

Teaching with Aloha

A Culturally Responsive Pedagogical Framework

Counselor educators are teaching in increasingly complex social environments. As policies continue to evolve, teaching often feels unsteady, especially among heightened levels of stress within graduate programs. Unsettling environments can be *mālama* (Hawaiian for “to care for, sustain”) through intentional pedagogical approaches that foster belonging and well-being in teaching practices. This article presents practices in teaching with aloha, a culturally responsive pedagogical approach grounded in Hawai‘i’s *Nā Hopena A‘o* (HĀ) framework. This framework offers support to counselor education preparation programs, serving as a model for designing and cultivating counselor resilience, relational competence, and professional dispositions that directly strengthen the counseling field.

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Introduction

Let's begin by asking "What is the practice of Aloha?" Within Native Hawaiian worldviews, aloha is not simply a greeting or expression of kindness, but a deeply relational cultural practice grounded in reciprocity, humility, compassion, interconnectedness, and collective responsibility (Lloyd et al., 2025; Miyose, 2024; Aloha Spirit, 2025). Aloha reflects an ethical way of being that emphasizes relational accountability among people, communities, and the living world, while fostering harmony, dignity, and mutual care (Lloyd et al., 2025; Miyose, 2024; Aloha Spirit, 2025). Contemporary, Native Hawaiian scholarship further positions aloha as a culturally grounded framework for sustaining well-being, relational balance, and community resilience amid ongoing sociopolitical and colonial challenges (Lloyd et al., 2025; Miyose, 2024; Salzer, 2025). In this manuscript, teaching with aloha is not conceptualized as performative niceness but as a culturally grounded relational ethic and anti-oppressive educational practice that centers reciprocal responsibility, humanization, cultural humility, and collective care within counselor education.

Grounded in these principles, teaching with aloha offers counselor educators a relational and culturally responsive pedagogical framework for fostering connection, belonging, and ethical engagement within increasingly complex sociopolitical educational contexts. Counselor educators are increasingly teaching within sociopolitical contexts shaped by shifting policies, instructional restrictions, political polarization, and even heightened limitations of curriculum. As a result, emotional stress may intensify throughout counseling program coursework, clinical training, and supervision experiences, increasing the risk of burnout among counselor educators and counselors-in-training (Harrichand et al., 2021; Myers et al., 2016). Research consistently demonstrates that counselor educators experience elevated levels of stress, emotional exhaustion, and burnout, which may diminish relational presence, wellness, professional effectiveness, and advocacy while influencing the preparation of future counselors (Friesema & Bradley, 2022; Harrichand et al., 2021; Maslach & Leiter, 2016; Myers et al., 2016), which can influence counseling services, having implications that extend well beyond the classroom. In this context, centering connection and care emerges as essential to counselor preparation practices. Counselor educators may benefit from pedagogical frameworks that intentionally cultivate community, relational accountability, cultural humility, emotional safety, and collective care. Teaching with aloha offers one culturally grounded approach for fostering humanizing, relational, and justice-oriented counselor education practices during challenging sociopolitical times.

This relational orientation is consistent with emerging scholarship from Hawai'i demonstrating that Native Hawaiian values can meaningfully inform educator preparation through culturally responsive assessment, professional disposition development, and institutional practices grounded in relationship rather than compliance (Simpson Steele et al., 2025; Simpson Steele et al., 2026).

Reflexivity and Positionality Statement

As a counselor educator at an Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institution (AANAPISI) in Hawai'i, my teaching is informed by relational, cultural, and place-based values in this context. While I do not position myself as a Native Hawaiian cultural expert, this framework emerged through sustained engagement with Native Hawaiian values, mentorship, community learning, and ongoing reflection.

Teaching with aloha is not intended to appropriate or universalize Native Hawaiian knowledge systems. Rather, it explores how relational principles rooted in aloha may inform more humanizing and culturally responsive pedagogies in counselor education. This work is grounded in commitments to relational ethics, reciprocity, and cultural humility, with recognition that engagement with these teachings requires ongoing learning, accountability, and respect for the communities from which they emerge. This perspective aligns with recent equity-minded scholarship emphasizing that Native Hawaiian values are most appropriately engaged through sustained relationship, community partnership, and culturally responsive institutional practices rather than as decontextualized instructional strategies (Hook et al., 2014; Simpson Steele et al., 2025; Simpson Steele et al., 2026; Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998).

