

University of Hawaii integrates USA Funds Life Skills into campus programs

Learning the basics of budgeting and how to distinguish between needs and wants is all part of adjusting to college life on the campus of the University of Hawaii at Manoa. Freshman students complete the USA Funds® Life Skills® life lesson “How Do I Live on a Budget While I’m in School?” and many times it’s an eye-opening experience.

Changing the spending and saving habits of teens and young adults is no easy task. Pamela Kutara, extension educator in the school’s department of Family and Consumer Science, undertook the effort more than five years ago after more than a quarter century of working with adults in the community to improve their financial acumen.

“These students will be the leaders in our community one day, and we want to help them become financially successful,” Kutara said.

Using students as peer educators

Kutara initially pulled together a team of faculty and staff to survey students about what they would want in a financial literacy program. Students told the group they wanted information about:

- ♦ Investing.
- ♦ Getting ahead after graduation.
- ♦ Avoiding credit issues.
- ♦ Budgeting.

The team decided students would be the best educators to teach this type of information, and they decided USA Funds Life Skills would be the best tool to use.

“Students are more creative than we are, and they connect better with their peers,” Kutara said, noting that one peer educator even created a game based on the popular “Jeopardy!” show to help students learn the material. And, she noted, USA Funds Life Skills was simple enough to use that the team could teach students to teach other students.

“You didn’t have to be a business or finance major to understand it.”

In 2006, Kutara officially launched the program using peer mentors to present workshop sessions during dormitory programs, freshman seminars and classroom sessions. The peer mentors who piloted the effort earned credit as part of a leadership development practicum through the department of Family and Consumer Sciences and the Student Affairs office.

“I found that I spent more money in a week than I was receiving, so the budgeting exercise really served as a wake-up call for me to spend more wisely right now before I have nothing.”

“It was interesting to see how many things I bought because I needed them and how many things I bought because I wanted them. I did not realize, before this assignment, that most of my spending falls in the ‘want’ category.”

“As teenagers, whenever we have money, without even thinking about it, we instantly know that we want to spend it. But after learning to keep track of my expenses, I’ll admit that my opinion about money has changed.”

“By keeping track of my expenses for two weeks, it showed me where most of my money went. Usually when I purchase something, I think about how much money I’ve spent only for about five minutes after leaving the store. But through keeping a written budget, I am able to look back at what I’ve spent over the past two weeks and am able to better budget my expenses for the future.”

“When I was sent off to college, I was never taught how to manage my money, so for these first couple of months, I spent my money on things that were not necessities. I just kept spending and charging my debit card without bothering to look at my account and look at how much money I was throwing out the door.”

— Comments from UH Manoa students after completing USA Funds Life Skills lessons



Photo by Shawn Spence

Pamela Kutara, right, extension educator for the University of Hawaii at Manoa, helped create the school's mentoring program to promote good money management. UH Manoa graduate Kyle Kiyonaga presented USA Funds Life Skills through the program.

The program's success — participants increased their awareness of money management practices and demonstrated greater awareness on 13 of 20 indicators — led to an expansion of the use of USA Funds Life Skills by the Shidler College of Business, student support services, the first-year program and the new-student orientation, which is called Warrior Week.

Learning to live on a budget

At freshman orientation, UH Manoa invited peer educators to host sessions about money management, budgeting, and the wise use of credit cards. During the 2009-2010 academic year, staff in the student services unit also used the USA Funds Life Skills life lessons with first-generation college students and first-year learning community groups. Peer educators from the business college worked with students, and the students tracked their expenses and developed a student budget. They chose a budget based on their personal experience of whether they:

- ♦ Lived at home and commuted to school.
- ♦ Lived in a dorm with no car.
- ♦ Lived in an apartment and used some kind of transportation.

"The students and peer educators learned that some had no idea what to plan for," Kutara says.

Starting in 2008, Leilani Takeuchi, who coordinates the first-year experience program, ACE — Access to College Excellence, began having freshmen and peer mentors in the program complete the "how to live on a budget" lesson of USA Funds Life Skills for course credit.

"Students kept track of their expenses for two weeks before completing the USA Funds Life Skills online budgeting activity," Takeuchi said. "Then, students created a budget and tried to stick to that budget for another two weeks. They learned they spent much of their money on "wants" rather than "needs," and many students said that keeping track of their expenses and creating a budget were eye-opening experiences."

Takeuchi also noted that students liked the interactive lessons of USA Funds Life Skills and found it helpful to print and save their budget sheets.

During the winter of 2010, a university-wide event — UH Saves Day — was held in conjunction with America Saves Week. Financial literacy workshops, exhibits, speakers and a quiz bowl were highlights of the event.

Next step: full-time financial literacy professional

Kutara, Takeuchi, and others who attended the 2009 Institute for Higher Education Policy Summer Academy currently are working to secure grant funding to create a full-time financial literacy professional position at the campus.

"We think financial literacy is so important that we believe we should have someone dedicated to the effort so all students can have access to financial literacy and education information," Kutara said.

Measurable results

Students displayed measurable learning after completing the life lessons. The 1,800 students who participated received scores that showed an average of 14 percent improvement in knowledge.

Lessons learned

Kutara and Takeuchi offer the following suggestions for schools interested in developing a financial literacy program on campus:

- ♦ Work with a broad group of people on campus. "We couldn't have taken it as far as we did," said Kutara, "if we hadn't involved other departments and colleges in addition to student services."
- ♦ Involve representatives from faculty, administration and program areas. "You need all three to be successful," Kutara said.
- ♦ Seek an administrative champion, because you'll need more than verbal support.
- ♦ Sometimes you have to prove your program works before anyone will take notice.
- ♦ Evaluation is critical to success. Develop tracking tools to evaluate the long-term success of students.

About UH Manoa

University of Hawaii at Manoa is the flagship campus of the University of Hawaii system. The campus is in the Manoa valley just outside Honolulu. About 20,000 undergraduate and graduate students are enrolled, and about 70 percent call Hawaii home. Most undergraduates are recent high school graduates, although there are some older students.

About USA Funds Life Skills

USA Funds Life Skills is a Web-based financial literacy and student success program designed to help students learn to manage their money and time wisely while in school and after graduation. The content is organized into easy-to-use life lessons that can be customized for a specific audience. Topics include managing credit card debt, living on a budget, and managing school and personal life. USA Funds Life Skills incorporates post-lesson quizzes to help measure knowledge of key personal finance concepts. Visit the USA Funds website at www.usafunds.org or contact your USA Funds representative for more information about USA Funds Life Skills.