



# Honolulu Star-Bulletin

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to do whatever was expected of "the very best."  
But how realistic was that intention then?  
How realistic is it now?



## **UH can be good, but not great**

By Jim Dator  
Special to the Star-Bulletin



I have frequently said that this state does not deserve a university as good as the University of Hawaii. Of course, I don't mean the people of Hawaii do not deserve the best institution of higher education. They clearly do. And they have, or at one time had, an institution of which they could be very proud indeed.

Name me one other polity of merely one million inhabitants, anywhere in the world, so physically isolated from other population centers, that has even tried to create an institution as broad and deep as UH.

Yet based on our population, geographic location and resources, UH should probably rank

somewhere between the University of Guam and the universities of Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, North Dakota, Vermont or Maine -- modest though worthy institutions, all.

Instead, we often deem ourselves to be academic peers with the universities of California-Berkeley, Wisconsin and Michigan. At one time we were, or at least many of our academic departments and programs, research units and libraries were, their peers. In some ways, we were their betters.

It was the intention of its founders that UH be the best in everything it did, to do whatever was expected of "the very best." But how realistic was that intention then? How realistic is it now?

While academic and athletic budgets are separate, the money coffers are the same -- the pockets and wallets or credit cards and stock options of our citizens and local businesses.

Can Hawaii afford a first-rate university of the kind envisioned in the past: first rate in physical plant, academics, research, service and in sports? The answer is clearly no. The citizens and businesses of this state do not want or aren't able to pay, through taxes or donations, what it takes for UH to be the kind of institution it was once intended to be.

This needs to be admitted openly and honestly. A first-class UH of the kind originally envisioned and still put forward, if only by default, cannot be sustained by this community whether funded from public coffers or private sources or both, unless citizens are willing to make sacrifices. I do not see them willing or perhaps able to do this.

Times have changed. Expectations have changed. And so it is time for UH to take a very deep breath, kiss its past dreams good-bye and change, too. But change to what?

## **The original vision**

Men and women of this state conceived the vision, passed the legislation and provided the private as well as public funds in the 1960s to transform the locally focused, small-scale UH of that time into the globally conscious, grandly intended, open-access and virtually tuition-free institution of the next few years. They are to be congratulated for their faith, hope and courage, if not their foresight.

They greatly valued higher education for the citizens of this state and region. They were willing to sacrifice to provide the tax revenues and private money necessary to establish a great university for this small and isolated community. But they did not anticipate some of the consequences of their attempt to realize that vision.

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If UH was to become world class virtually overnight, it would be necessary to hire world-class senior professors to establish that reputation. Then scores of junior faculty, who showed promise of becoming world class, would have to be hired. And they were.

This meant two cohorts of instructors:

- The senior, costing a large amount of money immediately.
- The junior, cheap at first but eventually costing an even greater amount of money later, as they became tenured. These ever-rising paychecks -- paltry by some standards, to be sure -- would nevertheless represent 80-90 percent of the overall operating costs of UH.

A second consequence of this initial hiring was that almost all of these faculty, both senior and junior, were male mainland Caucasians who brought and usually retained their male mainland Caucasian expectations and behaviors. This was bound to cause continuing conflicts between UH and the community, especially the Legislature. This would make it difficult for UH to have the kind of alumni and community support normally commanded by a big state university.

Moreover, there can be little doubt that, in the late 1960s and early '70s, the Oliver Lee case, the Bachman Hall sit-ins followed by the abrupt resignation of UH President Tom Hamilton, the burning of the ROTC building and the Vietnam War protests ended whatever honeymoon may have existed between the local community and UH. The result was a lingering, strained cohabitation, since divorce seemed out of the question.

All of this might not have mattered much had the founders also not failed to anticipate the fragility of Hawaii's economy. They did not know that the euphoria of the 1960s would end so soon, and that the state would enter an extended period of dimmed vision, timid actions and diminished resources, leading to the prolonged and ever-deepening recession of the 1990s.