Description of Teaching Innovation

Despite longstanding attention to multicultural and social justice competencies in counselor education (Ratts et al., 2016), few publications describe how counselor educators are navigating sociopolitical tension through culturally grounded, place-based pedagogies. Calls to decolonize counselor education highlight the need for approaches that move beyond individualistic, compliance-driven models toward relational, culturally sustaining ways of teaching (Gorski & Goodman, 2015; Stockton, 2025). Similar calls have emerged within assessment scholarship, where professional dispositions are increasingly conceptualized as developmental, relational, and context-responsive rather than static competencies (Simpson Steele et al., 2026). Still, practical guidance for implementing such approaches remains limited.

This Teaching Practice Brief addresses this gap by presenting teaching with aloha, an equity minded pedagogical approach grounded in Nā Hopena A'o (HĀ) (Hawai'i State Department of Education [HIDOE], 2015). The HĀ framework (HIDOE, 2015) provides a culturally grounded foundation shared within the P-12 public school settings across the state of Hawai'i that complements teaching with aloha in higher education. The HĀ outcomes mirror the values emphasized in the education with aloha approach (Tibbetts et al., 2007) and extend naturally into counselor education preparation programs committed to place-based and culturally sustaining pedagogy. Teaching with aloha can be framed as an adaptation of HĀ principles

within counselor education, supporting holistic student development, ethical practice, and relational well-being. In sociopolitical climates marked by division, fear, and institutional pressure, teaching with aloha may function as a humanizing pedagogical stance that centers dignity, interconnectedness, and relational care. Drawing on lived teaching practice in a graduate school counseling program in Hawai‘i, the teaching practices illustrated here share how culturally grounded strategies can support student well-being, professional identity formation, and resilience amid challenging sociopolitical times.

TEACHING WITH ALOHA CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

Teaching with aloha is informed by education with aloha, a strengths-based educational approach emphasizing cultural strengths, relational pedagogy, and collective responsibility (Tibbetts et al., 2007). Rather than focusing on deficits, education with aloha centers belonging, care, and high expectations as foundational to student engagement and development. Teaching with aloha extends this emphasis from the general P-12 educational setting into counselor education by recognizing graduate students’ cultural, relational, and experiential assets through the prioritization of growth, reflection, and relational accountability over standard evaluation practices. This developmental orientation parallels the Ho‘oulu framework, which conceptualizes professional dispositions as relational capacities cultivated through mentorship, reflection, and culturally grounded educational experiences rather than traits to be merely evaluated (Simpson Steele et al., 2026).

Teaching with aloha aligns closely with emerging scholarship on creative and relational pedagogies in counselor education. Baker et al. (2026) argued that creative teaching practices in counselor education foster deeper engagement, reflexivity, and meaning making, particularly when educators attend to relational processes, embodied learning, and contextual responsiveness. The concept of teaching with aloha similarly centers relationship, presence, and responsiveness, positioning learning as a co-constructed process grounded in connection rather than imparting knowledge.

Guillory-Lacy (2025) further supported this orientation by demonstrating how talking circles function as relational pedagogical spaces that decenter hierarchical authority and honor collective knowledge. These practices resonate with Hawaiian concepts of pilina (connection) and ‘ohana (family) learning, reinforcing teaching with aloha as a pedagogy that privileges relational safety, shared voice, and communal accountability.

NĀ HOPENA A’O (HĀ) AS PEDAGOGICAL COMPASS

Grounding pedagogy in local values can offer both stability and purpose. Teaching with aloha means creating a classroom community guided by Hawai‘i’s Nā Hopena A’o (HĀ) framework, a holistic model that centers Belonging, Responsibility, Excellence, Aloha, Total Well-Being, and Hawai‘i. The HĀ framework, originally developed by the Hawai‘i Department of Education (DOE) in 2015 and adopted statewide in 2016 (HIDOE, 2025), was established to strengthen

the HI DOE's mission to provide a public education system that honors Hawaiian identity, language, and culture while tuning into the success and well-being of all students. The HĀ framework is not used as a curriculum but rather as a grounding lens and values-based structure to promote connection and identity through practices in leadership and teaching to foster pilina (connection), and relationships.

