

Help-Seeking as Relational Risk Management Among Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander College Students in Hawai‘i

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Abstract

Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander (NHPI) college students navigate higher education within Indigenous worldviews that emphasize relational accountability, collective responsibility, and cultural dignity. Although existing research documents barriers to mental health service utilization among NHPI populations, less is known about how NHPI students actively navigate help-seeking within cultural, familial, and institutional contexts. Using a constructivist grounded theory approach, this study examined help-seeking processes among ten NHPI students enrolled at a faith-based university in Hawai‘i. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and analyzed using constant comparative methods. Findings revealed a core process conceptualized as help-seeking as relational risk management. Participants described enduring stress independently while continuously assessing cultural obligations, relational safety, and potential impacts on family relationships, identity, and dignity prior to seeking support. Help-seeking occurred selectively and relationally, most often through trusted faculty members, mentors, or peers, with formal institutional services accessed conditionally. An Indigenous conceptual framework grounded in participants’ narratives is presented to illustrate this cyclical and relational process. The findings challenge deficit-based interpretations of delayed help-seeking and highlight the importance of culturally grounded, relational approaches to student support in Indigenous-serving higher education institutions.

Indigenization Statement

We are a collective of Indigenous scholars and practitioners, including Native Indigenous Tongan and Native Hawaiian authors, writing from within our own communities, relationships, and responsibilities. Our ways of knowing, understanding, and engaging in this research are grounded in Indigenous epistemologies that emphasize relational accountability, collective wellbeing, spirituality, and respect for community knowledge. This study emerges from our shared commitment to serving Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander (NHPI) students and communities through research that reflects Indigenous realities rather than imposing external frameworks.

As Indigenous researchers, our positionalities shape how we conceptualize help-seeking, listen to participant narratives, and interpret meaning. We understand knowledge as relational and situated, carried through lived experience, community connection, and responsibility to others. Our engagement with participants was guided by respect, reciprocity, and care, recognizing that research is not separate from relationships but an extension of it. This research was conducted in Hawai‘i, a place with its own enduring Indigenous histories, knowledges, and responsibilities. We acknowledge the ‘āina (land) and lāhui (people/nation) of Hawai‘i and recognize our accountability to the people and places in which this work is situated. This study is offered collectively, not as a singular voice, but as a weaving of Indigenous perspectives intended to honor community knowledge, strengthen wellbeing, and contribute to Indigenous-centered scholarship in higher education. While we write as cultural insiders, we recognize that no individual or research team can fully represent the breadth, diversity, and complexity of Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander experiences. We acknowledge that participants’ perspectives may differ from our own lived experiences and understandings. Throughout the research process, we engaged in ongoing reflexive practice and intentionally examined our assumptions to create space for participants’ voices, meanings, and lived experiences to guide interpretation.

Introduction

Indigenous students enter higher education carrying responsibilities, relationships, and ways of knowing that are often rendered invisible within dominant academic systems (Battiste & Henderson, 2000; Hart, 2010; Ka‘ili, 2008). For Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander (NHPI) students in Hawai‘i, participation in higher education is not experienced solely as an individual pursuit of credentials or career advancement. Rather, it is embedded within Indigenous worldviews that emphasize collective responsibility, relational accountability, spirituality, and commitment to family and community (Cajete, 2000; Hart, 2010; Wilson, 2008). These worldviews shape how students interpret stress, success, and help-seeking, as well as how they navigate institutional environments that are frequently structured around individualistic

assumptions. Within Indigenous scholarship, worldviews are understood as foundational orientations that shape belief systems, decision-making, and modes of problem-solving. Indigenous knowledge systems emphasize relationality, balance, and reciprocity, locating wellbeing within networks of relationships rather than within isolated individuals. From this perspective, help-seeking is not merely a technical response to distress but a relational act that carries ethical, cultural, and social implications (Hart, 2002; Wilson, 2008). Decisions about whether, when, and from whom to seek help are therefore shaped by concerns related to dignity, responsibility, and the maintenance of relational harmony.