## **The reality**

From the 1970s, with every economic downturn, brief or prolonged, the UH budget has been frozen or cut. Services have been curtailed and personnel dismissed or not rehired. Often, they have never been replaced.

Equally important, the founders of the modern UH system did not know that more and more citizens (including UH faculty members) would gladly spend thousands of dollars to send their children to private schools locally and then hundreds of thousands of dollars to send them to mainland universities.

They would clamor successfully for lower taxes, or for the Legislature to cravenly end the progressive income tax and steadily increase the university's tuition. What was once a marvelous publicly supported and open university became more of a fiscally faltering and darkening institution -- depressed, demoralized and increasingly afraid of its shadow.

Nonetheless, the call came from time to time for UH to expand its services -- schools of medicine, law, ocean and earth science, and schools for Hawaiian, Asian and Pacific studies. These were answered by some increased funding by the Legislature and one-time infusions of outside money. But they were also funded by taking resources away from existing units of UH, which were never adequately restored.

The two oil crises of the 1970s also instantly quadrupled the cost of everything the university bought. Annual double-digit inflation continued for nearly a decade. The university -- already spread thin from its very beginning in its desire to be big time -- was spread ever thinner with each passing year. Buildings, however, continued to sprout up on all campuses of the university system.

One of the truest tragedies for UH is how its budgeting works, with its operational money separate from its capital improvements funds. Thus, the general public sees new buildings going up, especially on the overcrowded Manoa campus, and assumes all is well.

But whereas new buildings come from the capital improvements budget, each new edifice adds to the overall cost of electricity, phone service, furnishings, maintenance and the like, expenses in the operational budget. Since funds originally allocated for these functions were barely sufficient in the first place, each new building subtracts from a fixed and even shrinking operational pie.

The results are that sometimes a new building cannot be occupied for years or is poorly provisioned when it is. More seriously, the overall budget for maintenance of buildings and grounds is shrinking, so the university plant deteriorates. In fact, it is worse than that because, with each budget crisis, the first place where money is usually stolen to make up the shortfall, in order to keep faculty paid and some services flowing, is from the building and grounds maintenance.

The second place where money is stolen to make up budget shortfalls is from the library, the other place in the system where comparatively large amounts of money is required. A university must buy books, journals and other material each year so it can be the truly remarkable resource that it desires to be.

Anyone concerned with scholarship, whether of the most esoteric or most practical, must be shocked at the sorry condition of the UH library system, after years of theft and pillage of its budget. If you want to experience time travel, step into Hamilton Library and browse the shelves: It seems that everything there is 10 years old. It's as if the 1990s never happened.

Granted, the direction of the UH budget since its creation has not always been downward. There have been several occasions of general expansion, some substantial. The most dramatic, coinciding with Al Simone's UH presidency and John Waihee's governorship in the late 1980s and very early '90s, derived from a super-inflated real estate bubble and an exceptional tourism boom rather than from what could be considered a "healthy" economy.

But even during this boom, when new programs were created or existing programs enhanced at the university, in almost every instance the funding allotted to them was just enough to obligate the programs to do something. It was seldom enough to enable them to do very much, or to do it very well.

Thus a myriad of frail flowers bloomed across the university system, each one doing its very best to stand straight and tall, and to blossom fragrantly and alluringly, but each one requiring substantially more manure and weeding than it has gotten or ever will get.

## **The deepening crisis**

Then came the lingering economic crisis of the 1990s, when the fragile bubble burst and all state budgets, including that of the UH system, began to get smaller.

I happened to sit on a committee when the first of those budget cuts was impending. We heard from all deans and directors of UH-Manoa, who came to tell us what would happen to their units if their respective budgets were reduced by 5 percent -- a horrifying thought which almost no one believed could come to pass.

