



Evaluation of the Healthy Hawai'i Evaluation Team's Efforts to Train the Public Health Workforce from 2013-2023

Meghan D. McGurk, MPH, Alena K. Shalaby, MA,
Rebekah Rodericks, MSc, and L. Brooke Keli'ikoa, DrPH



UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII at MĀNOA
HEALTHY HAWAII
EVALUATION TEAM

Healthy Hawai'i Evaluation Team

The Healthy Hawai'i Evaluation Team (HHET; formerly the Healthy Hawai'i Initiative Evaluation Team, HHIET) comprises professional evaluators, who conduct evaluation and research on initiatives to prevent and manage chronic disease in Hawai'i. For over twenty years, HHET has conducted evaluations in collaboration with the Hawai'i State Department of Health's (DOH) Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion Division (CDPHPD; [Agner et al., 2020](#)).

In addition to conducting innovative and useful public health evaluations, HHET also aims to train the future public health workforce in evaluation. Being housed within the University of Hawai'i's Office of Public Health Studies (UH OPHS) has enabled HHET to hire 2-4 graduate research assistants (GRAs) annually. The workforce development mission has been a key feature of the partnership between the DOH CDPHPD and UH OPHS since HHET's inception in 2000.

Evaluation Purpose

In 2023, HHET sought to evaluate if it had met its aim of training the public health and evaluation workforce over the past 10 years, and to understand how the GRA experience has impacted former GRAs' academic and professional development. This report outlines the findings from this evaluation study.

Key Partners

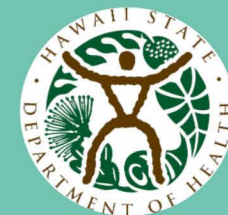
HHET is able to train GRAs and conduct evaluations, such as this, through funding provided by the Hawai'i DOH CDPHPD, as well as through the support of UH OPHS.

Graduate Research Assistant (GRA) positions

GRA positions on HHET are 11-month, half time positions that are open to University of Hawai'i graduate students. Positions also include a tuition waiver, covering all classes, and a monthly stipend. Students are required to work 20 hours per week.

Situated in UH OPHS and funded by the Hawai'i DOH CDPHPD, HHET prioritizes hiring GRAs who are graduate students pursuing their Master's or PhD in public health or in related fields (e.g., Social Work, Educational Psychology). HHET GRAs are hired to assist principal investigators and project managers in the execution of all aspects of the evaluation process.

HHET GRA's primary activities include assisting with the design of evaluation studies, drafting IRB applications, developing survey and interview guides, conducting literature reviews, developing data collection protocols, collecting data, analyzing data, writing reports and publications, presenting findings, and meeting with stakeholders.



METHODS

HHET organized a list of 19 former GRAs who worked for HHET between 2013-2023. Former GRAs were sent an email inviting them to participate in a 45-60 minute semi-structured interview over Zoom. **17 of the 19 former GRAs (89%) were interviewed from February to March 2023.** Participants were mailed a Yeti tumbler valued at \$35 as an incentive for participation. This evaluation project was deemed non-human subjects research by the University of Hawai'i Human Studies Program.

