill, the universal measurement of economic success. Of course, the measurement of an economy is not as simple as the dollar bill, but it is the measurement that most of the world around us values and understands.

I was a banker for 13 years—every single one of them spent in native communities, grappling with a completely Western structure, a structure so in tune with economies, with industries, and, so many times, directly in conflict with native culture and values. At times, in my early years, I thought, “What am I doing in this business? It won’t work, it won’t serve native peoples, and native peoples must give up way too much to be served by it.” The fundamental value systems and measurements seemed so far apart, so opposite of the other. In banking, for example, economic success meant that your balance sheet was loaded with assets, savings accounts, income, and revenue. A successful balance sheet showed very little obligation to anyone. And having been raised entirely in very traditional native communities, places where gathering food and subsistence lifestyles were the center of the economy, I found that the Western measurement of success rubbed me the wrong way; it didn’t sit well with what I had been raised to embrace. The Western system of economic success promoted and celebrated and rewarded the literal hoarding of assets, whereas my native upbringing instilled the absolute opposite—sharing. And even more than sharing, but the concept that if you had extra, your wealth, your standing, your economic success were actually measured by how much you gave away. It was a struggle, when I think back to the early years of my chosen career and the meaning of economic success.

The breakthrough for me came in the realization that the conflict only existed if native peoples were forced to choose—one culture over the other, one value

system over the other, one goal over another goal. When business and banking were approached as a tool to sustain a way of life and not as a way of life itself, then the conflict all but disappeared.

More importantly, when I applied my native values to measuring the success of my native clients, when I viewed them through my own native eyes, and what was important to me and what I knew was important to them, I could see my way through on how this Western tool of business and of economies would serve my native community and deliver native-based results and the achievement of native goals. I apply this lesson every day to understanding Western tools, not for the purpose of achieving Western success, but to use Western tools and methodologies for the purpose of achieving native success and native goals. The lesson was simple: Although the Western system has its own set of predetermined measurements of predetermined notions of success, I am not bound—we are not bound—by those predetermined notions. And perhaps easiest of all, we can use Western tools without giving anything up about ourselves.

And so it is with data, research, and the compilation of information. We may use Western tools to collect it for efficiency and for speed. We may even engage in research and the publication of research to present the data, and in doing so, present an understanding of ourselves to a Western world—to assist a larger world to understand where we are, where we want to go, and how we intend to get there—in a manner that they understand. We may even publish our research and conclusions solely for a Western audience, directed at this larger world, which may be an entirely different manner than what we would do for ourselves.

The challenge for us as native peoples is to be grounded always in the native goal, the native measurement of success, to hold in our sights the native endgame and, at the same time, understand the Western world around us and apply Western tools to achieve native goals. The conflict all but disappears.

A year ago, at the Council for Native Hawaiian Advancement (CNHA), we took this very approach to the Hawai'i economy and the issue of federal recognition. We published a modest brief in May 2003 that examined what the economic impact is to the entire state of Hawai'i of federal programs funded to serve Native Hawaiian communities—not because of our racial status but because of our *native* status in this country. A dozen simple pages, and hundreds of hours of research to basically say that \$70 million in federal funds comes to Hawai'i in a single year, come to Native Hawaiian communities for health, for education, for housing, for

job training, for language. Funding that comes to our community, to our native people, for our native culture. The brief goes on to focus on how the \$70 million reaches well beyond our native community and produces \$147 million in economic output, the dollar bill bouncing around every community in the state, getting spent on social workers, insurance brokers, construction workers, grocery store clerks, car dealers, the list goes on. The brief focuses on the economic impact of native funding to the nonnative world around us, which was exactly its purpose. This type of analysis, of communicating native goals and then their relation to the economy, is not something we do enough of. It is something we need to do more of, in more areas and in more ways.

What is the endgame in doing economic impact research, economic impact reports? The native endgame is cultural survival, to survive as a people. So an element of the federal recognition issue, an element of the Native Hawaiian goal, is to protect native programs that serve native needs. Yet, CNHA produced an economic brief, created not for an audience of Native Hawaiians but an audience of non-Native Hawaiians and the larger Western world. CNHA produced a brief that speaks in a language everyone can understand—that universal measurement: the economy. By holding fast to the native endgame on one hand—cultural survival, language preservation, native health initiatives, and so on—and by understanding the Western value system and its measurement of economic success on the other, we produced a brief that delivered a very Hawaiian issue, that seemingly had nothing to do with the economy, to a very Western audience. We gathered financial data, we gathered financial information on programs that we in the Hawaiian community value for their impact on our ability to breathe life into our native language, to protect our cultural sites, to promote native healing techniques, to care for our *kūpuna* (elders) and *‘ōpio* (youth). The brief is all about these things indirectly, but it speaks directly to a larger audience and relays how the economy outside of our community, how the economy of the larger world may be affected if federal recognition for us is not achieved and the lawsuits against us prevail. The conflict disappears when we embrace the tool, *not* for the purpose of conforming to predetermined measurements and values that may be different from our own, but when we embrace the tool to achieve the native goal.

