Written Testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives, Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Investment

Hearing Entitled “Engines of Economic Mobility: The Critical Role of Community Colleges, Historically Black Colleges and Universities, and Minority-Serving Institutions in Preparing Students for Success.”

Chairwoman Susan A. Davis and Ranking Member Lloyd Smucker

May 22, 2019

Chairwoman Davis, Ranking Member Smucker and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, it is an honor to write to you and share my story on how the AANAPISI program has made an impact on my life and why it is critical to sustain and increase funding for AANAPISI programs across the nation.

My name is Kaitlen Taoipu, a first generation Samoan American junior at Highline College in Des Moines, Washington. I first heard of the AANAPISI Program through a friend at school, but I was no longer taking classes at the time, due to family obligations as my mother’s health was declining as a result of getting pneumonia for the third time in a year. She wasn’t able to work anymore, so I was left with no choice but to drop my classes during my sophomore year and find a full time job to help provide for my family, especially since I’m the eldest of three younger siblings. I was sad because I knew my mom never wanted me to work a full time job before graduating college. She always taught me the difference between a job and a career, and how important it is to get an education in order to establish a successful career. I was sad that I couldn’t go to school anymore but happy because I wasn’t performing at my best, as I was failing multiple classes. I wasn’t motivated to keep going because of this, I lost my financial aid...
support, and wrote multiple appeals, explaining the challenge I faced with barely passing classes because I was the sole provider for my family. Everything was so stressful and I decided school was just not a priority for me anymore.

One day my friend Fuifui Ah Kui told me about the AANAPISI Program and suggested we go together so she could introduce me to Nestor Enguerra, Retention Specialist for the program and Ekkarath Sisavatdy, former director of the program. I spoke with Nestor about my situation and shared something I never told any of my professors before, which was that I have a learning disability. Since elementary school with math and science, I was always placed in a different room with four to five other students who also had learning disabilities. In high school I took Math Essentials instead of Algebra or Geometry. The teachers taught at a much slower pace in a very structured and specific way that would help me and the other students learn better.

Nestor and Ekk told me about the benefits the AANAPISI program provides for students, and more importantly the assistance they would offer me as mentors. One thing that caught my attention about AANAPISI was the name itself and what it stood for; Asian American Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institution. It felt so good to see other Pacific Islanders there because it made me feel more included as a Samoan student. It provided a space where I had something to call my own, a place where others looked like me and spoke my native tongue, and a place that made me feel like I belong.
I started to attend the AANAPISI center frequently and received the support I needed from Nestor by enrolling in classes, getting financial aid, and just getting back on track again. Sometime after, Nestor offered me a job as a Student Ambassador for AANAPISI, which I applied for, had an interview, and was hired. Three years later, I’m a proud advocate and consider AANAPISI like a second home and the people I’ve met have become family. If it weren’t for this program and mentors like Ekk and Nestor, I would not have gone back to college. I went from someone who felt alone in my education journey, didn’t know how or who to ask for support, and felt like giving up; to someone who recognized the value I had in school and became a Student Ambassador through the AANAPISI program. I never thought I’d be working on a college campus with other students, leading workshops and presentations, participating and leading in panels, and sharing with other students about why this program is so important to me and how it can help them.

AANAPISI has exposed me to a more inclusive curriculum and the power of building coalition with other groups on campus and in the community. I took classes such as Native American Storytelling and English 101 and 205, where I learned about Indigenous peoples, cultures, and languages, which is something different from the standard curriculum. I was able to learn more about my own history, culture, and identity through these courses. AANAPISI has also given me opportunities to volunteer with different groups from facilitating workshops and presentations to organizing events both on campus and in the community.
AANAPISI has taken me to places I never thought I’d go. I’ve attended the Asian Pacific Americans In Higher Education (APAHE) Conference for two years in a row, I’m a former alumni of the 2018 eleventh cohort for the Pacific Islander Leaders of Tomorrow (PILOT) Institute, and just recently got accepted to participate in this year’s Pasifika Summer Institute at the University of Utah. I have improved immensely in my classes, learned how to maintain better study habits, and can confidently advocate for myself as a student. I have fallen in love with who I’ve become in my education journey. The AANAPISI program has shown me that I’m not alone on this journey and I refuse to believe in the saying that ‘college isn’t for everyone,’ because I proved to myself that it’s possible. To this day I am still the sole provider for my family, working two jobs as a Student Ambassador for AANAPISI and as a tutor for the school district at a local middle school. I am majoring in Psychology and plan on graduating next year from Highline College with my AA Degree with an emphasis in psychology. The AANAPISI program changed my life and is why I strongly advocate for its sustainability and growth.