While a few units could apparently handle such reductions without much damage, many

were in dire straits in spite of the "formally" booming economy. I remember especially the testimony of the dean of natural sciences, complete with slides showing the impacts of faculty loss and the already deplorable physical condition of the chemistry laboratory. Many other deans and directors had similar tales.

Well, the fiscal ax eventually fell on the just and the unjust, and the dreaded budget cuts were experienced more or less uniformly by all. Somehow life went on, diminished but surviving.

Since that time, for every year save one, the financial resources of UH from state general funds and tuition have declined significantly in real dollars -- even more significantly in terms of rising costs. Yet the number of students expecting a good education remains high: Enrollments are only slightly and not noticeably down.

But many professors are gone, their chairs vacant, their expertise no longer a part of academics. Some of these programs teeter on the edge of acceptability and may not be reaccredited the next time they are externally reviewed. If that happens, UH degrees are worthless.

Buildings are increasingly shabby, classroom chairs are broken, the grounds are overgrown and weedy. Yet new buildings go up, subtracting more from the already strained maintenance budget.

As a consequence, student and faculty morale has dropped. Academic and other services have gotten steadily worse. Yet classes are taught, degrees are granted, research is performed and promulgated. But fear and ennui are widespread. There is no hope for the future and certainly no compelling guiding vision suggesting a light at the end of the dark tunnel.

## **What's to blame?**

The overall budgetary climate, as just recounted, has been worsened by various coincident factors, some the result of administrative mismanagement, some of poor judgment, and some of bad luck and timing.

I suppose it is possible, as some allege, that a number of our problems at UH might also be the products of conscious, malicious intent (within the administration, "downtown" or elsewhere in the community), but I, for one, do not think that has ever actually been the case. We may not have many fervent friends in the community, but I don't think we have many active enemies, either.

Nevertheless, exacerbating the poor economy's impact on UH were:

- **Mismanagement/bad decisions.** One of the first additional problems, from the early 1990s, was the substantial diversion of money and personnel precipitated by a one-day stop-out of all federal funding. The stop-out happened because of a judgment by the U.S. Department of Defense that the UH accounting system was inadequate -- which it certainly was, as any principal investigator would attest.

But, in response, instead of adopting a comparatively inexpensive and flexible PC-based decentralized "just-in-time" accounting system which an expert faculty group strongly recommended, the UH central administration chose to capture and divert a large number of personnel positions as "control and compliance" officers, and to spend millions of dollars on outside consultants and new hardware and software systems to set up a more

cumbersome and labor-intensive centralized accounting system.

At about the same time, the medical school was discovered to have overspent more than \$500,000, so other parts of UH were further shortchanged to make up for the deficit. Then an early retirement scheme, expected to be a way out of some of UH's budget problems, backfired and added to the overall fiscal burden.

■ **Bad timing.** Instances of bad timing have plagued the university. Certainly the "right" of UH to set and keep its own tuition (instead of having tuition go straight into the state general fund) could not have been granted at a worse time -- at the beginning of the 1990s budget decline. The legislation permitted UH to set and keep its tuition, with legislators also promising that the UH budget would not be cut in proportionate amounts.

But state government has not kept its promise. As tuition has gone up, general funding has gone down.

Similarly, state government did not keep its promise that the UH budget would not be further cut if the university engaged in a private fund-raising campaign. Given the perceived fiscal condition of the state, government could hardly be blamed for breaking its word and failing to fund UH at the level required by its own laws.

Furthermore, it was extraordinarily bad timing (or bad decision-making) that UH finally gained "autonomy" at the very time the state was least able to afford a university anyway. So UH has been set freer of government financial support, and hopefully also of government control, at the same time the state economy is at its lowest point in years and sinking.

■ **The East-West Center.** The East-West Center is not a formal part of UH. But its presence, essentially on the Manoa campus -- and the facts that there have always been a close relationship between UH faculty and EWC scholars, and that many EWC grantees have been UH students -- means there has always been a strong symbiotic relation between the two.

