

I specifically chose to obtain my master's degree online from Michigan State for a number of reasons. First, as a full-time teacher with a family, I lacked the time to attend in-person classes. Secondly, I did not like the programs being offered at any of the colleges in Hawaii. I will forever be grateful to the University of Hawaii system that I obtained three degrees from, but I needed a program focused on hands-on application of knowledge, not theory. Finally, I wanted to fight against a paradigm that plagues my community: that we are inferior to the continental United States.

Being from Hawaii carries a certain stigma; since most of the United States simply considers it a vacation spot, we must be on vacation all the time. Although this concept seems benign, its roots are not. Hawaii was the first overseas conquest of the burgeoning American Empire at the end of the 19th Century. This colonial attitude remains imbued on the psyche of Americans and the people of Hawaii.

Since we are supposed to be part of America, we are held to the same standards as the rest of the country. Our students take the same metrics that all American schoolchildren do. We even bring in standardized curriculum from major publishers. But because of a number of factors, including the vast differences of experiences, both cultural and economic, Hawaii students often do poorly. I remember teaching a poetry unit with an assessment that utilized poems about winter. How can students who have never seen snow analyze poetry about it?

I wish I had written down every time I have met an "expert from the Mainland." Even as a student I remember visiting delegations of people coming to help our school. When I began teaching, there were required trainings from these "experts" who knew more about my students than I did, despite only having been on island for less than a week. Going back to Mrs. Lewis's lesson, I decided to do something about it. What did the "experts" have that I did not? The answer came abruptly in a school meeting when an administrator said: "I do not understand why classroom teachers with bachelor's degrees think they know more than PhDs." I had to go back and get an advanced degree.

Not only did I want an advanced degree, I wanted a degree from a "real" university. The stigma against Hawaii schools extends to our University system. Furthermore, it became an opportunity to add the voice of a Hawaii teacher to the Michigan State College of Education.

Now that I have come to the end of this program, I do believe I have achieved my goals. I will get that diploma, and all of its honorifics. I will also have displayed what educators from Hawaii can do.

What I did not expect was that this journey helped me get back to why I became a teacher. The past four years in the classroom were focused on survival; getting students through content, passing teacher evaluations, and balancing work and family life. I had lost sight of a lot of what I wanted to accomplish. By evaluating my teaching philosophy again and taking the time to think about my practice, I have become a better teacher.