Can you imagine the results of completing this type of analysis on the whole of our *ali‘i* (royal) trusts and Hawaiian agencies? Can you imagine the results of a report

that indicates how many total jobs our Hawaiian agencies provide and that identifies what segments of our total community in Hawai'i hold those jobs? Powerful stuff, a powerful message.

CNHA gave its best effort to address the topic of federal recognition by conducting financial research and producing an economic impact brief. The economy is not the first thing that most in the Hawaiian community—or anyone else in the state think of—when the words *federal recognition* are uttered. But when we talk in terms of the economy, the discussion of a very Hawaiian issue, an issue most often dismissed by the non-Hawaiian community as not their issue, becomes real for them and becomes part of them. We don't communicate our economic role enough, we don't conduct economic research and results enough on so many other issues. We don't present our issues in our way enough. We can always do more, and we must do more.

In making this statement, I am reminded of Kamehameha Schools Trustee Nainoa Thompson and his dedication of his life and energy to traditional Native Hawaiian navigation and revealing the ingenuity of our ancestors. For a moment, forget the pride and energy that he stirs in each of us, forget about the incredible flurry of energy and forward motion that his work generates for all Hawaiians, and think for a moment what his life's work tells us about the work of research, the work of presenting information. For decades, people conducted research on how Hawaiians arrived here, first theorizing, then setting parameters for what data would be considered, then applying their data, and finally issuing their findings. They had the world believing that our people happened here, drifted here by accident, that we did not possess the capacity to voyage long distances, to explore anywhere beyond these shores—or any shore for that matter—in the vast Pacific.

By others controlling the research, controlling what information and what considerations would be used and, yes, having predetermined expectations, these anthropologists decided the conclusion. Nainoa and the Polynesian Voyaging Society proved them wrong and, in doing so, kindled a fire that warms our community and launches our community forward. Powerful stuff, this research and information.

In my own experience living among the Alaska Natives, scientists would show up and conduct research on the bowhead whale, a food staple of the Arctic peoples. A report would be issued, and suddenly, policies were implemented by public policy-

makers thousands of miles away to halt their gathering activities, to halt a cornerstone of their culture and life ways—the annual bowhead whale hunt. In reaction, the Alaska Natives would have to gather their own data, using the knowledge of their elders, of the ice floes and the ice pack—dedicating millions of dollars and man hours to literally count the bowhead as they migrated, one by one past their villages—to counter the findings of foreign men. Powerful stuff, this research and information.

It is important that we Hawaiians control our own research and our own information. We must own it, develop it, analyze it, ground it in our own Native Hawaiian measurements, and then present it to the larger community around us. I am thrilled at the possibilities native peoples as native researchers can create for our native communities in the work ahead.

Your participation in this research conference on the education and well-being of Hawaiians lays out several goals for yourselves and for native well-being. Your first goal is to advance the state of our understanding of our knowledge about our community in the areas of health, education, leadership, culture, spirituality, and economics. As you take the steps to achieve this goal, remember to stay true to the measurements valued by our community, by Hawaiians. In all likelihood, they will be different from the measurements of Western society and institutions. But do not ignore the measurements, spoken or unspoken, of the larger world around us. To ignore these measurements, to pretend that they do not exist or that they do not matter, is to pretend that the larger world surrounding us has no bearing on our ability to reach native goals. They exist, and they can and do play a role in keeping us from our goals. For a time, they kept the Eskimos from their beloved bowhead. For a time, they had the world believing that Hawaiians were the product of accidental sailing. We must communicate for ourselves, communicate our world, not only what it means to us but what it should mean to others. My message on the Native Hawaiian economy and on our role in the larger economy is that it is understated, underreviewed, underconsidered, underreported, and underused.

In the area of education, for example, we are comfortable tracking educational achievement, numbers of children, the cost of education per child, the grade point averages of classrooms, even of different educational techniques. We must go beyond that to achieve our native goals in a world that surrounds us and sometimes crowds out our needs. The economic measurement must be a greater factor in our research and in our information delivery.