Despite increased attention to diversity, equity, and inclusion within higher education, NHPI students continue to experience disproportionate challenges related to academic persistence, mental health, and institutional belonging. Available data indicate that although many Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander individuals complete high school, significantly fewer attain a bachelor's degree, highlighting persistent challenges in the transition into and through higher education (Reddy et al., 2022). In Hawai'i, where NHPI students are more visible within educational institutions, these disparities intersect with unique cultural, historical, and institutional contexts that influence student experiences.

Hawai'i represents a distinct educational landscape shaped by Native Hawaiian history, ongoing colonial processes, and a multicultural population (Taira & Maunakea, 2022; United States Census Bureau, 2024). In this study, colonial processes refer to the ongoing influence of settler-colonial institutions and systems that have historically marginalized Indigenous knowledge, language, and cultural practices within educational contexts (Battiste & Henderson, 2000; Smith, 1999). Educational practices within Hawai'i are deeply connected to place, culture, and community, with 'ike kupuna (ancestral knowledge), storytelling, and relational learning

remaining central to Indigenous ways of teaching and learning. At the same time, higher education institutions in Hawai‘i operate within Western academic frameworks that privilege individual achievement, self-reliance, and clinical models of support (Battiste & Henderson, 2000; Hart, 2010). For NHPI students, navigating these intersecting systems requires ongoing negotiation between Indigenous values and institutional expectations. Research consistently documents that NHPI college students experience significant stressors related to academic workload, financial pressure, caregiving responsibilities, and competing family obligations (Freitas et al., 2024; McLellan et al., 2025). These stressors are often compounded by historical and intergenerational trauma, socioeconomic inequities, and limited access to culturally responsive support services (Freitas et al., 2024; Greenall et al., 2023). Studies have shown that NHPI students report elevated levels of stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms compared to their peers, highlighting the importance of understanding how mental health and wellbeing are experienced and addressed within this population (Freitas et al., 2024; McLellan et al., 2025). Within Tongan and other Pacific Islander contexts, mental health concerns are often treated as private or taboo, contributing to patterns of silence and endurance rather than early disclosure (Foliaki, 1997).

At the same time, NHPI communities possess substantial sources of strength and resilience (McLellan et al., 2025). Cultural identity, strong familial bonds, spirituality, and connection to place have been associated with improved wellbeing and reduced stress among NHPI students (McLellan et al., 2025; Taira & Maunakea, 2022). Practices such as storytelling, music, hula, and communal gatherings serve not only as cultural expressions but also as mechanisms for emotional regulation, meaning-making, and collective support. These strengths

underscore the importance of approaching NHPI student wellbeing from a strengths-based, culturally grounded perspective rather than through deficit-oriented frameworks.

Within higher education, mental health promotion and intervention efforts are largely predicated on the assumption that students will seek help through formal institutional services such as counseling centers, academic advising, or peer-support programs (McCabe et al., 2024). While these services are widely available, utilization rates among NHPI and other culturally minoritized students remain disproportionately low. Existing research often attributes underutilization to factors such as stigma, lack of awareness, time constraints, or personal attitudes toward self-reliance (Cutrer-Parraga et al., 2024). Although these factors are relevant, they provide an incomplete explanation when divorced from cultural and relational contexts. Dominant models of help-seeking are rooted in individualistic paradigms that conceptualize support use as a rational, autonomous decision driven by personal need and service availability (Hart, 2010; McCabe et al., 2024). Such models rarely account for collectivist cultures in which help-seeking carries relational consequences, including concerns about burdening family members, disrupting social roles, or compromising personal and communal dignity. For NHPI students, decisions to seek help are often filtered through questions such as whether disclosure will reflect poorly on one's family, whether it will create additional obligations for others, or whether it will disrupt established relationships. Emerging scholarship highlights the importance of cultural and relational approaches to help-seeking among Indigenous and Pacific Islander populations (Cutrer-Parraga et al., 2024; Rao et al., 2025). Research suggests that individuals from collectivist cultures are more likely to rely on informal support networks, including family, peers, and community leaders, rather than professional services. Trust, familiarity, and cultural safety play critical roles in determining whether support is sought and sustained (Freitas et al.,

2024; Sakiz & Jencius, 2024). In this context, help-seeking is not avoided but strategically navigated within relational systems.