Interview Questions

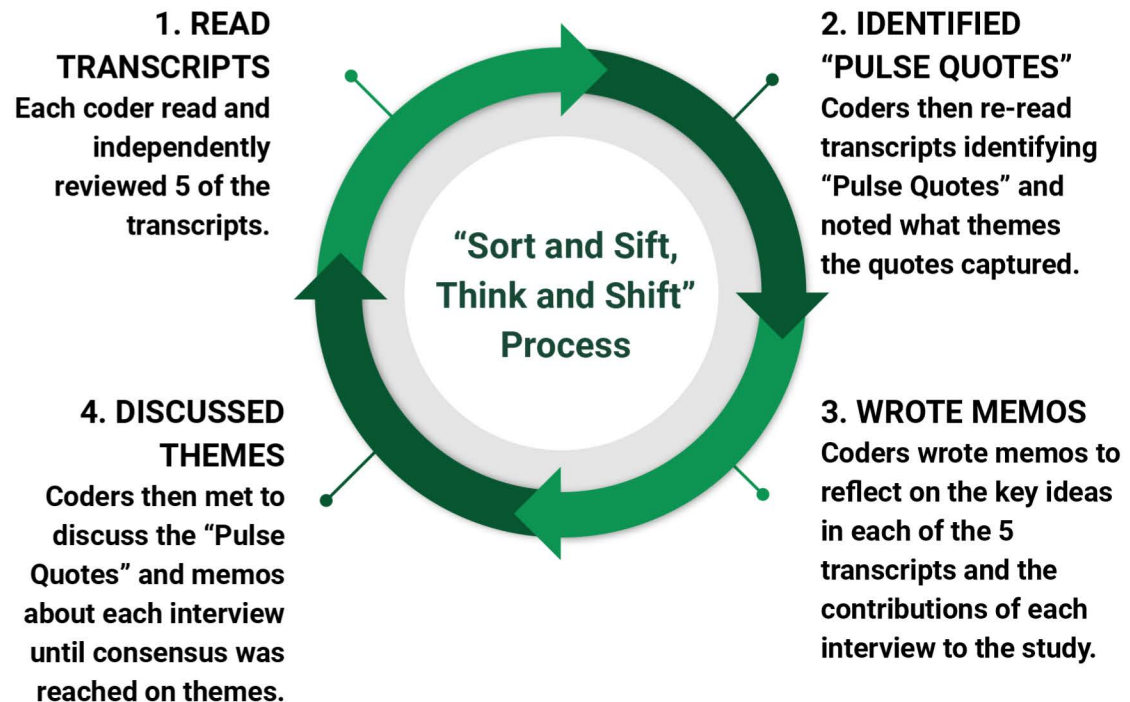
Interviews inquired about the projects and tasks GRAs experienced on HHET, their academic journeys, and their professional careers after graduation. Former GRAs were asked to share specific stories to demonstrate how their GRA position with HHET helped them in their academic and subsequent careers. They were also asked about the most valuable things they learned about program evaluation and public health while on HHET.

Participant Characteristics

The majority of the interview participants were female (77%), studying public health (88%), and pursuing a master's degree (66%) while working as an HHET GRA.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Two coders (AS and MM) analyzed audio transcripts of interviews using ResearchTalk, Inc's "Sort and Sift, Think and Shift" method of data-driven qualitative data analysis ([Maietta et al., 2021](#)). Coders did four rounds of the "Sort and Sift" method of "diving in" and "stepping back" to reflect on the data. The process entailed independently reviewing 5 transcripts, identifying "Pulse Quotes" or powerful sentiments about the GRAs' experiences, writing memos about each interview's main ideas, and meeting to discuss quotes and themes until reaching consensus. *See figure below.* This process was repeated until all 17 transcripts were reviewed and final a list of themes was formed. Then, the coders re-reviewed all transcripts and memos grouping "Pulse Quotes" into four overarching and multiple sub-themes. Analyses were conducted in Google Docs.



