Sakaria Auelua-Toomey Selected as Luce Scholar for 2017

University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa alumnus Sakaria “Sai” Auelua-Toomey has been named one of the Luce Scholars for 2017. This marks the second time in two consecutive years that the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa has been successful in fostering a Luce Scholar. The Luce Scholars Program identifies promising young leaders for a yearlong experience of working in Asia. Seventy-five top universities across the United States nominate up to three candidates annually. Sai, as he is known, is one of approximately 175 nominees who were considered from across the United States, with about forty-five making the final interviews in San Francisco, Washington, D.C., and New York. About 15-20 Luce Scholars selected from that pool of finalists annually.

Sai’s path to this prestigious fellowship was not traditional. As he tells it, he barely finished high school and had no interest in going to college. He spent two years working at a local grocery store and only started to attend Honolulu Community College because he wanted to enter the police program. As that program was full, he instead tried courses in Psychology and Speech while waiting. He credits an early mentor, Dr. Jennifer Higa-King as “seeing something in me that I didn't see in myself.” He earned a 4.0 GPA that year, but didn't get accepted into the police program. Instead, he detoured through the Air Force for a year, and used the G.I. Bill to continue his education at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, where he double majored in Communicology and Psychology in 2016. For his ambitious Honors thesis in Psychology, Sai collaborated with the Interactive Autism Network at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine to investigate individuals with autism spectrum disorder perception, which led to his first publication in the Mānoa Horizons undergraduate journal.

Sai was drawn to the Luce Scholars program because of his interests in intercultural communication, which was developed in different research opportunities in which he participated as an undergraduate. He traveled to Thailand through the Minority Health International Research Training Program with the John A. Burns School of Medicine. Supervised by Dr. James Campbell and Dr. Charlene Tomas at the Thai Red Cross in Thailand, his project focused on reducing HIV infection rates in transgender women (TGW) populations through the use of health questionnaires. He also credits Dr. Kristin Pauker from Psychology, who supervised his work as a research assistant in her Intergroup Social Perceptions Lab.

Since graduation, Sai continues to pursue research interests in psychology and communications, as well as international and intercultural communication. He participated in the Language and Information Internship Program at Stanford University, where under the mentorship of Dr. Thomas Icard, he examined how moral judgment affected decision-making. Currently, Sai is a seminar leader at the Sakaria at the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, a U.S. Department of Defense institute that addresses regional and global security issues with participation of representatives from the United States and over forty Asia-Pacific nations. He also works with children with autism through the Behavior Change Institute.

Following and building on his experience in the Luce Scholars Program, Sai plans to pursue a doctoral degree in Psychology and Cognitive Sciences, with a focus on international communication. He hopes to increase the representation of Pacific Islanders in higher education, stating: “I couldn’t see myself in academia because I had no role models.” The Luce Scholars Program is a big step toward this goal.

In June, Sai will leave for New York and San Francisco, spending a week of training in each before being placed in Asia. He hopes his year in Asia will give him an opportunity to research how collectivist societies have different frames of perception, communication and decision-making than American culture.