



HAWAI'I FOOD+ POLICY

Fix Our Food System

Building the next generation of food system leaders

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

Hawai'i Food+ Policy (Food+) is a civic engagement internship program of Purple Mai'a Foundation based in Honolulu, Hawai'i. The program trains cohorts of college students and young professionals to actively engage in the Hawai'i State Legislative Session through the lens of food systems, building practical capacity in emerging leaders to navigate, understand, and participate in the policy process.

Food+ runs a cohort of up to 25 paid interns over approximately four months, timed to align with the legislative session and the spring semester. This structure makes Food+ one of the only internships in Hawai'i specifically designed to train students in food and agriculture policy work in real time, with the session itself serving as the primary classroom.

Since its founding, Food+ has run 6 cohorts, training over 110 interns, tracking 629 bills, and submitting 691 testimonies to the Hawai'i State Legislature. Alumni have gone on to work at organizations across the food and policy landscape, and many have reported that the program shifted how they understand their own field, recognizing policy engagement as a core professional skill rather than a separate specialty. Some have continued doing advocacy works in areas well beyond food systems, carrying the civic skills they built into new communities and issue areas. In 2025, the program piloted the Food Policy Incubator, a post-session pathway for participants to develop a bill concept toward potential introduction in the next legislative session.

Food+ uses food, an issue area that touches every person's life regardless of background or profession, as an entry point into civic education. The civic and policy skills interns develop are transferable into food system work and beyond, positively impacting whatever communities and issue areas they go on to engage with.

110

interns trained

629

bills tracked

691

testimonies submitted

6

cohorts statewide

PROGRAM STRUCTURE AND TIME COMMITMENTS

Food+ runs a cohort of up to 25 interns for approximately four months, aligned with the Hawai'i State Legislative Session which typically runs January through May. Interns are compensated with a stipend, reflecting the program's commitment to making civic education accessible regardless of financial circumstances.

The weekly structure centers around two recurring touchpoints: a Monday working session led by a designated lead advocate, where interns engage in active legislative work, discuss deliverables, and explore specific food system topics, and a Thursday learning session focused on skill-building, guest speakers, and deeper engagement with the policy process. Independent work like bill tracking, testimony writing, research, and outreach adds several additional hours per week, with intensity fluctuating alongside the pace of the session. Deadlines, committee hearings, and bill crossover periods naturally drive heavier workload at key points in the calendar.

The program is led by a Program Director, who provides organizational oversight and strategic direction, and is managed day-to-day by a Program Manager alongside a small team of lead advocates – interns from a previous cohort who believe in the program's mission and return to help shape it. Their firsthand experience informs how each new iteration of the program is structured and run, making them active contributors to program development rather than simply peer mentors.

CURRICULUM AND LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Unlike programs built around a fixed syllabus, Food+'s curriculum is substantially shaped by the legislative session itself. The bills that move, stall, get amended, or die in committee are the course material. Hearings, deadlines, and political developments set the pace. This means the curriculum looks different every year, responsive to what is actually happening at the capitol rather than what was planned in advance.

Within that live context, the program works toward six core learning objectives: understanding the legislative process and how bills move through the Hawai'i State Legislature; tracking food and agriculture bills and analyzing their implications for the food system; writing and submitting testimony to legislative committees; developing communications and public education strategies around food policy; power mapping to identify key stakeholders, relationships, and decision-makers; and building relationships with and engaging directly with lawmakers.

These core objectives don't unfold linearly. Mid-session, once interns have enough context to engage with the process, they begin asking harder questions – why didn't this bill pass despite overwhelming public support? Who is opposing it and why? What did that amendment actually change? Who do we need to talk to? These questions are a signal that the learning is working – interns are no longer just tracking the process but thinking strategically within it.

PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH & TEACHING MODALITIES

Food+'s pedagogical approach is grounded in what might be described as proximity to consequence. Interns are not practicing on simulated bills or analyzing historical case studies. They engage with real legislation, in real time, with real outcomes. They are writing testimony on a bill that has a hearing in 48 hours, tracking a measure

they care about as it moves through committees, and watching legislation they worked on pass or fail. The stakes are never hypothetical, and that condition shapes everything about how learning happens in the program.

