Anamalia Su'esu'e Blog Post

Data-Narrative-Action Fellowship 2024

Topic: Experience as DNA Fellow

Over the last six months I had the opportunity to work with Empowering Pacific Islander Communities (EPIC) as a part of the AAPI Data-Narrative-Action Fellowship. As one of three fellows working with EPIC this past semester, I learned more about my Pacific Islander communities and relevant skills that I can take with me in my work. As a doctoral student, building my research skills is of focus. However, as a *Pacific Islander* doctoral student, I am constantly seeking to build my skills in research so that they are appropriate and relevant to my community.

When I saw the notice for this fellowship on social media last year, I was intrigued. When I realized that EPIC was a host organization, I knew I had to apply. I had been following EPIC's work for a few years and was inspired by what they have accomplished. The mission, goals, and team are truly amazing! I remember reading about their efforts with the 2020 Census and how hard they worked to count our Pacific Islander communities in California. EPIC has motivated me in graduate school to use culturally responsive, decolonial approaches in my work. When I received notice that I was matched with their organization as a fellow, I was thrilled to learn from such an amazing team.

Building skills for community

As a fellow with EPIC, our training was centered on community and how our work must reflect that. In our Census data training, we learned how to navigate the Census page to obtain the latest data on NHPI in the United States. Though counting our communities may seem simple enough, in reality this process requires a lot of careful planning and steps. Our Census data

training had me reflect on my experiences in 2019 where I had been a part of several community efforts in Hawai‘i to count Pacific Islanders here. I knew how much work it was to collect the data from the community, but the Census data training gave me the chance to finally see the numbers we were working so hard to obtain. Seeing the different ways the data was broken down and the sheer amount of Pacific Islanders in Hawai‘i and across the US was exciting. It was nice to think that the work we put in all those years ago to promote the Census resulted in these datasets that could be used to help our people.

Talk story and Talanoa

Though there were a lot of numbers to work through, learning more about Census data made me appreciate the pairing of stories or qualitative data with this information. I think this is what made me so interested in our migration project in the first place, the chance to make sense of and add depth to these numbers. During the fellowship, we were able to build research skills that are most appropriate for Pacific Islander communities. We learned more about methodologies like talk story and talanoa and how to use that for our projects. As a student, I have mostly worked on qualitative research projects. I definitely find myself more drawn to this type of research – the process, the findings, and the clarity it can provide those it is meant for. I was more familiar with using talk story in research so it was great to be able to receive feedback on my understanding of talanoa. I was eager to incorporate talanoa into our projects and seeing how our stories and conversation could make sense of Census data.

Building community with EPIC fellows

As much as I enjoyed building research skills relevant to Pacific Islanders, one of my favorite parts of the fellowship was getting to know the EPIC team and the other EPIC fellows. I thoroughly enjoyed learning about the work and experiences of each fellow at our weekly

meetings. Even with varied backgrounds, I felt that we had much more in common as Pacific Islander graduate students working to serve our respective communities.

I feel that the experiences with my fellow EPIC fellows were as enjoyable as they were because we were able to share spaces with leaders with the same cultural values. Our weekly meetings were led by the amazing Karla Thomas, EPIC's co-Executive Director. Throughout the fellowship, Karla guided us through trainings and discussions on meaningful Pasefika research and advocacy including approaching work with a decolonizing lens, ensuring that what we do is not extractive and instead centers relationships, respect, and service to communities. It was extremely validating to hear how others saw that Census data, and all data really, should be disaggregated to best serve Pacific Islanders. I am happy to have had the opportunity to work with Karla and the EPIC fellows, I've learned so much from them.

Reflecting on my experience further, I am grateful for how supportive and understanding Karla was throughout the semester. I'm not only a student or a fellow, but also a mother, wife, and eldest daughter, with many familial responsibilities. It can be difficult to explain all of this when I take on a new position in an academic or professional setting. However, as Samoan and an eldest daughter herself, Karla held an immediate understanding of my life outside of academia and helped me feel supported in the fellowship. Her unwavering support helped me enjoy the fellowship experience while also embracing all my identities. This overall atmosphere of care allowed me to weave my different experiences into my work which, in my opinion, strengthens it. Again, I am so thankful to have been able to work with Karla, and to experience what an incredible leader she is.

Closing thoughts

I will carry this DNA fellowship and time with EPIC with me in my future work and studies. The relationships I've made and the things I've learned brightened the beginning half of my 2024. I often think about how much we need culturally responsive programs with mentors and training for Pacific Islander students at all levels. This experience made me realize how important these programs are for Pacific Islander graduate students who aim to shape their graduate training in ways that will be meaningful to their communities. Just as we need data disaggregation for NHPI, we need programs and training specific for our communities too. I believe that many things can uplift our communities and one of those is supporting more PI students so that they are trained in and confident with data about NHPI. I hope other Pacific Islander students take advantage of opportunities like this fellowship or similar programs at EPIC. Fa'afetai lava AAPI Data and EPIC!!