UNIVERSITY OF HAWAIʻI SYSTEM
ʻŌNAEHANA KULANUI O HAWAIʻI

Legislative Testimony
Hōʻike Manaʻo I Mua O Ka ʻAhaʻōlelo

Testimony Presented Before the
House Committee on Labor
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By
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SCR 139 – REQUESTING THE WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL TO RECOMMEND TO THE GOVERNOR, FOR INCLUSION IN THE STATE UNIFIED PLAN, A COMPREHENSIVE STATEWIDE WORKFORCE STRATEGY TO ENSURE THAT ALL PEOPLE OF THE STATE HAVE A PATHWAY TO A CAREER THAT ENABLES THEM TO LEARN, WORK, AND THRIVE IN THE STATE AND CONTRIBUTE TO A VIBRANT LOCAL ECONOMY GROUNDED IN COMMUNITY VALUES BY 2045.

Chair Sayama, Vice Chair Lee, and Members of the Committee:

The University of Hawaiʻi supports SCR 139 – Requesting The Workforce Development Council To Recommend To The Governor, For Inclusion In The State Unified Plan, A Comprehensive Statewide Workforce Strategy To Ensure That All People Of The State Have A Pathway To A Career That Enables Them To Learn, Work, And Thrive In The State And Contribute To A Vibrant Local Economy Grounded In Community Values By 2045.

The University of Hawaiʻi (UH), as a member of the Workforce Development Council, agrees with the intent of the resolution to develop a long-term strategy. No single state entity, including UH, can solve workforce shortages alone. For kamaʻāina who pursue higher education, outcomes are shaped less by educational preparation than by Hawaiʻi's labor market and cost of living. Only 43% of the state's four-year college graduates are employed in jobs requiring a degree within five years of graduation, and after accounting for Hawaiʻi's high cost of living, median wages for these graduates rank among the lowest nationally. As a result, even college-educated workers often cannot access jobs that provide a sustainable living wage in Hawaiʻi. This mismatch contributes to underemployment, out-migration, and ongoing workforce shortages across both the public and private sectors, including among graduates who wish to remain in the state.

SCR 139 recognizes this sobering reality, and proposes a statewide unified workforce development goal, strategic plan, and metrics for tracking the impact and success of various initiatives over time. Moreover, it explicitly calls for the state to invest in quality career coaching and a robust expansion of the work-based learning ecosystem. National research has long established both of these as the most impactful ways to bridge education and employment, reduce the underemployment rate of college

graduates, and counter brain drain. Indeed, other states' "North Star" workforce development goals have been met through the deliberate alignment of cross-agency efforts, just as the Learn, Work, Thrive Hui, Workforce Development Council, Chamber of Commerce Hawai‘i, and others have done over the past 18 months. UH supports codifying the Generational Workforce Commitment in this way, with an organizational structure and embedding it in future State Unified Plans. Together, these provisions provide a mechanism for continuity across planning cycles and administrations, helping to ensure that coordination efforts can build on prior work rather than restart.

In addition to its work with the Workforce Development Council, UH is an active participant in the Learn, Work, Thrive Hui — a community-driven coalition of government agencies, education and training providers, employer and industry partners, and philanthropic organizations working together to first develop and now advance Hawai‘i's Generational Workforce Commitment. Across multiple analyses and years of shared learning within the Learn, Work, Thrive Hui and beyond, a consistent conclusion has emerged: Hawai‘i's workforce challenges are interconnected and long-term in nature, and progress depends on sustained coordination across systems. In order to effectively counter brain drain, address longstanding workforce shortages, and fulfill the fundamental promise of higher education to provide a better life for our graduates, this coordinated strategy will need to expand the work-based learning opportunities available to our students and the number of good jobs graduates can look forward to (especially on the neighbor islands, where there are two well-qualified job seekers for every job that pays a living wage). Both are key goals of the strategy developed through our collaborative process.

Workforce challenges of this scale require time, sustained coordination, and long-term investment. SCR 139 creates the conditions for aligned public and private investment to accumulate over time by establishing shared direction, clarified roles, and durable accountability. For these reasons, the University of Hawai‘i supports this resolution, and appreciates the opportunity to submit this testimony.