Take Native Hawaiian charter schools. It is an incredible area for research and information, because it is in its infancy and because we are practically at the beginning of its impact on academic achievement. What a tremendous opportunity to track and gather data, to plot trends, to identify and validate what those in the field feel in their gut about its effectiveness in the health and well-being of Hawaiian children and therefore our entire community.

I don't have to tell a crowd of educators and researchers how important education is. I like Dr. Jeve Chang's statement that she herself is a lifelong learner. Education is tied to every other sector of our community. Without education, we do not succeed culturally, we do not learn our language. Without education, we do not succeed healthwise. Without education, we do not succeed in providing shelter and caring for our kūpuna and our 'ōpio. And without education, we will not be economically self-sufficient as individuals, as a community, as a whole. So what does the economy have to do with charter schools? What does compiling economic data over and beyond what charter schools cost have to do with the academics of education?

When noneducators approach a topic like charter schools, the first thing that comes to mind is: Let us track the progress of the child, track the success of the child, track the effectiveness of the curriculum they are using and the teachers they are engaged with, track the numbers—is it growing in enrollment, in interest, in people's approval about native charter schools? Let us imagine for a moment a report five years from now that contains indisputable data that charter schools have produced unbelievable results in every one of these categories: an A-plus for Hawaiian language revitalization, an A-plus for producing technological capabilities in our youths, an A-plus in academia. A-plus all the way around, a slam dunk for the native goals being sought by our community. It is easy to predict that the data can be off the charts in every one of these categories, but there will be economic questions asked, if limited in their scope, that could stand in the way of where our charter schools want to go—the native goal. It wouldn't be hard to imagine a report that comes out with high marks in all areas but fails to communicate the native goal in relation to the Western system of economic measurements.

Usually, our consideration of economics in these kinds of reports hits the obvious economic impacts. For example, how much does it cost, how much per child, where is the money being spent, is it in capital costs or operational costs, and how much is being spent directly on educational instruction in the classroom? It is an

approach that starts with the goal of improving the educational environment of our children, celebrates the success of it, and then provides the economic answers to the “spend” scenario only. Or at least those are the only sound bites the public hears, and then policymakers act on: “Did you see the charter school report? It’s such a great thing for the children, what awesome results they are having. But it costs so much. I don’t know, maybe we can’t afford it.” Take this scenario, take the imagined report two more steps forward. Don’t stop the economic analysis at how much it costs. Continue on and tell us: How many direct jobs does it create and for whom? How many residual jobs does it create and for whom? Who are *all* of the stakeholders, who are the stakeholders besides someone else’s native child, the teachers, and janitors who will be affected? You will naturally answer questions about charter schools in terms of what happens to the educational quality and opportunities for the child—that is a given, you won’t be able to help yourself, your report will scream out to contain that information—because you are already grounded in the native goal. But this is what we must do: Answer the economic question of what will happen if we stop spending in this area of our community, who and where jobs will be lost. Not just the obvious jobs like teachers, but the residual jobs like the local businesses where people spend their earnings, at the gas station, the banks, and the airlines. At first blush, everyone assumes automatically that the stakeholders are only us, the Native Hawaiians, it’s all about us. But by gathering and compiling economic data, the stakeholders become much, much larger—it becomes us and them. The visitor industry does this all the time. They say, “if you don’t do this or that, these folks will lose their jobs.” They identify and reveal a larger stakeholder group, beyond themselves. They don’t run around saying, if you don’t do this or that, our individual owners will lose money!

As Native Hawaiians, we cannot afford to continue to present *only* the data that say, “if you don’t do this, we’ll lose our culture.” We must add data that say, “if you don’t do this, you’ll lose your job.” It is more direct and more sobering than the slogans that say, “what is good for Hawaiians is good for Hawai‘i.” We hear this slogan and it sounds great, and we in this room know it is absolutely true, but what does it really mean? Research, data, information—tell them what it means! We know in our guts that our community is a vital component to all of Hawai‘i, we know in our hearts that our survival is the survival of all of Hawai‘i. But we need to back it up and tell them in a language that all can understand—the language of economy.