The HĀ framework is stated as “a framework for the Department [of Education] to develop in its employees and students the skills, behaviors and dispositions that are reminiscent of Hawai'i's unique context and to honor the qualities and values of the indigenous language and culture of Hawai'i” (HIDOE, 2015, para. 2). The idea of teaching with aloha can extend to environments and contexts outside of Hawai'i by incorporating place-based standards, striving to be both a pedagogical stance and a wellness practice to help guide how counselor educators design, lead, hold space, and practice kākō'o (support), and offering mentorship and professional modeling in counselor education courses. HĀ functions as a pedagogical compass guiding classroom norms, relational practices, and approaches to professional dispositions. Recent work has further demonstrated how HĀ-informed values can extend beyond curriculum to shape assessment design, faculty relationships, and institutional culture, reinforcing the importance of culturally grounded systems that foster belonging, reflection, and professional growth (Kelly et al., in press; Simpson Steele et al., 2026). Anchoring an aloha-based teaching pedagogy at the graduate level models shared values, stability, and collective grounding during periods of sociopolitical stress, while aligning with the ASCA School Counselor Professional Standards and Competencies (ASCA, 2025a) and the ACA Code of Ethics (ACA, 2014) used within counselor education programs including competencies of ethics, multicultural responsiveness, and wellness.

With the increasingly complex sociopolitical context across the nation today, educators are navigating evolving policy landscapes, contested public discourse surrounding identity and equity, and growing constraints on classroom dialogue, all of which may contribute to educator stress, emotional fatigue, and uncertainty within graduate learning environments (Goodman et al., 2020; Gorski & Goodman, 2015; Lewis et al., 2003; Ratts et al., 2016; CACREP, 2021). Rather than responding to sociopolitical tension through avoidance or disengagement, teaching with aloha encourages relational accountability, community care, and culturally responsive dialogue. In the state of Hawai'i, these broader national challenges intersect with the state's unique cultural, historical, and geographic context. Counselor educators and school counselors-in-training may be navigating the ongoing impacts of colonization on Native Hawaiian communities, persistent educational and health inequities, the high cost of living, geographic isolation across island communities, and the responsibility of serving culturally and linguistically diverse students while honoring place-based ways of knowing and learning. These realities often coexist with broader national conversations surrounding identity, equity, and educational policy, shaping both educator and student well-being. Teaching with aloha reflects a philosophy of education that is relational, place-based, and centered on the holistic flourishing of learners. In counselor education, it can offer a powerful anchor for cultivating belonging and resilience, serving as a stabilizing and ethical compass for teaching and mentoring. Its ethical foundation lies in intentionally fostering learning environments that

uphold students' dignity, promote beneficence, honor cultural humility, encourage relational accountability, and support the well-being of individuals and communities in ways that are consistent with the ACA Code of Ethics (ACA, 2014), multicultural and social justice counseling competencies (Ratts et al., 2016), the ASCA Ethical Standards for School Counselors (ASCA, 2022), and counselor educators' responsibilities to model ethical and culturally responsive professional practice.

Each component of the HĀ framework: Belonging, Responsibility, Excellence, Aloha, Total Well-Being, and Hawai'i, can be intentionally embedded in counselor education pedagogy as seen in Table A1, Integration of HĀ Elements in Counselor Education: Teaching Focus, Practices, and Student Outcomes. During periods of sociopolitical uncertainty, these HĀ values provide students with a shared language for navigating tension, emotional reactivity, and professional responsibility.

Examples of Teaching Strategies

An educator using teaching with aloha may facilitate difficult classroom conversations regarding race, identity, legislation, or educational inequities through practices emphasizing humility, listening, mutual respect, and relational responsibility rather than debate-oriented engagement.

HĀ CIRCLES

HĀ circles are structured, relational dialogue spaces intentionally used at the beginning of courses, during periods of heightened sociopolitical stress, or following challenging or emotionally charged discussions. Grounded in shared values, these circles emphasize deep listening, mutual respect, and relational accountability. Implementation typically includes an initial grounding or centering activity, explicit naming of relevant HĀ values to frame the dialogue, opportunities for voluntary reflection or sharing, and a collective closure that supports integration and return to learning. By modeling relational practices central to the counseling profession, HĀ circles can help foster psychological safety, strengthen cohort cohesion, and reinforce expectations for ethical presence and community responsibility within counselor preparation programs. These relational structures are also consistent with Sense of Community theory, which emphasizes membership, shared influence, integration of needs, and emotional connection as foundational to meaningful learning communities (Kelly et al., in press).