Institutions themselves play a significant role in shaping help-seeking pathways. Studies examining peer mentoring, faculty engagement, and culturally responsive service delivery demonstrate that relational access points can facilitate help-seeking among Indigenous and minoritized students. Faculty members who demonstrate care, cultural humility, and accessibility often serve as trusted intermediaries between students and institutional resources (Pointon-Haas et al., 2024; Sakiz & Jencius, 2024). Conversely, environments perceived as culturally unsafe, corrective, or surveillance-oriented can discourage engagement with formal support services.

Despite these insights, significant gaps remain within the literature. First, much of the existing research focuses on identifying barriers to help-seeking rather than examining the processes through which NHPI students navigate stress and support (Freitas et al., 2024). Questions related to timing, decision-making, relational assessment, and selective disclosure remain underexplored. Second, there is a lack of qualitative, process-focused research centered specifically on NHPI college students in Hawai‘i (Sabado-Liwag et al., 2025). Studies frequently aggregate NHPI students with broader Asian American populations or examine Indigenous wellbeing outside of higher education contexts, limiting their relevance and transferability. To address these gaps, the present study employs a constructivist grounded theory approach to explore how NHPI college students in Hawai‘i understand, navigate, and enact help-seeking within their institutional and cultural contexts. Constructivist grounded theory is particularly well suited to Indigenous research contexts because it emphasizes co-construction of meaning, reflexivity, and attention to process rather than hypothesis testing (Charmaz, 2014; Hart, 2010;

Wilson, 2008). This approach recognizes the existence of multiple realities and prioritizes participants' interpretations of their lived experiences.

Guided by Indigenous epistemologies and grounded theory methodology, this study seeks to move beyond deficit-based explanations of help-seeking behavior. Instead, it aims to generate a theoretical model that captures the relational logic underlying NHPI students' help-seeking decisions. By centering Indigenous ways of knowing and situating help-seeking within cultural, familial, and institutional systems, this study contributes a process-oriented framework that has implications for research, policy, and practice within Indigenous-serving higher education institutions. Specifically, this study addresses the following research question: How do Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander college students in Hawai'i navigate help-seeking within a university context shaped by Indigenous worldviews and institutional expectations? Through in-depth qualitative inquiry, the study illuminates the processes through which NHPI students assess relational risk, negotiate cultural obligations, and engage with support resources over time.

Methodology

This study employed a constructivist grounded theory methodology to examine how Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander (NHPI) college students navigate help-seeking within higher education. Constructivist grounded theory is particularly well suited for research with Indigenous populations because it prioritizes participants' meanings, attends to process, and recognizes knowledge as co-constructed through relationships rather than discovered as objective fact. Consistent with Indigenous research paradigms, this approach emphasizes relational accountability, reflexivity, and ethical responsibility to community (Kovach, 2005; Wilson, 2008).

Research Design

A qualitative, constructivist grounded theory design guided all phases of the study, including data collection, analysis, and theory development. Grounded theory was selected because existing help-seeking models inadequately explain the relational, cultural, and institutional dynamics shaping NHPI students' decisions to seek support. Rather than testing predefined hypotheses, this study sought to generate theory grounded in participants' lived experiences and cultural contexts. Constructivist grounded theory differs from objectivist approaches by acknowledging the influence of researchers' positionalities and by treating theory as an interpretive rendering rather than a neutral representation of reality. This orientation aligns with Indigenous epistemologies that recognize multiple realities and situate knowledge within relationships, history, and place (Hart, 2010; Smith, 1999). The research team consisted of Indigenous scholars and practitioners, including Native Hawaiian and Tongan researchers, whose professional and community experiences informed the study. The team was intentionally composed of individuals with longstanding relationships within NHPI communities and experience working with NHPI students in higher education settings, supporting culturally grounded inquiry and interpretation.