FOUR OVERARCHING THEMES EMERGED ABOUT THE HHET GRA POSITIONS

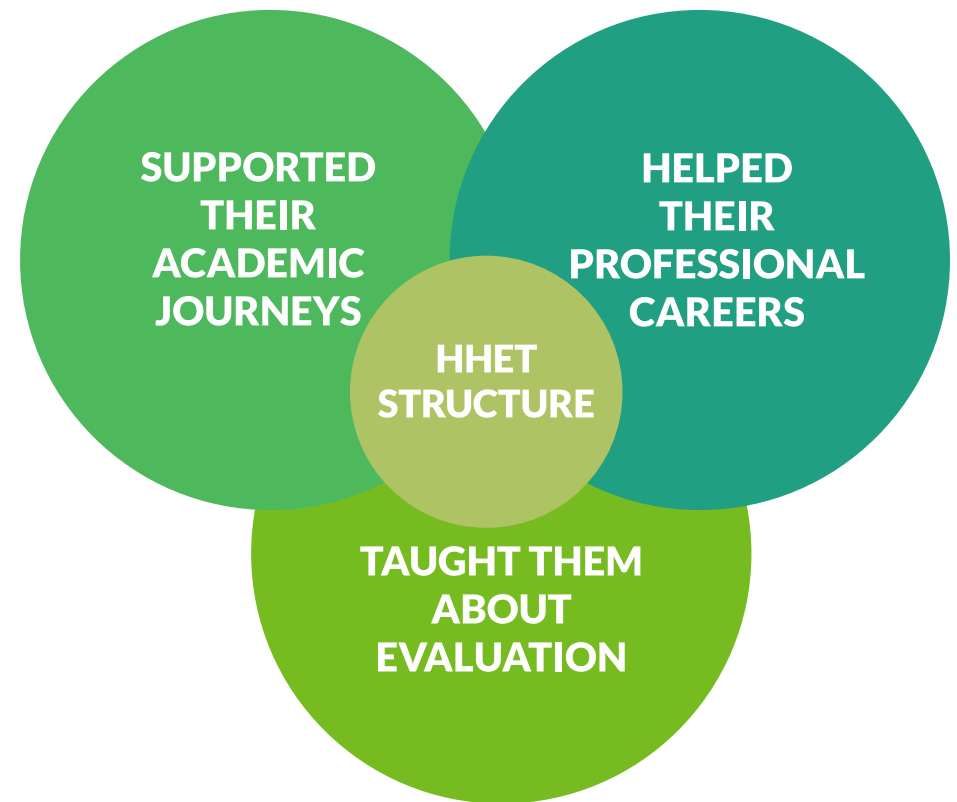
Through the “Sort and Sift” data-driven analysis, four overarching themes emerged from the data. Overwhelmingly, former GRAs felt their HHET GRA positions were beneficial to them. They shared a variety of stories in their reflections on the impact of their GRA positions and their time with HHET, which we grouped into the following overarching themes:

1) how the HHET GRA positions supported them during their **ACADEMIC JOURNEY**,

2) how the HHET GRA experience has helped them in their **PROFESSIONAL CAREERS** after graduating,

3) what former GRAs specifically learned from HHET about **EVALUATION** that they used in their academic journeys and subsequent careers,

4) the **ASPECTS OF THE HHET SUPPORT STRUCTURE** that were most valued by former GRAs and supported their academic and professional successes, as well as their understanding of evaluation.



1. HHET GRA POSITIONS HELPED FORMER GRAs IN THEIR **ACADEMIC JOURNEYS**

The position provided former GRAs with an **applied learning opportunity** with which to test out and solidify what they were learning in their courses.

GRAs reported having hands-on experiences in public health and program evaluation, which they felt **supplemented what they were learning** and helped them to have a more well-rounded understanding of public health.

GRAs valued being able to gain **“real-world experience”** with research, which helped prepare them to collect and analyze data for their Doctoral dissertations and Master’s capstones.

GRAs reported that **through HHET they were exposed to a variety of research methods and public health topics** and gained new skills, which they applied in their coursework, capstones, and dissertations.

“It really complemented the coursework I was doing in my program as well. I know I took a lot of like project evaluation classes...So it was pretty great to be like learning about some of the different theories in the class, and then working as a GRA, getting to actually try out different methods of evaluation.” -- Participant 3

“So it's all these little like projects that I was on that kind of helped me have a more well- rounded idea of what public health should be, and our how just how interdisciplinary we are.” --Participant 8

“When you're in class or the data set's clean. ...but you actually realize how much harder the the process is, and then that prepared me for when I did my PhD. It was just like hours and hours of cleaning data sets and and grinding before you know you even got to do the analysis. So yeah...that was good, just getting some real world experience.” -- Participant 9

1. HHET GRA POSITIONS HELPED FORMER GRAs IN THEIR **ACADEMIC JOURNEYS**

The nature of the GRA positions were also key to their academic journey.

