Application to the 2022 Helen and Martin Schwartz Prize, for programs in 2021

Young members of PEACE at a food drive and community discussion about housing insecurity for their Micronesian community, that they organized on Sand Island in summer 2021. Screenshot from Just Futures video by Mikey Inouye.

What unique thing can the humanities offer to civic education and engagement efforts? To undertake the Federation of State Humanities Council & Mellon Foundation project: Why It Matters—Civic and Electoral Participation, we first gathered together community partners and leaders in civic engagement to discuss the successes and challenges of voting initiatives, and ask: what makes real impact? We spoke with the Judiciary History Center (Project Citizen, mock court programs), Office of Hawaiian Affairs (a state agency dedicated to benefiting Native Hawaiians), Civic Education Council (a Kids Voting org), and Kāhuli Leo Leʻa (a Native Hawaiian music and cultural education org). What emerged from these conversations is that an impactful electoral initiative must be
tied to a longer civic engagement campaign that teaches us how to interact with local government processes and inspires us to do so. We received the $50,000 grant and developed and ran three intertwining strands of programming and media projects online in the continuing pandemic (November 2020 - April/May 2021).

Civic and electoral engagement is historical and intergenerational

Flyer art by intern Rae Kuruhara, for a series on the relevance of oral history to contemporary social issues. This event focused on women's leadership in government and education, showcasing voices from the past and present.

Deep Dive Discussions, grounded in humanities perspectives, on voting, government processes, and political histories. We partnered with Judiciary History Center to put on a series that looked at relevant topics like restorative justice, race and voting, women in politics and education and histories of Indigenous political movements in Hawai‘i. We featured diverse speakers for each event, highlighting women, POC, and Indigenous, and youth voices in particular. We partnered with the Chaminade History Center and NY Historical Society to do an educator workshop on women's suffrage, again highlighting marginalized POC voices and primary source material. We held our own facilitated discussion events for more active engagement. We learned that civic and electoral engagement is deeply historical and intergenerational, and to be strong citizens, we need to engage voices from the past, bring ancestors’ voices to life, and grapple with challenges together.
Scholar Noenoe Silva sharing Hawaiian-language newspaper articles about the anti-annexation petition signed by thousands of Native Hawaiians in 1897.

The most ambitious program we put on was a Zoom adaptation/production of a community play that was an historical re-enactment of the signing of the Kū‘ē Petitions in 1897, in protest of the annexation of Hawai‘i to the US. This play uses primary sources to bring this buried history to life, and we cast the play full of young Native Hawaiian scholars. An audience member commented, to the question, what did you find most meaningful?: “ALL OF IT: the introduction, the context, the music, the graphics, the smart outfits, the overlays between present speaker and representation of mana wahine [strong women], the firm and resounding ‘A’ole [No], the connection to the present, the end comments, the reminder that it is fine to disagree because this does not mean dis-unity, and the reminder that those in our past are always speaking to us, if we listen close enough.”
The clarity and strength of young people can galvanize us all

We worked with the Civic Education Council to create a series of videos featuring diverse young leaders analyzing power and making positive community change. We held an online Youth Summit event where youth engaged with 6 Hawai‘i State Legislators as well as each other around topics they chose. These topics emerged from the research of Kids Voting Hawai‘i: climate crisis, social justice, and political polarization. A Maui HS senior, Peyton Gillespie, ended up interning and becoming a key organizer. A high school philosophy club, the philoSURFERS led breakout rooms with youth only (no adults). It was stunning to witness a truly youth-led event.

Peyton shared: “There are so many youth out there who are excited about civic education, who are so excited about taking on these issues and so excited about participating in a political process…. [By the end of the summit] they had confidence in being able to talk to their state legislators and say ‘hey, we have these issues, you said that you promised to be willing to listen to us, this is our voice, let’s put this into action’”

These youth videos have impacted other youth organizations, educators, policymakers, and legislators. We learned that the clarity and strength of young people can galvanize us all. For example, Project Director and State Representative Amy Perruso shared: Some legislators were reminded of their values when they saw these videos, and they

High school student Nikkya Taliaferro speaking at a Black Lives Matter protest she co-organized with her peers, in Honolulu, July 2020. Screenshot from Just Futures film by Mikey Inouye.
affected our conversations at the Capitol. A group of legislators ran a mini-campaign around some of the issues the youth brought up, for example: a bill for homeless shelters for non-gender-conforming youth that is now at the Governor’s desk.

This viewer comment points a direction forward: “It was great to see youth voice being showcased. I would be interested in knowing more about how civic education is being integrated into school curriculum. If we want a healthy democracy to thrive for generations to come, we need more individuals to participate and a wider community to make a connection to what their role is in ensuring that it continues.”

Civic Engagement as Wholeheartedness

Engage music, poetry, and diverse cultural traditions to redefine civic engagement. The thought behind this programming strand was that extended civic engagement entails “lighting a fire” in your heart—to be moved to deep and long love and care for your community. We hosted 8 poetry discussion/workshop events to practice our civic “voice,” and genuine listening in a whole-human way. Participants ranged in age from 14 to 90, and said they felt nourished by the community poetry space in a way they did not in town halls or debates. Project Director Dr. Lyz Soto shared: “People put so much of themselves into the poetry workshops, their whole selves. For example, the poetry

Hawai‘i County Council Member Holeka Goro Inaba playing a traditional song about Kona and describing what this mele teaches him about leadership. Screenshot from Why It Matters film by Keli‘i Grace.
workshop that happened very shortly after Iremembar’s [young Micronesian boy] death. They pivoted their workshop to create a support space for members of the community grieving. Asking people to share in a computer space among strangers is asking a lot. People from different Pacific Islands came. And they gave specific feedback--so much happening on social media, but that was not healing in a way that this poetry workshop was.”