Example. In a graduate-level counseling course, a HĀ circle may be used at the beginning of class following a week of politically charged educational policy changes. Students are invited into a structured opening grounding practice (e.g., breathwork or silent reflection), followed

by a prompt such as, “What value from HĀ feels most needed for you this week in your role as a developing counselor?” Students may share voluntarily using a talking piece (in-person) or turn-taking structure (virtually) while others listen without interruption. The instructor closes the circle by naming shared themes, reinforcing pilina (connection), and inviting students to identify one relational or self-care action they will carry into their academic work, professional interactions, or future counseling practice.

The HĀ circle activity aligns with key counselor education professional dispositions and directly supports the development of competencies outlined in the *2024 CACREP Standards* (CACREP, 2024), particularly in areas of professional counseling orientation and ethical practice (Section 3.A.), social and cultural diversity (Section 3.B.), and counseling and helping relationships (Section 3.E.; CACREP, 2024). The HĀ circle also corresponds with dispositional domains assessed through the Professional Dispositions Competency Assessment Revised (PDCA-R), including interpersonal skills, cultural sensitivity, self-awareness, ethical and professional conduct, and openness to feedback (Garner et al., 2020).

During periods of collective grief, political uncertainty, or community trauma, educators may apply teaching with aloha by prioritizing connection, flexibility, emotional presence, and culturally responsive care within classroom interactions.

RELATIONAL RITUALS AND CHECK-INS

Relational rituals and brief check-ins are intentionally embedded throughout courses across the counseling curriculum and program semesters to support students’ nervous system regulation, emotional presence, and relational safety. Drawing from trauma-informed educational principles (Carello & Butler, 2015), these rituals and check-ins include predictable opening routines that orient students to the learning space, reflective pauses during emotionally intensive content, and closing acknowledgments that honor collective effort and shared responsibility. Check-ins may take verbal, written, or somatic forms, offering students multiple avenues to express readiness, an emotional state, or learning needs while maintaining appropriate professional boundaries. Over time, these rituals may cultivate consistency, trust, and relational attunement, reinforcing learning environments where students feel supported, grounded, and more fully able to engage in both personal and professional growth.

Example. In a graduate counseling course delivered online or in-person, each class session begins with a structured relational check-in using a consistent prompt such as, “On a scale of 1–5, where is your energy and presence today as you enter this learning space?” Students respond verbally in round-robin format or through a Zoom function, if attendance is online. The instructor acknowledges patterns without requiring explanation, normalizing fluctuation in emotional availability while maintaining professional boundaries. During emotionally intensive topics (e.g., suicide prevention, school violence, or systemic inequities), a brief mid-class pause is incorporated where students are invited to silently reflect, stretch, or jot down reactions in a private journal. The class session closes with a grounding acknowledgment of shared effort and a brief reflective prompt such as, “What is one word you are taking with you from today’s class?”

These relational rituals intentionally cultivate counselor self-awareness, emotional regulation, reflective practice, and professional presence; foundational capacities for ethical and effective counseling relationships. They directly support the 2024 CACREP Standards related to Professional Counseling Orientation and Ethical Practice, particularly Standard 3.A.10 (ethical standards and ethical decision-making) and Standard 3.A.11 (self-care, self-awareness, and self-evaluation strategies for ethical and effective practice), while also reinforcing the integration of diversity, equity, inclusion, critical thinking, and culturally sustaining practices throughout counselor preparation (CACREP, 2024). In addition, these practices foster professional dispositions reflected in the Professional Dispositions Competency Assessment–Revised (PDCA-R), including self-awareness, interpersonal skills, ethical and professional conduct, cultural sensitivity, and openness to feedback (Garner et al., 2020).

LETTERS OF ALOHA

Teaching with aloha may support students from historically marginalized communities by intentionally affirming cultural identity, honoring lived experience, and fostering relational safety within counselor preparation programs. Letters of aloha are narrative-based reflective practices offered to students at key points in the semester, particularly during periods of heightened academic, professional, or sociopolitical stress. Rather than functioning solely as evaluative feedback, these letters center affirmation, meaning-making, and relational presence by inviting students to reflect on their growth, cultural assets, relational engagement, and emerging professional identity through the Nā Hopena A’o (HĀ) framework. The practice positions reflection as a dialogical and compassionate process that supports counselor identity development while maintaining appropriate academic and professional boundaries.

Example. In a graduate-level practicum or internship course, the instructor provides a mid-semester “Letter of Aloha” to each student following site supervisor feedback submissions and reflective journal entries. Rather than focusing solely on students’ performance evaluation, the letter highlights their observed strengths, such as relational presence with clients/students, ethical decision-making in challenging situations, and growth in cultural responsiveness. The instructor intentionally integrates HĀ domains (e.g., belonging, responsibility, and total well-being), naming specific examples, such as how a student demonstrated pilina (connection) by building trust with a school site team or showed ha’awina no’ono’o (reflective learning) through reflective supervision engagement.