As UH was experiencing its fiscal troubles in the early 1990s, the fortunes of the EWC were also waning. But UH took a double hit: the decision by the EWC to reduce the number of grantees fully funded for graduate work at Manoa reduced the number of students in several graduate programs by as much as one third. Courses were denied lecturers. And major areas of study, carefully built up with expectations of Asian scholars, were suddenly bereft.

The EWC is now a pale shadow of its former self, and UH has blanched as a consequence right along with it.

■ **Athletic aspirations.** I am a former jock, a descendent from a long line of jockular men and women, and progenitor of more. I love to play all sports and watch them. I have held season tickets to UH football and baseball, and have attended many Wahine games.

I want UH to have the best Division 1A teams in all sports for both genders. (It is unfortunate that gender equity was not obtained when the economy of the state was flush with money, nonetheless, it must be done now whatever the costs and consequences.) Being the best in Division 1A athletics is good for the university and the community.

Therefore I and untold others felt every moment of Coach Fred vonAppen's anguish this past football season, and of Wags before him. VonAppen had the absolute right to complain about not having a private or at least a charter airplane, while being required to

practice on a field that caused more injuries than the Rainbows' football opponents.

VonAppen was only stating in his sphere what every other student, secretary, professor, dean, director and administrator can and does, with equal justification -- complain about the sorry condition in their spheres as well. They suck, when compared to our peers. They suck, when compared to what the citizens of this state need and deserve. I can only hope that June Jones can turn all of this around in short order.

Of course the citizens of this state want UH to have a winning and maybe even championship team in all sports, especially in those where we have once felt the victor's laurels on our brows. And they also want the best academic programs for their sons and daughters which are competitive with the very best.

## **What could be**

WHILE I would be pleased if my suggestions on the university's future, outlined below, were accepted, I suspect they are more likely to be ignored, rejected and/or ridiculed. Nevertheless, I offer them in the hope that they will provoke a discussion throughout Hawaii. If funds are not available to support the kind of state university originally envisioned by the UH founders, then the system I propose seems a reasonable alternative.

More than that, what I propose is positively good -- reasonable and potentially progressive developments made possible through new technologies, new human and environmental needs, new philosophies and ideologies, and new pedagogies.

I challenge those of you who agree that the old dream is not realizable, but who do not share my new dream, to present a better one of your own.

But most of all, I challenge those of you who wish to retain and expand the original dream for the University of Hawaii to show me how this is possible. Of all futures for UH, the one that would please me most is the one which recaptures the vision and enables the reality of a world-class UH.

I deeply love this institution. I deeply love the people of this state in whose service I and other faculty members have given our lives. But we cannot continue to let this most precious community and global resource decay and drift into oblivion, as we are now.

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# **One possible future for UH**

By Jim Dator  
Special to the Star-Bulletin



My vision of the future of UH is meant to be positive and inspiring but realistic. It reflects my understanding of what the people of this state need and want in relation to the funds available to pay for it and the technology available to deliver it. I offer the following suggestions.

- 1) No one will plan or construct any more UH buildings, except those already clearly

under way, such as the annex to Hamilton Library. Most certainly, no one will erect a single building for a new West Oahu campus or a new campus on any other island.