Setting and Institutional Context

The study was conducted at a faith-based university in Hawai'i with a predominantly Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander student population. The institutional context is characterized by strong integration of academic, spiritual, and community life, high relational visibility, and shared cultural and religious norms. These conditions shape students' experiences of stress, belonging, and help-seeking, and were treated as active contextual influences rather

than background variables. Hawai‘i’s broader sociocultural context, including Indigenous histories, ongoing colonial processes, and the presence of multiple Indigenous and Pacific Islander communities, further informed participants’ experiences. Understanding help-seeking within this setting required attention to both institutional structures and Indigenous relational values.

Participants

Participants were 10 NHPI students enrolled at the university at the time of data collection. All participants self-identified as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander and represented a range of genders, academic standings, majors, living situations, and family responsibilities. This variation was intentionally sought to support theoretical development and to examine whether help-seeking processes remained consistent across diverse circumstances. Participants were recruited through campus networks and referrals, with eligibility criteria focused on NHPI identity and current enrollment at the university. Consistent with grounded theory methodology, sampling was guided by theoretical relevance rather than representativeness, and variation in participants’ gender, academic standing, living situation, and family responsibilities was intentionally sought to support theory development. Participant demographic characteristics are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Characteristics (N = 10)

Characteristic	n	%
Gender		
Female	7	70
Male	2	20

Nonbinary / Female	1	10
NHPI Identity		
Native Hawaiian	3	30
Tongan	2	20
Cook Islands Māori	1	10
Māori / Pacific Islander	1	10
Other Pacific Islander (Fijian, Samoan, PI unspecified)	3	30
Year in School		
Sophomore	1	10
Junior	2	20
Senior	6	60
Non-traditional	1	10
Family / Caregiving Role		
Married and/or Parenting	3	30
Significant caregiving responsibilities	4	40
No caregiving role reported	3	30
Living Situation		
On-campus	5	50
Off-campus	3	30
Living with family / commuter	2	20

Note. Percentages are rounded. Demographic variation was examined analytically rather than for subgroup comparison.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews designed to elicit participants' experiences of stress, support, and help-seeking within academic and personal contexts. Interview questions were open-ended and process-oriented, inviting participants to describe how they recognized challenges, how they decided whether to seek help, and whom they approached for support. Interviews emphasized storytelling and participant-led narratives, consistent with Indigenous approaches to knowledge sharing. Interviews were conducted in

private conference rooms, outdoor spaces selected by participants, or via Zoom, depending on participant preference and availability. These settings were chosen to support comfort, confidentiality, and open conversation, and interviews ranged in length from approximately 60 to 90 minutes.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed constant comparative methods central to constructivist grounded theory, emphasizing iterative comparison, reflexivity, and theory generation grounded in participants' meanings rather than hypothesis testing (Charmaz, 2014). Analysis began with initial coding, during which interview transcripts were reviewed line by line to identify *in vivo* and process-oriented codes that reflected participants' actions, meanings, and decision-making. Codes were compared within and across interviews to identify similarities, differences, and emerging patterns. Focused coding then grouped the most salient and recurring codes into conceptual categories. Through axial coding, relationships among categories were examined, including conditions, actions, and consequences associated with help-seeking. Memo-writing was used throughout the analytic process to document analytic decisions, emerging interpretations, and reflexive insights. Through selective coding, categories were integrated around a core process that accounted for the greatest explanatory power across the data. This analytic process resulted in the grounded theory of help-seeking as relational risk management, which captures how NHPI students assess cultural obligations, relational safety, and institutional context when navigating support. The progression from open coding through focused, axial, and selective coding is summarized in Table 2 and informed the development of the Indigenous conceptual framework presented later in the manuscript.