Students are then invited to respond to the letter with a brief reflective reply (written or recorded), identifying how the letter affirms their developing professional identity and where they see continued growth. This exchange is positioned as developmental rather than evaluative, reinforcing relational accountability, professional formation, and cultural humility within counselor preparation. Framing feedback as an ongoing relational dialogue rather than a summative evaluation reflects contemporary approaches to culturally responsive assessment that emphasize growth, reflection, and reciprocal faculty-student relationships (Kelly et al., in press; Simpson Steele et al., 2026).

ASCA NATIONAL MODEL AND HĀ FRAMEWORK LESSON PLAN

At my university, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) national model lesson plan assignment was designed to support counselor-in-training integration of culturally responsive pedagogy, professional standards, and place-based values within comprehensive school counseling practice by incorporating the HĀ framework intentionally within the lesson plan. Students developed a classroom, unit, or small-group guidance lesson aligned with the “ASCA National Model[®]: A Framework for School Counseling Programs” (5th ed.; ASCA, 2025b) and “ASCA School Counselor Professional Standards: and Competencies” (ASCA, 2025a) while intentionally incorporating the Nā Hopena A’o (HĀ) framework. Lesson plans were tailored to specific P–12 grade levels and identified student needs, requiring students to demonstrate developmental appropriateness, cultural responsiveness, and alignment with state and national educational standards.

Example. In a graduate school counseling course, a student designs a 6th-grade classroom guidance lesson focused on “Navigating Stress and Building Support Systems.” The lesson is aligned with the “ASCA Student Standards: Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success” (ASCA, 2025c) and explicitly integrates HĀ domains, such as belonging (belonging to supportive peer networks), responsibility (help-seeking behaviors), and total well-being (emotional regulation strategies). The lesson begins with a brief grounding activity and introduces the concept of pilina (connection) by helping sixth-grade students identify trusted adults and peer supports within their school community.

Elementary students engage in a small-group activity where they map their support systems using a “circle of care” worksheet followed by a reflective closing prompt asking students to identify one strategy they can use when feeling overwhelmed. In the course context, the graduate student is also required to submit a reflective commentary explaining how HĀ influenced their lesson design decisions, including how relational safety, cultural responsiveness, and developmental appropriateness were considered in planning instruction for diverse learners.

Evaluation of Effectiveness

The effectiveness of teaching with aloha has been evaluated across multiple semesters through informal and formative indicators, including student reflective feedback, course evaluations, and observed cohort engagement. Students have reported increased feelings of belonging, emotional safety, and connection to peers and faculty. Faculty observations indicate enhanced student participation, mutual support within cohorts, and greater willingness to engage in difficult sociopolitical conversations. While these indicators are not causal, they align with literature suggesting that relational, culturally grounded pedagogies support engagement and resilience in counselor education (Carello & Butler, 2015; Friesema & Bradley, 2022).

TEACHING WITH ALOHA: PRACTICE OUTCOMES

Across reflective practices, including the “Letters of Aloha” activity, students reported outcomes related to emotional regulation, professional clarity, and relational connection. Students frequently described reduced anxiety and increased capacity to pause, reflect, and engage intentionally during periods of academic and sociopolitical stress. Students’ reflections indicated greater clarity of purpose and alignment with professional values, with students articulating renewed commitment to counseling grounded in responsibility, compassion, and service.

Common themes also included increased awareness of the importance of relational support and cultural grounding. Students highlighted *pilina* (connection) and *kāko’o* (support) as essential to sustaining well-being and professional presence, while reflections demonstrated integration of place-based values and growing cultural humility. Collectively, these outcomes suggest that teaching with aloha-informed practices support counselor identity development, emotional presence, and values integration within counselor preparation.

ASCA LESSON PLAN HĀ FRAMEWORK: ASSIGNMENT OUTCOMES

Review of the “ASCA National Model” lesson plans revealed consistent integration of counseling standards with culturally grounded values. School counseling students demonstrated the ability to align “ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors” standards with HĀ principles, using belonging, responsibility, and well-being as organizing frameworks for lesson objectives rather than as additive elements.