- The **tuition waiver and stipend gave them financial stability** that helped them to pursue their degrees.
- The **flexibility of the GRA position** and being on campus, enabled them to easily work around mid-day classes or adjust their schedules during finals, which they could not do in other jobs.
- **Working in their field of study, for only 20 hours per week, also helped them to focus on their studies.** It supplemented their class learning, giving them “a chance to do ‘real work’ as part of your work” and giving them the “opportunity to see what public health is under the hood.”

Finally, being a a HHET GRA, within UH OPHS, helped students **feel more connected to the department** and gave them opportunities to get to know the faculty and staff better, which enhanced their graduate school experiences. This can be attributed to HHET’s long history in UH OPHS and active involvement in department activities.

“I think it just helped me like be able to pursue a master's. And yeah, like not be too crazy in debt post graduation, and like having to have that financial stress too much...I mean, I think, regardless, if I got the GAship...like I would have pursued the MPH. I mean. I did right, because I didn't have it the first year, but...there was that mutual benefit.** I feel like I was benefiting, and hopefully in theory, your team was, like everyone was benefiting to the work I was contributing.”**

-- Participant 16

“I would say that that 20 hours really help me just concentrate on my core school work. And the fact that it's like, okay, if I've got a class in D court at a dumb time...**my schedule is flexible enough for me to fill my academic schedule and then work around that** instead of, ‘You need to be here from 8-1 Monday through Friday to get your 20 hours.’”

--Participant 1

“I just felt like a really nice sense of community with the program staff and students that I don't think I, I would have felt otherwise...And connection is so important in grad school in furthering your relationships and networking outside of...your degree, is really important.” --Participant 6

2. HHET GRA POSITIONS HELPED FORMER GRAs IN THEIR PROFESSIONAL CAREERS

Former GRAs reported a variety of ways that their positions and time with HHET has helped them in their professional careers. One key factor was how HHET engages GRAs in all stages of the evaluation process. Former GRAs valued **being able to participate in the projects from start to finish**, as it helped them understand how research works and feel equipped to do all steps in their subsequent jobs.

Participants also said that the tasks they performed and reports they created while on the team **helped to build their resumés**, enabling them to show employers they had the experience needed to do the work and **helping them to get jobs**.

Former GRAs reported **using data collection and analysis skills they learned at HHET in their post-graduation jobs**.

*“When I was there– **you have a good array of projects, spanning like very, very different sectors. As I mentioned, the skills that you come out of the program with, or the the group with is very vast. So just being able to be a part of every single phase of a research project is really, really helpful.** And I think um... it’s really great to see the whole holistic picture of everything.” -- Participant 2*

I think it was a huge part of my ability to get both of my postgraduate jobs... I looked at so many job ads. And then I saw this one, and I was like, oh, my gosh! I have all these things like, I think really wholeheartedly, 100% like meet all of these requests that they have for this future employee, so it was great.” -- Participant 6

“I think it influenced me a lot. Not just to the job but kind of the experience of kind of building up my skills, data skills. Whether it's analysis or helping out with-- coming up with an eval plan for any projects there. I think it’s really helped me for this role when I first started...they handed me this set of tobacco retailers in the county, and they didn't know where to start with it. They just said, “hey, can you do something with the spreadsheet.” ...And so I ended up mapping it, and that I learned there at HHET with some of the real basic ArcGIS skills...And yeah, they were pretty impressed.”

--Participant 5

2. HHET GRA POSITIONS HELPED FORMER GRAs IN THEIR PROFESSIONAL CAREERS

Former GRAs also said that meeting key stakeholders, like DOH, **helped them network with future employers.** It also said it gave them **an understanding of public health's coalition nature,** which prepared them to work collaboratively in their subsequent jobs.

For some, **the GRA position was one of their first professional experiences and HHET taught them how to work in a professional setting.** For others it was their first exposure to professional conferences, including the American Public Health Association (APHA). A few former GRAs said HHET provided them with opportunities to attend and present data at APHA.

Finally, several former GRAs talked about HHET being a positive work environment, with supervisors and team members that cared about them and supported them, not only in their identities as employees, but in their roles as students, parents, and people. **HHET's supportive and collaborative work environment was something that helped them in selecting their future work environment** and in thinking about the type of supervisor and public health professionals they wanted to be.