Within that environment, the program draws on two complementary approaches. The first is inquiry-based learning. Interns begin with a structured orientation that covers the fundamentals – how a bill becomes law, how to navigate legislative resources, what to expect from the session. But that foundation is a starting point. As interns develop enough context to engage more deeply mid-session, they begin generating their own lines of inquiry about power, opposition, strategy, and institutional decision-making. These questions drive some of the most substantive learning in the program precisely because they come from genuine investment in the outcome.

Purple Mai'a Foundation, as the community nonprofit that hosts the program, cites the Kanaka Maoli (Native Hawaiian) 'ōlelo no'eau, or wise saying, "ma ka hana ka 'ike" ("in the work is the knowledge"), as a driving pedagogical theory behind program design and pedagogical approach. Similar to work-based learning, the pedagogical insight of ma ka hana ka 'ike is that asking learners to get to work creates opportunities to develop experiential knowledge and test their knowledge against authentic assessments inherent in real-world outcomes.

The second approach is practitioner-facing learning. Thursday learning sessions regularly feature guest speakers from across the food system like researchers, county officials, farmers, nonprofit staff, and scientists who speak to the moments in their own work where policy became relevant. These sessions model what it looks like when someone working in soil science, or county government, or community health has to understand and navigate the policy environment to do their job. Over time, this has reinforced a central framing for the program: policy is the environment everyone in food systems operates within, and anyone can learn to shape it from wherever they stand.

Teaching modalities include weekly team working sessions, weekly learning sessions with guest practitioners, live bill tracking, testimony writing and submission, observing legislative hearings, and ongoing reflection throughout the session. It is worth noting that this pedagogical approach developed iteratively through practice and reflection rather than top-down design, a relevant point for institutions considering this model.

INTEGRATION WITH SSCI 490X / SCFS

Food+ operates in formal partnership with the Sustainable Community Food Systems (SCFS) program at University of Hawai'i West O'ahu through APSC/SSCI 490X: Senior Food Systems Practicum. This integration creates a dual-track learning experience in which the course and internship serve distinct but complementary functions.

The course provides the theoretical and academic scaffolding — a structured reading arc moving from food systems frameworks and barriers to reform, through integrated food policy, democratizing the food system, and food system planning under climate change. Students engage with peer-reviewed literature, develop academic writing skills, and build a critical analytical framework for understanding how and why food systems change. Biweekly seminar discussions explicitly connect the readings to bills moving through the Hawai'i State Legislature, with students providing legislative updates alongside their academic analysis.

Food+ provides the applied counterpart — the live legislative environment where those theoretical frameworks get tested against real political conditions. Interns track bills, write testimony, map stakeholders, and engage directly with the policy process while the session is actively unfolding. The conceptual tools from the classroom become immediately relevant when an intern is trying to understand why a bill with broad public support stalled in committee, or how to frame an advocacy message for a specific lawmaker. Together, the two components offer students a rare opportunity to move fluidly between theory and practice — building analytical frameworks in the classroom while applying them in a live policy environment. For students who experience both, the integrated model deepens learning in ways that neither component could fully replicate on its own.

CONCLUSION & AREAS FOR FURTHER INQUIRY

This Program Summary has given an overview of the structure, curriculum and impact of the Hawai'i Food+ Policy program, detailing its pedagogical approach that combines proximity to consequence, inquiry-based learning, *ma ka hana ka 'ike*, and practitioner-facing learning, as well as its integration with a senior food systems practicum within a local university. Through these elements, Food+ has successfully intervened in higher education to create a link between theoretical and academic learning and policy interventions at the level of a state legislature.

More study is needed to understand how this program is shaped by Hawai'i's unique context, and how it could translate into the political contexts of other states, which have different legislative processes, legislative cultures, geographies, cultural contexts and political power dynamics. Adaptiveness, flexibility and relationships are hallmarks of Food+ Policy's approach, making iteration and responsiveness core features that paradoxically create different expressions of the program from year to year and, presumably, from place to place.

OUR VISION

A Hawai'i where communities are nourished by resilient, equitable, and 'āina-centered food systems led by informed and empowered people of those places.

OUR MISSION

To develop the next generation of food system leaders by providing hands-on policy education, mentorship, and opportunities to engage in community-centered, 'āina-rooted food system work.