Lesson designs emphasized P-12 student engagement, relational safety, and developmental appropriateness, frequently incorporating interactive activities, opportunities for student voice, and attention to classroom climate. School counseling students also demonstrated increased competence in articulating participation data, outcome indicators, and follow-up plans, reflecting growing confidence in accountability within school counseling practice. Reflective components further indicated strengthening professional identity and ethical awareness, particularly in designing counseling lessons responsive to Hawai’i’s cultural and community contexts.

MID-AND END-OF-SEMESTER FEEDBACK AS RELATIONAL AND RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGY

Mid- and end-of-semester feedback informed the practice of teaching with aloha by highlighting how instructional strategies affected graduate students’ learning and relational presence. Students identified interactive, relational approaches, such as small-group discussions, in-class dialogue, practical assignments, structured reviews, and organized materials as most supportive, fostering clarity, engagement, and confidence when tied to real-world counseling practice.

Challenges in implementing the instructional framework (e.g., HĀ-aligned pedagogical practices) in the course led the instructor to make intentional adjustments to support graduate school counseling students’ voice and engagement. teaching prompted intentional adjustments

to support student voice and engagement. The instructor restructured class sessions into 3–4 segments (approximately 30–40 minutes each) to better balance content delivery with discussion, reflection, and application. To enhance engagement, the instructor incorporated brief relational and mindfulness activities, facilitated guided discussions in whole-class and breakout group formats, and created structured opportunities for students to brainstorm ideas, share questions and reflections from readings, and connect course content to their professional practice as emerging school counselors. The instructor also used formative assessments, online interactive tools (e.g., polls, chat responses, exit tickets), and applied case and video analyses to reinforce learning and promote reflective practice. These instructional adaptations highlighted key concepts, scaffolded student learning, and fostered relational presence while ensuring multiple avenues for graduate students to engage meaningfully with course material.

Student feedback from graduate school counseling (SC) students at both mid-semester and end-of-semester points highlighted several recommendations for strengthening engagement and learning. Students emphasized the importance of more consistent class structures, clearer connections between assigned readings and in-class content, additional scaffolding of complex concepts, culturally grounded examples, and more structured opportunities for reflection. Students also noted that relational safety, attention to nervous system regulation, and responsive teaching practices supported their engagement and learning process.

The instructor used this feedback as an ongoing relational feedback loop to adjust instruction in real time. This process demonstrated teaching with aloha as an adaptive and culturally responsive practice that centers graduate students' voices, supports relational presence, and fosters shared accountability for learning. These iterative adjustments strengthened content integration, deepened reflective dialogue, and enhanced students' ability to apply course concepts in practical, professional contexts.

Assessment Tools and Methods Used

The HĀ framework aligns strongly with the goals of counselor education, including the preparation of culturally responsive, ethically grounded, and developmentally competent school counselors who can promote student academic, social-emotional, and career development while engaging in systemic advocacy and equity-focused practice. Within school counselor education specifically, these aims are reflected in the “ASCA National Model’s” emphasis on social-emotional learning, equity, and systemic awareness (ASCA, 2025b). Using HĀ as a pedagogical compass reminds both faculty and students that education is inseparable from culture, relationship, and community; it is the practice of breathing together. By intentionally embedding each HĀ element into counseling pedagogy, faculty and supervisors guide students toward professional dispositions that are culturally responsive, ethically grounded, and developmentally cultivated.

‘ŌHI‘A LEHUA AS A DISPOSITIONAL GROWTH FRAMEWORK

He lā‘au kū ho‘okahi, he lehua no Ka‘ala. [A lone tree, a lehua of Ka‘ala].

This ‘Ōlelo No‘eau (proverb) is an expression of admiration for an outstanding person, unequaled in beauty, wisdom, or skill. This comes with practice and reflection over time. Teaching with aloha reframes dispositional assessment as relational and developmental. This conceptualization builds upon the Ho‘oulu framework developed within the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa College of Education, which positions professional dispositions as context-responsive, culturally grounded, and developmental processes supported through mentoring, reflection, and community (Simpson Steele et al., 2026). Drawing on the ‘ōhi‘a lehua as an Indigenous metaphor, dispositional indicators are dynamic and context responsive. Changes in engagement are interpreted as invitations for connection and growth rather than immediate concern. Through intentional pedagogical design, including structured feedback, guided reflection, and scaffolded learning experiences, students are supported in enacting both relational and ethical competencies.

