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Hawaii News

# Leeward students to try college life

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Leilani Ly from McKinley, left, Shania Dias from Kahuku and AJ Alcover from Farrington completed the YMCA College Camp with the help of past participants who are now in college.

The YMCA College Camp is expanding its efforts in Leeward communities this month with the launch of a camp for Nanakuli-Waianae area students.

College Camp — a weeklong experience that aims to give high school students a slice of college life — is tailored for teens in Hawaii's at-risk communities. Now in its fifth year, the program has two groupings: one for students entering their junior year and another for incoming seniors.

Participants stay at the Atherton YMCA, near the University of Hawaii at Manoa, while immersed in confidence-building activities, community service, campus tours and workshops about college tips and financial resources. Successful completion of both camps earns a student conditional admission to the University of Hawaii, regardless of high school track record.

The new camp for Nanakuli-Waianae's incoming seniors gets underway July 24. Twenty-three students will be assigned mentors — College Camp alumni now in college — who will stick with them through camp and beyond. Annual fundraisers cover part of the camp expenses, making the program free.

Shane Arquines, 19, who attended both camps and now serves as a mentor, takes the responsibility of helping to guide a younger student seriously.

"We see it as a lifetime commitment," Arquines said, adding that he and his charges regularly communicate by way of social media, typically texting and Facebook group messages.

Leilani Ly, 16, decided to apply for admission to the camp program after spotting a flier on a bulletin board at McKinley High School. There is no GPA requirement, but applicants must submit school transcripts, a letter of recommendation and a personal statement.

"After I got in, my mentors contacted me and they were really welcoming, so I didn't feel that nervous about it," Ly said. "They're invested in us not just as students, but as people, too."

This summer she completed the second college camp, which included focused college prep workshops that Ly said "cleared up the confusion" she had felt about applying to college.

Ly said College Camp workshops provided in-depth information she had not found at McKinley High on matters such as how to choose a college that best matches her academic plans with financial aid opportunities.

McKinley High School Principal Ron Okamura said that like many other high schools, McKinley has just one college counselor.

In addition, Okamura said, grade-level counselors, responsible for helping students choose classes and maintain credits, can serve as as valuable resources.

Ananda Chou, executive director of the YMCA Atherton branch, said College Camp helps fill a void created by an apparent shortage of high school counselors in public schools statewide.

In 2013 the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics reported that Hawaii's student-to-counselor ratio for elementary and secondary schools was 292-to-1. That's 42 students above the recommended maximum of 250-to-1.

"There simply aren't enough resources out there," Chou said. "High school counselors often serve a thousand students or more, and that affects graduation rates and rates of students going to college."

Hawaii's current graduation rate is 81.8 percent, slightly above the national average of 81.4 percent.

So far, 90 percent of College Camp's 222 campers have graduated from high school and enrolled in higher-education institutions.

Arquines, a sophomore at UH Manoa, said after attending a camp he felt motivated to work harder in high school and do away with lackluster grades. He is now pursuing a degree in the Shidler College of Business, which could help him fulfill a dream that eluded his parents.

"My parents never went to college. They tried to open multiple restaurants, but they all kind of failed because they didn't have that background knowledge that school would provide," Arquines said.

For AJ Alcover, who graduated from Farrington High School in May, College Camp gave him confidence to simply be himself. Throughout high school, Alcover said, his social life on campus and his relationship with his parents were complicated by his identity as a gay teen.

"Coming here, I realized that there are people who support me and accept me as I am," he said, adding that he wishes the camp could be available to more students who need such a program to glimpse their potential.

"A lot of students at my school say, 'I'm not smart enough' or 'I'm not good enough,' and I tell them, 'If I can do it, you can do it, too.'" Regarding the matter of low confidence, he said, "I think that's just the mentality that I feel is perpetuated in low-income communities." By settling for mediocrity, Alcover said, students are "hindering their true potential."

After receiving acceptance letters from Ivy League schools, Alcover said he plans to attend Brown University this fall and will pursue studies in geriatric oncology. His closeness to his grandmother, who died when he was 12, stirred his passion to help the elderly.

Shania Dias, a 15-year-old incoming junior at Kahuku High School, said College Camp gave her time to contemplate goals and a temporary reprieve from her role as a sort of “mom of the house.”

“My dad works every day, so I cook for my family and take care of my sister and I make sure everything gets done,” Davis said. In addition to her responsibilities at home, she is also involved in cheerleading and hula, and maintains a 4.0 GPA.

Her camp week marked the longest time she’d ever spent away from home. Although she wants to attend a college on the mainland, she has worried about how such a move would affect her family. With the encouragement of her mentors, Davis said she is considering applying to colleges in Oregon and California.

“Your family expects you to be a certain person, but when you’re not around your family, you get to be who you really are,” she said. “I think I would learn a lot more about myself if I went away for college.”

College Camp applications for summer 2017 will be available on the YMCA website in January.

All students who complete the college camp receive a conditional letter of acceptance from the University of Hawaii. The students finishing two rounds of camp get acceptance letters from UH Manoa. Successful Nanakuli-Waianae campers will receive letters from UH West Oahu.

Chou, who has been involved with the program for three years, said seeing teens earn high school diplomas and move on to college fuels enthusiasm to further expand College Camp’s outreach and scope.

“The idea is that we provide a support system to help them find lifelong success,” she said. “I feel like they’re my kids. I’m just so proud of them.”

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**CORRECTION:** Shania Dias is an incoming junior at Kahuku High School and Ron Okamura is the principal at McKinley High School. An earlier version of this story and the story in Monday’s paper said Dias’ last name was Davis and Okamura was the president at McKinley.

**CLARIFICATION:** Annual fundraisers cover part of the cost of College Camp. An earlier version of this story and the story in Monday’s paper did not specify that the fundraisers cover part of the cost.