- 2) Move toward a judicious mix of campus and other place-based education delivery systems while relying more heavily on carefully conceived "distance"-learning modalities, better understood as "intimate, personal and collegial learning." Conventional campus-based classroom education will continue but will be given a steadily lower priority until it is basically phased out. Library and other such services will be less place-based and more cyber-based, remotely available anywhere. Funding and personnel decisions will be made to reflect and facilitate this.
- 3) The UH (especially its Manoa campus) will end its attempt to be a major basic research university. Those individuals or research institutes currently attracting substantial outside funding will continue as long as their funds do. But the heyday of marvelous land grant universities was long ago. State or national governments will not likely have the funding they had during the 19th century and second half of the 20th century to support general education, professional training and basic research at their previous uncharacteristically high levels.
- 4) Continuous scholarly inquiry will remain an expected and rewarded aspect of most instructors' duties but will generally be expected to be more applied and service-oriented than basic and personal. Instead -- without denigrating or denying the profound value of basic or even some discipline-focused research -- UH will focus primarily on research and service applied to the needs and potentials of humanity and the planet in Hawaii and the Pacific region as well as worldwide.
- 5) Both teaching and research will become primarily collegial, cooperative and cross-disciplinary. What are now called "learning communities" will become the norm in both cyberspace and face-to-face learning and research situations. The humanities, social sciences, natural sciences and applied sciences will no longer be kept separate from one another but rather be taught and experienced primarily as integrated wholes just as they are experienced in life. The current distinction between "undergraduate" and "graduate" education will also fade, as performance-based and life-long learning become the norm.
- 6) Tenure will end while academic freedom will be carefully safeguarded, enhanced and expanded. There shall be only a small number of faculty members directly working for UH. After initial probationary periods with annual contracts, members of this core shall be granted renewable five-year contracts. These faculty members will be responsible for determining a core set of learning communities.

Since most UH courses would be online, they would be developed and offered by free-lance instructors or professional curriculum purveyors from Hawaii or anywhere in the world. Criteria for offering a UH course will be determined by core faculty. The intention behind the criteria and their application, however, is to encourage anyone who thinks he or she has something worth teaching to offer it.

Then, if students enroll for the class, it will be taught. UH and the instructor/purveyor will split the tuition by a pre-determined formula.

- 7) As with instructors, so shall it be with the nonacademic staff. All personnel shall first have initial probationary periods with annual contracts, and then be granted renewable five-year contracts. While there will be basic grounds and building maintenance personnel on contract, each member of UH -- students, administrators, staff and faculty -- will routinely assist in cleaning and repairing facilities. There will be no university dormitories, food or other similar services. The market will provide.

- 8) The huge assortment of currently existing administrative personnel will be reduced to the absolute minimum. All deans, directors, presidents and the like shall be chosen by the faculty and shall rotate back into the faculty after a limited tour of duty.
- 9) The state will continue to be a major source of funding for the university for a while, but UH will set a goal of being largely self-sustaining within a reasonable period of time and will attain it. Federal funding will similarly decline. The goal is to eliminate it and all of the personnel and procedures required to service and be in compliance with federal funding guidelines.
- 10) UH participation in all Division 1A sports programs will end. Instead, as learning moves away from centralized campuses to more decentralized and temporary locations throughout the state, it will be possible to have many more students who are also athletes, competing among themselves in a multitude of UH "colleges" and existing private universities in Hawaii.

The costs associated with playing mainland colleges will thus be substantially reduced and the sort of rivalries and excitement once associated with high school games in Hawaii will once again be experienced at the university level.

Since most Division 1A-caliber athletes from Hawaii now go to mainland schools and not to UH, this will not prevent local kids who can play at the highest level from continuing to do so, while retaining and even expanding the value of participation by more young people, on the one hand, and spectator entertainment, on the other, which college athletics provides.



### **The Author**

Jim Dator is a professor and head of the Alternative Futures Option in the Department of Political Science at the University of Hawaii. He is also the director of the Hawaii Research Center for Futures Studies, and past president of the World Futures Studies Federation.

Since coming to the university in 1969, Dator has been elected by his UH colleagues to serve on the Manoa Faculty Senate and its various committees, including the Executive Committee.

Dator has master's and doctorate degrees in political science, the latter from the American University in Washington, D.C.

His main area of study is political futures, especially the design of new political institutions and the futures of education, law and technology.

He has lectured and led workshops all over the world, and is the author of dozens of scholarly papers and articles.

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