*"...given the reputation, at least within the MPH program, like **the DOH is like a black box,** and so hard to get hired there as a new MPH grad...**I definitely felt like I had more of an understanding of how things functioned there than than, maybe some of my classmates.**"-- Participant 17*

*"Working as a grad assistant was one of my like earlier professional experiences. So I think, just like the general professionalism skills. **You know, like working with others, learning how to communicate well, working together as a team. I think that was also really helpful.**" -- Participant 15*

*"**I think it really taught me being there like it's okay to ask certain things of your job** and for them to... You know it's, **it's nice to see what a good boss should be, I think, for you know, and that's that's not something you ever learn....I think HHET really does teach you that you can be treated well in a work environment, and that's what you should expect from it.** -- Participant 8*

3. WHAT HHET GRAs LEARNED ABOUT EVALUATION

Former GRAs were asked to share the most valuable things they learned about evaluation from HHET. The **importance of evaluation** for public health work was one key lesson that they took away from HHET.

They also said they learned the **importance of engaging stakeholders throughout the evaluation process**, recognizing that although it added more time to the process, it created a better evaluation and final report.

Many reported they **gained a number of evaluation skills** through their applied experiences on the team, which they used both in school and professionally. Skills included: creating interview and survey questions, thinking evaluatively to plan evaluations, tailoring evaluation methods for a program's needs, developing performance measures, analyzing data, using software (e.g., Qualtrics, SPSS, NVivo, ArcGIS), and learning evaluation and research methods (e.g., social network analysis, outcome harvesting, qualitative, quantitative, observational).

Another key evaluation lesson they gained was **how to synthesize data and report findings in a way that is easily understood and resonates with the intended audience**.

Some former GRAs said that they did not have backgrounds in evaluation or public health when starting with the team, but learned while working with HHET and now feel equipped to work in these fields. Former GRAs were using many of the things they learned about evaluation in their current jobs, even non-evaluation jobs, carrying over an **"ethos of evaluation"** into all of the positions they hold.

"I think, for program evaluation....I think the biggest thing for me was just learning about how important it is. ...especially since I got to see, like, follow a three-year program...like each year we could go back...and, you know, like...show them what, you know, like what their achievements were, what areas they could improve on, and maybe like, come up with new ideas for them to implement in the following year. I think it also was really helpful to see where maybe they like needed to reallocate some of their resources. --Participant 15

"I think the biggest takeaway is just...making sure to include the necessary players on each step is critical to a strong final project....even with the long review process and time, the like strength of the final product was so much better with the involvement of so many team players. "--Participant 3

"I think, the importance of writing your- and sharing- your results and recommendations in a way that is gonna resonate with your audience. So, meeting them where they are in terms of, you know, maybe they're really busy educators, and it needs to be just bite-size visuals. You can save the lengthy, peer-reviewed paper, for, you know, another time, but making sure that the people who really need the information are getting the information in an effective way."

--Participant 6

"I didn't need to have a background in program evaluation to work with [HHET]...because you really learn it within those first 2 or 3 months....I know a lot about program evaluation now, like and, those things can be applicable to other aspects that I--that I want to do." --Participant 4

4. ASPECTS OF THE **HHET SUPPORT STRUCTURE** HELPED FORMER GRAs SUCCEED

Participants mentioned aspects of HHET's structure that were critical in helping them succeed academically, professionally, and personally, and in fostering their understanding of evaluation and development as public health professionals.

Several participants mentioned how the **HHET project managers provided support** that helped them not only in their HHET work, but as students, parents, and individuals, which helped them to get through graduate school. Relatedly, former GRAs explicitly mentioned how they received **mentorship from HHET project managers that made them feel entrusted and empowered** to engage meaningfully in the evaluation work, and helped them explore areas they were interested in.

Former GRAs also described how **HHET's team dynamic and support from the whole team enhanced their work within and outside of the organization**. GRAs found that working as a team made them feel able to navigate collaborative work environments. It also set their expectations for being able to work with "enjoyable people who really care about the work." The **team support extended to their academic careers as well**, as many participants described how HHET helped them to practice their capstones and dissertation presentations.