In the College of Education at University of Hawai‘i Mānoa, across graduate and undergraduate programs, professional growth is described through the stages of the ‘ōhi‘a lehua (*Metrosideros polymorpha*), which is one of the most iconic and culturally significant plants in Hawai‘i. As seen in Figure A1, this floral representation embodies school counselor candidates’ dispositional growth as they develop into professionals who exhibit the characteristics of an outstanding school counselor. Figure A1 is intended as pedagogical sense-making tools rather than prescriptive assessment instruments to support relational and culturally responsive teaching in counselor education.

To operationalize these dispositions, the dispositional Assessment D: ‘Ōhi‘a Lehua Tool was developed as a visual and reflective guide for professional growth. This tool offers a developmental model for counselor education students, just as the lehua tree progresses from seed to full bloom, candidates advance from early promise to professional excellence by cultivating the values and dispositions embedded in the HĀ framework.

The metaphor of the ‘ōhi‘a lehua tree not only illustrates stages of professional dispositional growth but also reinforces the cultural and place-based values of Hawai‘i, providing a tangible and meaningful representation of the abstract qualities fostered by the HĀ framework. Counselors-in-training progress intentionally through stages, from ‘*Ano‘ano* (seed) to *Hōpoe* (full bloom), through practice, reflection, feedback, and mentorship (*kāko‘o*). This integration ensures that dispositional development is holistic, culturally grounded, and aligned with the program’s philosophy of teaching with aloha. As captured by the Hawaiian proverb, “*He lā‘au kū ho‘okahi, he lehua no Ka‘ala*” (“A lone tree, a lehua of Ka‘ala”), professional excellence in counseling emerges over time through deliberate cultivation of values, reflection, and relational practice, echoing the growth of the ‘Ōhi‘a lehua in Hawai‘i’s unique landscape.

From a teaching with aloha perspective, dispositional gate checks function as developmental waypoints rather than endpoints. Each gate offers an opportunity for students to receive

feedback, reflect on their growth, and recommit to professional values that ultimately shape their work with children and adolescents. Teaching with Aloha does not negate the necessity of gatekeeping decisions. Rather, it emphasizes that even when remediation or dismissal is required, the process can be carried out with transparency, compassion, and respect for dignity, values central to ethical counseling practice.

School counseling candidates in the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa College of Education are assessed at admission and at multiple points throughout their program to ensure growth in professional dispositions essential to effective, ethical, and culturally responsive school counseling. Figure A1 (see Appendix A), illustrates professional dispositions as a context-responsive process rather than a linear progression., and it reflects both the professional standards of the field and values rooted in Hawai'i's cultural context, including the following:

- kuleana: right, privilege, concern, responsibility
- pilina: relationship, connection
- alu like: striving together, to cooperate
- ha'awina no'ono'o: thought, reflection
- aloha 'aina: love of the land and its people

In addition to these core cultural values, dispositions are assessed using the Professional Disposition Competency Assessment, Revised (PDCA-R) (Garner et al., 2020), which evaluates competencies, such as conscientiousness, cooperativeness, coping and self-care, critical thinking, cultural sensitivity, emotional stability, honesty, interpersonal skills, ethical and professional conduct, moral reasoning, openness, and self-awareness. The PDCA-R is structurally necessary, as it is a research-informed assessment process, where the 'ōhi'a lehua dispositions support the concept of teaching with aloha as a relationally transformative concept to apply to dispositional assessment processes. These dispositions are understood as developmental capacities and not as static traits, capacities cultivated through reflective practice, relational engagement, and guided mentorship.

Discussion and Implications

Teaching with Aloha offers a Hawaiian specific context for counselor educators to consider a culturally grounded approach for navigating teaching in challenging sociopolitical times. By centering care, belonging, and relational accountability, these practices support counselor resilience and ethical professional identity development, with implications for downstream counseling services. Collectively, this work contributes to a growing body of scholarship demonstrating that Native Hawaiian values can inform pedagogy, assessment, professional dispositions, and institutional culture within educator preparation programs (Kelly et al., in press; Simpson Steele et al., 2025, 2026).

Meaningful engagement with teaching with aloha requires ongoing learning, cultural humility, relational accountability, and sustained connection to local communities, educators, and place-based practices. Counselor educators interested in culturally sustaining and relational pedagogies may benefit from engaging with professional learning communities, Indigenous and Pacific-centered educational organizations, and place-based educational initiatives within Hawai'i and beyond. The resources provided in Appendix B are offered as starting points for continued learning rather than definitive representations of Native Hawaiian knowledge or practice.