In terms of my example and imagined five-year report on native charter schools, by including the economic impact, you will then answer the doubts with, “Gee, we can’t afford *not* to continue.” Native Hawaiian charter school proponents already know this in their gut (but for very different reasons); research and information now confirm this belief by using the widely understood measurement of economics. Even within our own native world of agencies, have we asked ourselves where native speakers—whom we applaud and encourage to become native speakers—go to work, to provide for their families and for economic self-sufficiency? Where do we want them to go? To the phone company? No, we want them to go back into the classroom and perpetuate our language, to increase its use by others. Are we creating an economy within our own community for them to be able to achieve this native goal? Or, do we say, it costs too much? The Western tool of hoarding dollars and of building financial strength is *not* the endgame—that is not the reason we seek to build wealth. We build it for the native endgame: to spend it on and to invest it in native goals, to achieve language revitalization, to attract our native youths and immerse them in native cultural values that will serve them to be economically self-sufficient, and to set a foundation for Native Hawaiian well-being.

When I think about the landscape of presenting the native worldview, presenting the native agenda on education, on health, on housing, on cultural preservation—I see excellence in our abilities to express our native endgame. We all witnessed this excellence with the leadership of Kamehameha Schools and the ‘Īlio‘ulaokalani Coalition in the “Kū i ka Pono: Justice for Hawaiians” unity march in Waikiki. We witnessed it with the leadership of the Office of Hawaiian Affairs in the family day gathering. Now we need to follow up with more of this excellence, and more in connecting native goals to the Western measurement of economic success. I have no doubt that our community can express the native endgame; we have some of the best advocates to express native views, needs, and goals in health care, education, affordable housing, environmental protections, and even tuition waivers. And we must empower these advocates even more. We must get very good at expressing that endgame as it relates to the economy around us. If the stakeholders on any issue are reduced to us or them, we will eventually lose. We will win a few, but in the end we will lose. On this, I need no further research or any report. I need only look at our own history and the history of others similar to us around the globe. As researchers, you are the keepers of ammunition we have not used in any large way: the review and consideration of the economic impact of our native life ways, the economic impact of individual native goals and

their relevance to the larger economy. You are the keepers of a powerful tool: the mining of data that in a state like Hawai'i, more likely than not, will stretch the stakeholders of our native issues well beyond our native population and include a larger world. And like it or not, that larger world has an impact on our ability to achieve native goals.

Take the visitor industry, for example. At this moment, the state agency of the Department of Business, Economic Development and Tourism is drafting a report on the sustainability of tourism in its present form in Hawai'i. The draft report says very clearly that we, as a state, cannot continue to use the same methods to promote and execute tourism, the business of visitors. Our islands cannot sustain it environmentally, and our islands cannot achieve the economic measurements desired because visitors will go elsewhere. The draft report states directly that Native Hawaiian culture must be a priority, and that the inclusion and health of Native Hawaiian culture is a critical component to addressing sustainability. I have known Lilikalā Kame'eleihiwa for more than 10 years and I have heard her say the same thing much more eloquently and passionately. These findings are not something new for her, or for many others in the Native Hawaiian community. But today, the preservation of Hawaiian culture is not a sidebar in an economic report; it is the economic report. And because of it, and because of people like Peter Apo who are armed with the ammunition of economy, native goals have a chance at influencing an industry we do not control and which, since it began in Hawai'i, has entirely disregarded Hawaiians and Hawaiian needs. What is the difference now? Did the information Lilikalā knew decades ago suddenly become true? No, it was true back then and it is true today. The difference is the tie to the Western measurement: the economy and the compilation of data and the issuance of a report that backs it up.

In your deliberations and your future research topics and data compilation, the *economy*, that single word, should automatically be a consideration in your work, no matter which goal you are addressing.

It is my hope that, by next year's conference, this group will have harnessed the talent and passion of Native Hawaiian historians, of Native Hawaiian language experts, of Native Hawaiian navigators, and the elders and keepers of our rich culture, and with it, we have researched and produced the first and best high school and collegiate level textbook on Native Hawaiian history. In doing so, we will make our world accessible to our own community and the larger community that at times

struggles to understand us. My own children attended public school and signed up for the American History course as well as the Hawaiian History course. I cannot tell you my dismay to find them working with a textbook for one, and a mishmash of Xerox copies for the other. We need Hawaiian history textbooks in our schools. Textbooks on us—and written by us—will make great strides in building support and understanding about our people. This single research project alone, of producing a solid educational textbook on our people, is worth hundreds of other research projects going by the wayside. I beg you to do it.

In closing, I believe strongly that when information and data are compiled by us, analyzed by us, and presented by us, we have not traded our native goals for another; we have picked up a Western tool to achieve our native goals.

This article is adapted from the author's speech at Kamehameha Schools' inaugural research conference on the education and well-being of Hawaiians held on O'ahu in September 2003.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robin Puanani Danner is CEO and president of the Council for Native Hawaiian Advancement.