"It was a an excellent experience. I mean everyone was incredibly nice, was great to work with. Um, being that I was newly married and had a young child, they were really great with, you know, my working schedule...there are times when I came in earlier than everyone...and they were really trusting...that I would get the job done. When I needed to be out when my child was sick, they were understanding. They made the transition from being a student to a student that's a father and husband very easy for me."

--Participant 14

"If I could say the most helpful thing um, that prepared me for the workforce, I do think was the support from the supervisors that HHIET had...Because I just really felt like they spent so much of their time with me, teaching me a lot of background on evaluation and helping answer questions that I had. Um, you know, they gave me room to work independently, but were also available for support when I needed it and when I had questions."

-- Participant 3

"One thing that I really just appreciated so much about HHI was that it like provided an opportunity to work with a team of evaluators, which my understanding is not necessarily the norm. Like at UH or Academia on the whole... I think that really reinforced like an ethos of collaboration for me, and I think really prepared me when I...jumped into this new role, and I had to write collaboratively."

--Participant 17

CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this evaluation was to understand if HHET's hiring and training of GRAs from 2013-2023 has helped to develop the evaluation and public health workforce. Former GRAs reported positive experiences during their time with HHET, which contributed to their development as future public health professionals. The hands-on experiences they had in all phases of the evaluation process and the mentorship they received from HHET supervisors gave them a well-rounded understanding of public health, evaluation, and research, which helped them both in school and when they entered the workforce.

Former GRAs also shared that their positions were fundamental to the completion of their degrees. The tuition waiver and flexibility of the positions helped them to have the financial stability to focus on their studies, while working in public health, gave them real-world experiences that complemented their academic studies. Former GRAs felt they were entrusted to meaningfully contribute to the evaluations and apply what they were learning in their coursework, which enhanced their skillsets. They also reported applying what they learned at HHET about evaluation, research, and public health in their classes, capstones, and dissertations.

Many participants noted how their time with HHET was vital to securing jobs following the completion of their degrees, specifically mentioning how the skills they acquired were desired by employers. Former GRAs shared how they have used the many of the evaluation skills and tools they learned as GRAs

in their current professions. Even GRAs who were not studying public health reported walking away with a better understanding of public health and evaluation, which helped them to secure jobs.

Finally, participants also indicated that they received academic, professional, and personal support from the entire team during their time on HHET, which enhanced their graduate school experiences and helped facilitate a smooth transition from academic to professional settings. Many former GRAs specifically recalled how they were given opportunities to practice their dissertation or capstone presentations, or were supported by the team during challenging times in their lives, which helped them to navigate their time in graduate school.

Overall, the stories shared in this evaluation showed that HHET GRA positions are a valuable supplemental graduate school experience that helps to train the future public health and evaluation workforce, while providing a positive working environment to foster academic and professional growth.

"I really enjoyed my time at HHET, and that's one of the things that I very much remember, not just because I got all these publications, and because I was a GRA, you know, or they paid for my schooling or whatever it was, but it was like I ended up knowing so much more than I thought I would know. " --Participant 13

LIMITATIONS

This study is limited in that it was a self-evaluation, with interviews conducted by current HHET team members. One of the interviewers was a project manager, who worked with all and supervised some of the participants, and the other was a current HHET GRA. To attempt to minimize bias, participants were given the option of being interviewed by the HHET GRA only. However, participants may not have felt comfortable voicing their concerns and criticisms about their time on HHET to current team members and a former supervisor. Additionally, because the study aimed to assess the impact of HHET GRA positions since 2013, some of the participants had worked as GRAs 10 years ago and their memories and criticisms of their HHET experience were limited. Other participants were freshly graduated public health professionals, who had more recent memories and more salient impacts on their new professional careers, which may have biased the findings toward more positive impacts of the HHET GRA experience. Finally, we were unable to reach two former GRAs, thus, experiences and perspectives shared in the report are not comprehensive. Those who did not participate, may have had less positive or different experiences not conveyed in this report.

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