Pohnpeian poet Carol-Ann Carl sharing a poem about the murder of Micronesian youth Iremember Sykap in a police chase. Carol-Ann, with Mary Therese Perez Hattori, also conducted a Why It Matters poetry workshop or the community to process the traumatic loss. Screenshot from Why It Matters video by Keli‘i Grace.

We also worked with Native Hawaiian organization Kāhuli Leo Le‘a to create 5 musician and poet videos that expanded “civic engagement” into the Indigenous concept “aloha ‘āina”—the commitment and care that comes from an integrated existence of land with people. Innovating further, we showed not just Native, but diverse cultural traditions engaging with aloha ‘āina. Project Director and Humanities Scholar Zachary Lum commented: “Grateful for the many conversations together. Thinking about the word, “inspiring.” As a musician...we can sometimes forget the difference between entertainment and inspiration. The inspiration is that catalyst that brings music into civic engagement/aloha ‘āina. This project has been a continual reminder that for me, being entertaining is not enough. Being able to leverage entertainment for the purpose of having harder conversations...that becomes this kuleana, privilege and duty, to utilize this powerful tool. Mahalo.”

Impact:
Overall, this initiative created 22 virtual humanities programs that reached 37,594 participants, and garnered 42,494 views on non-council-owned media.
Collage poem by Lyz Soto, inspired by the Why It Matters Poetry and Civic Engagement workshop series.

**Longer impact:**
This was a one-time $50,000 grant from the Federation of State Humanities Councils (Mellon Foundation), and we were not planning to create ongoing funding or continue programs beyond the grant period. However, this grant was an important opportunity for our council to break out of our normal programming of History Day, Try Think community conversation, and Community Grants, work with brand-new partners, and learn a lot about what the humanities can do for strengthening civics. Some examples of longer-term impact:

- During the project, we convened our partners monthly to discuss project status and to discuss deeper questions: what new things are we learning about civic engagement? What does civic engagement feel like? What lessons are surprising us? This group-relationship building built a lot of trust among our diverse organizations, and created a collective learning space that helped us see our shared work toward civic strength, instead of our individual work. This way of working collectively instead of one-on-one has served as a model for future council partnerships, and we believe creates greater community impact.

- Our humanities council ED has since been invited into a judiciary-run think tank group on Civic Education in Hawai‘i, because the humanities offer “something different” to the normal ways we have been thinking about civic education.
The Why It Matters Poetry Workshop Series aimed to connect poets across islands, who did not know each other well but who shared a lot of values and skillsets around community-based poetry. This small project helped us launch into a bigger project arguing for supporting poetry as a vehicle for strengthening civic community: a new State Poet Laureate program in partnership with our state arts council and state public library system. This new initiative is now funded through the arts council and underway in Fall 2022. In 2022, the State Legislature recognized this initiative through a bicameral resolution stating: “storytelling and literature strengthen civic responsibility and civic engagement through promoting deep thinking, increased empathy and understanding, and stronger connections to ourselves and each other”

We were very proud to consistently center Indigenous and POC histories and perspectives throughout our Why It Matters humanities programming, and feel that the programs and products created are a valuable resource for advanced, innovative, and inclusive directions in civic education.
To Learn More:

Main Webpage

Enewsletter July 2021

Recordings of Humanities Events

- Post-Election Reflection on Justice
- Equity and the Power of Hawai‘i Voters
- Visionary Women in Politics and Education (also broadcast on Hawaii Public Radio)
- Kūʻē Petitions Panel Discussion
- Kūʻē Petitions historical re-enactment
- Essay "No Ka Lei Maile Aliʻi: He Aloha ʻĀina ʻOiaʻiʻo"

Why It Matters Aloha ʻĀina musician and poet videos:

- Brandon Ing is an Okinawan culture and language preservationist and activist.
- Kainani Kahaunaele is a puʻukani and haku mele and U’ilani Tanigawa Lum is an attorney, a fellow at Ka Huli Ao Center for Excellence in Native Hawaiian Law, and composer
- Holeka Goro Inaba is a Council Member of the Hawaiʻi County Council, representing North Kona, who describes himself as a public servant, rather than a politician.
- Eugene Tunac Marquez is a native speaker of Ilocano, who teaches us about the deeply intertwined histories and connections between Filipinos and Hawaiians for more than a century.
- Carol Ann Carl is a storyteller from Pohnpei, who is deeply committed to her community and to the people of Hawai‘i.

Just Futures Youth Videos:

- Nikkya Taliaferro helped organize the 2020 Honolulu Black Lives Matter march, one of the largest anti-racism actions in Hawai‘i in the 21st century.
- Tāneariʻi Fernandez, inspired by Ke Ea Hawai‘i, is one of the anchors for the Hawaiian Kingdom Weekly, which aims to be a reliable independent news source for people in Hawai‘i.
- Dyson Chee advocates for solutions to climate change through The Hawai‘i Youth Climate Coalition.
- Maggie Messer is the President of the Gay Straight Alliance at Campbell High School and is a strong supporter of her peers.
- PEACE, a youth-founded grassroots organization, addressing food and housing insecurity in our Micronesian communities.

Women’s Suffrage History Curriculum

Online publication of poetry and civic engagement lesson plans

Other Publicity:


Just Futures youth summit featured on Hawaii Public Radio.

Just Futures youth summit featured on Federation of State Humanities Councils blog, "This is Our Voice".