COMMITTEE ON HIGHER EDUCATION
Rep. Isaac W. Choy, Chair
Thursday February 5, 2015 2:00 pm, Room 309

RE HB 555 RELATING TO THE UNIVERSITY OF HAWAI‘I

HEPC OPPOSES THE CURRENT DRAFT

The purpose of this bill is to promote economic self-sufficiency of specific University programs, and eliminate those that are less self-sufficient. It’s “marker” for high cost and low demand programs are undergraduate majors with fewer than ten students.

HEPC respectfully suggests that the current draft does not meet this goal. Here are some reasons why:

1. There is no cost per se for a department or program allowing a student to “major” in a unique or emerging area if the existing undergraduate and or graduate faculty is already in place, teaching full time, and can provide the necessary courses and support for an emerging or declining area of study. Many faculty teach both graduate and undergraduate courses.

2. Many undergraduate majors take courses from a number of departments and units, and thus focusing on the program in which a major is offered may not be relevant to cost.

3. Some areas of learning and research do not require a large number of students to make a contribution to the field. This can be the case of cutting edge research, or programs that focus on understanding different cultures or nations. I have personally benefitted from a Korean history program in the 1970s in which the actual number of fellow students, both undergraduate and graduate, was small. Yet Korean studies, and the construction of a Korean Studies building, was and is important in asserting UH as an important player in East Asian studies. The number of students enrolled in Korean language classes at the time was also very small.

4. Some specific majors are part of a cluster of major and minors that go together. To major in Korean history meant you also needed to take courses in Chinese and Japanese history, and Korean language, not to mention historiography. I also took courses in Sociology, and audited a UH Law school course on Constitutional Law to better understand the differences between traditional East Asian law and western approaches.
5. Programs that need to offer a unique course often seek to hire a lecturer for that course. Some rely heavily on lecturers for core courses. The School of Social Work comes to mind. As a former music major at another university, it was common for most students to receive private lessons from musicians who were not regular faculty. To the extent that departments and programs utilize the non-full time instructor option, the imagined cost of a low enrollment major may be insignificant.

6. There is value in the ability of UH to offer the largest number of major options to better serve a changing and diverse population. When a young student suddenly discovers a new passion and seeks to declare a major, it could be discouraging to learn there is a law on the books prohibiting it.

7. For emerging science and STEM programs in particular, there may be great advantage to students who can graduate with a finely tuned and focused major in an emergent field. Emerging fields (I’m thinking of cloning?) might well be limited to a smaller number of highly motivated students for a number of years. This bill could, hypothetically, work against the ability of UH to be on the cutting edge of both undergraduate and graduate research.

8. All due respect, the Legislature is really not the best arena for determining courses and majors. This is why we have a Board of Regents.

Nevertheless, there may be instances in which student interest and demand are so small, and the cost of maintaining tenured faculty with a comparatively low work load so costly, that reassessment of some programs is prudent and justified.

HEPC suggests that providing important cost, enrollment, and faculty workload data, preferably on its web page, as well as a periodic review for the BOR, would be of value to track the costs of both the emerging and diminishing programs. Perhaps a resolution would be an appropriate first step. HEPC would be willing to assist in gathering UH input for such a resolution if requested.