

The Malama Learning Center: Hawaii Green Collar Institute

An Environmental Justice Grant Success Story

Project Overview

The Malama Learning Center, a non-profit organization that brings art, science, conservation, and culture together through education to promote sustainable living on the Hawaiian Islands, created the “Green Collar Institute” to bring awareness to high school and college students of the environmental and climate change issues affecting their communities. The project brings community change through environmental education.

The Community

The community of focus for the Hawaii Green Collar Institute, a project funded under a \$25,000 [Environmental Justice Small Grant from EPA](#), was Oahu’s Leeward coastal region.

Located on the west side of Oahu, Leeward coast is home to the highest number of native Hawaiians in the state. It is a geographic wonder that is recognized for its storied cultural history and beautiful beaches.

In spite of living in what many consider a beautifully majestic paradise, Leeward Oahu’s native Hawaiian and low-income communities go largely underserved by the resources more readily available to other communities.

Leeward’s disadvantaged communities face extremely high rates of unemployment, low rates of educational attainment, increasing poverty, and homelessness.

Leeward’s vulnerable communities also struggle with challenging environmental threats that affect their health, homes, schools, work, and recreational environments. Many residents face overflowing landfills, illegal dumpsites, and pollution caused by refineries and power plants. Together, these environmental threats have negatively affected Leeward’s natural surroundings, including its beaches and fertile lands, which provide these communities sustenance.

Despite these setbacks, Leeward’s disadvantaged community perseveres by maintaining strong community networks with service organizations such as the Malama Learning Center, who designed an educational enrichment program to engage young adults in creating healthy and sustainable communities through education and the green collar job industry.



Figure 1: Map of Leeward Coast courtesy of USGS.

Project Description



Day of community service at the Piliokaha Beach Park. (Photo courtesy of the Malama Learning Center)

In 2010, with the support of the EJ small grant, the Malama Learning Center formed a partnership with the Native Hawaiian Student Support Program at Leeward Community College to launch the “Hawaii Green Collar Institute” (the Institute). The Institute seeks to engage high school and college students in learning first-hand about the environmental and climate change issues affecting their communities. Through the Institute, students learn from professionals who are knowledgeable about environmental justice issues, conduct team based research projects to address the issues and receive training to become better prepared to enter Hawaii’s green collar job industry.

While Leeward suffers from many environmental and climate change threats, the Institute narrowed its focus to spotlight four key topics relevant to the students’ immediate environment: Sustainable Agriculture, Waste Management, Ocean Conservation, and Clean Energy Production.

Within each of these topic areas students listened to guest speakers, watched locally produced videos, visited off campus sites, and learned how the green collar job industry can provide pathways to action.

The Results

Spanning the course of four weekend sessions for five months (October 2010 to March 2011), the Hawaii Green Collar Institute has made significant achievements.

Through a focused and comprehensive grant implementation plan, the Institute and its partners were able to build awareness among students about the environmental and climate change issues affecting their communities, connect students to resource experts who can help them solve problems created by environmental and climate change issues, and encourage students to pursue careers in conservation and green technology.

The ultimate success of this EPA-awarded small grant culminated in March 2011, when the Institute honored its first graduating class of 36 students, of which 40% were of Native Hawaiian decent.

PROJECT SNAPSHOT:

On the evening of March 8, 2011, students from the Institute highlighted their green career research projects to classmates and invited guests. Presentation topics included careers related to ocean management and research, plant nurseries, and electric vehicles.

Two young Native Hawaiian students shared their goal of applying the traditional land management system of ahupua’a to a modern day context, in support of sustainable agriculture. The students believe that applying the concept of ahupu’a, in the form of a best management practice; will lead to more sustainable long term land and natural resource management.

The importance of this project is based on the understanding of the interconnectedness between the health of one’s environment and one’s self.

The Institute has empowered its former students with the knowledge and ability to engage the larger Leeward community in meaningful discussion regarding place-based solutions to solving problems created by environmental and climate change threats.

Although the grant project sessions are over, the Institute supports their former student's transitions into the green job workforce by offering them career support services that include bulletins of possible green job openings, resume writing workshops, mock job interview sessions, and career fair opportunities.

Reflection

In the first year of the Institute, the coordinators found it very difficult to get students to apply to a brand new educational program. Initial recruitment efforts involved contacting students through teachers, counselors, parents, and other groups in connection with high school and college-aged students. Follow-up discussion with some teachers showed that they were randomly selecting students to distribute program information to rather than distributing information to all students. New strategies employed in subsequent recruitment efforts include encouraging recent Institute graduates to serve as recruitment ambassadors, and conducting workshops to educate the educators.

Opening New Doors

In June 2011, the Hawaii Green Collar Institute held a free sustainability forum geared towards helping educators from Leeward Oahu understand the economic value and social benefit of the green job industry. Over the course of three days, the Institute introduced 17 educators to the concepts of "green collar" careers and provided them with the opportunity to participate in many hands-on activities similar to what the students experienced. Guest speakers from Hawaii's Green Jobs Initiative presented information about Hawaii's sustainability movement and informed participants about the state's up and coming green job industry.



HGCI student, Christopher Strickland receives his honorary certificate from MLC program coordinator Pauline Sato. (Photo courtesy of the Malama Learning Center)

Through this forum, the Malama Learning Center believes educators will be better prepared to assist the program staff in leveraging new opportunities to encourage Hawaii's youth to pursue careers in the green jobs industry.

What's Next For the Institute

The Malama Center has received a tremendous amount of positive feedback about the Institute from students, parents, educators, government officials, non-profit organizers, and community members. The Malama Center will expand the Hawaii Green Collar Institute to introduce students to the businesses of native plant nurseries and aquaponics, as well as conduct more introductory classes for students, educators, and adults seeking entry into the green job industry.

KEY RESULTS

- Graduated 36 student participants
- Introduced 17 educators to the concepts and practices of the green collar job industry
- Built awareness among students and educators of environmental and climate change issues affecting their communities
- Connected students to resource people who can help them solve problems created by environmental and climate change issues.
- Encouraged students to consider careers in conservation and green technology
- Received state funding to expand the program into rural communities in Central Oahu and the North Shore
- Has become Leeward Oahu's go to source for all things green job related

To learn more about the Hawaii Green Collar Institute, please visit [The Malama Learning Center](#) or contact Paula S.C. Nagao, Project Coordinator for Hawaii Green Collar Institute, at (808) 351-9465 or paula@malamalearningcenter.org