Adoption of this model can be customized to reflect specific places of learning and the contexts of those served in counselor education programs. A personalized place-based framework can support students from diverse backgrounds across a range of learning environments, from core coursework to experiential supervision groups. This brief is limited by its focus on a single institutional and cultural context. Future research could explore the adaptation of values-based, place-responsive pedagogies in other regions and counselor education settings. While teaching with aloha is rooted in Hawai'i, its emphasis on relational ethics and cultural grounding may be transferable when educators thoughtfully attend to local contexts and communities.

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Appendix A

TABLE A1

Integration of HĀ Elements in Counselor Education: Teaching Focus, Practices, and Student Outcomes

HĀ element	Teaching focus	Example teaching practices	Intended student outcome
Belonging	Inclusive classroom; cultural identity development	HĀ circles; opening rituals	Increased engagement; reduced isolation
Responsibility	Accountability; ethical practice	Group agreements; reflective check-ins	Professional responsibility; repair
Excellence	Continuous learning; professional growth	Narrative feedback; Letters of Aloha	Skill development without perfectionism
Aloha	Empathy; compassion; respect	Values-based dialogue; modeling care	Empathy; ethical presence
Total well-being	Wellness; self-care; resilience	Capacity check-ins; pacing	Resilience; self-regulation
Hawai'i	Place-based, culturally responsive practice	Community reflection; 'ike 'ike	Contextualized practice

Note. HĀ = Hawaiian values framework for teaching and learning. “Ho‘oponopono” (a traditional Hawaiian practice and philosophy centered on restoring balance, harmony, and right relationship) and similar culturally grounded practices can be integrated within HĀ circles or reflection activities as appropriate.

FIGURE A1**‘Ōhi‘a Lehua as a Relational Model of Professional Dispositional Growth**

‘Ano‘ano (Seed) 	‘Ōpu‘u Lehua (Flower bud) 	Mohala (Blooming) 	Hōpoe (Full bloom) 
A candidate may demonstrate prom-ise but may not have developed the shared norms and values of the profession yet. Ongoing feedback and reflection are critical for growth.	A developing candidate may practice some (but not all) shared norms and values of the profession or may do so inconsistently. Feedback and reflection nurture the growth of a developing candidate.	A proficient candidate intentionally and consistently demonstrates shared norms and values of the profession. They actively seek and respond to feedback for growth.	An advanced candidate may, on occasion, model higher standards than the shared values and norms of the profession. This demonstrates an exceptional level of commitment to go above and beyond expectations.

Note. This figure illustrates professional dispositions as a context-responsive process rather than a linear progression. Stages reflect relational and developmental states influenced by sociopolitical context and supported through faculty relationships, cohort connection, and culturally grounded pedagogical practices. The model depicted in this figure is reproduced and adapted with permission from the College of Education, University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa. Used with permission.

Appendix B

SUGGESTED RESOURCES FOR CONTINUED LEARNING AND RELATIONAL ENGAGEMENT

Hawai'i State Department of Education – Nā Hopena A'o (HĀ)

<https://hawaiipublicschools.org/about/na-hopena-a%CA%BBo-ha/>

The HĀ framework offers a statewide, culturally grounded approach centered on belonging, responsibility, excellence, aloha, total well-being, and Hawai'i. Educators use HĀ as a guide for relational, place-based, and culturally responsive teaching and leadership practices.

Pacific Circle Consortium (PCC)

<https://www.pacificcircleconsortium.org/>

The Pacific Circle Consortium (PCC) is an international network of educators, researchers, and community leaders focused on Indigenous education, sustainability, equity, and Pacific-centered learning. Participation in PCC conferences and collaborative initiatives may support educators seeking deeper engagement with relational, place-based, and culturally sustaining educational practices across Pacific communities.

University of Hawai'i at Mānoa College of Education

<https://coe.hawaii.edu/>

The College of Education offers opportunities for engagement in Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, multicultural, and place-based educational initiatives through coursework, community partnerships, research collaborations, and professional learning events.

Community and Place-Based Learning Opportunities Across Hawai'i

Educators may further deepen their understanding of Teaching with Aloha through participation in:

- community cultural events
- mālama 'āina (land stewardship/service) opportunities
- Indigenous and place-based education workshops
- Hawaiian language and cultural learning experiences
- local school-community partnerships
- relational engagement with educators, cultural practitioners, and community leaders across the islands

These experiences support ongoing development of cultural humility, relational accountability, and contextual responsiveness beyond traditional academic learning environments.

Additional Foundational Readings

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