Table 2*Grounded Theory Coding Process: From Data to Core Category*

Coding Phase	Analytic Focus	Example Codes / Categories	Representative Data Excerpts
Open Coding	Line-by-line, in vivo and process coding	"handling it on my own"; "not wanting to burden"; "family comes first"; "waiting until it's bad"	"I don't really ask for help unless it's, like, really bad... I try to just deal with it myself." (Participant 2)
Focused Coding	Grouping salient and recurring codes	Enduring stress; prioritizing family; selective disclosure; relational trust Cultural obligation;	"I don't want to stress my family out back home, so I kind of just push through until I can't." (Participant 3)
Axial Coding	Linking conditions, actions, and consequences	relational safety; conditional institutional use; endurance until threshold	"I'll talk to a professor before I go to counseling because they know me and understand where I'm coming from." (Participant 4)
Selective Coding	Integration around a central process	Help-seeking as relational risk management	"It's not that I don't want help... it's just figuring out who I can talk to without it becoming a whole thing." (Participant 1)

Reflexivity and Positionality

The research team consists of Indigenous scholars and practitioners, including Native Hawaiian and Tongan authors, with lived experience in Hawai'i-based higher education. The authors currently serve as social work faculty and bring prior professional experience as mental health counselors and mental health workers. Student coauthors, who identify as Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander students, contributed as social work students and research

assistants. Together, the team maintains long-standing relationships within NHPI communities. This shared positionality facilitated relational trust during interviews and supported culturally grounded interpretation of participants' narratives (Hart, 2010; Wilson, 2008). At the same time, the research team engaged in intentional reflexivity to examine how their experiences, assumptions, and responsibilities shaped the research process. Reflexive memo-writing and collaborative analytic discussions were used to distinguish participants' meanings from researchers' interpretations and to ensure analytic rigor.

Ethical Considerations and Relational Accountability

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board at Brigham Young University–Hawai'i (IRB #24-53). All procedures were conducted in accordance with institutional guidelines for the protection of human subjects. Participants provided informed consent and were assured of confidentiality and voluntary participation. Beyond institutional requirements, the research was guided by Indigenous ethical principles emphasizing respect, reciprocity, relational accountability, and responsibility to community. These principles were informed by Indigenous research methodologies, existing scholarship, and the lived experiences of the research team (Kovach, 2005; Wilson, 2008). Findings are presented with care to honor participants' lived experiences and to contribute knowledge that supports Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander students and communities. In alignment with Indigenous research paradigms, the research team remains accountable to the relationships and responsibilities that made this study possible.

Use of AI Tools

Generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools (ChatGPT, OpenAI) were used during manuscript preparation for limited editorial purposes, including grammar refinement and alignment of writing structure. No participant transcripts, interview excerpts, identifiable information, coding materials, or research data were uploaded into AI systems. AI tools were not used to generate research content, conduct data analysis, interpret findings, or produce citations. All substantive content and analytic decisions were developed independently by the authors, and all AI-assisted revisions were reviewed for accuracy, cultural integrity, and alignment with Indigenous research principles.

Findings

The findings are presented here in alignment with the Indigenous conceptual framework of NHPI help-seeking as relational risk management (Figure 1). Consistent with grounded theory approaches used in Indigenous social work research, the results are organized to emphasize process, relationality, and cultural context rather than isolated variables (Haring, 2010; Hart, 2010; Wilson, 2008). Across participants, help-seeking emerged as a dynamic, cyclical process shaped by cultural obligation, institutional context, and ongoing assessments of relational safety. Participant demographic characteristics are summarized in Table 1, and variation across gender, academic standing, and caregiving roles was examined analytically rather than for subgroup comparison.

Figure 1

Indigenous conceptual framework of NHPI help-seeking as relational risk management.



Overview of the Help-Seeking Process

Participants described help-seeking not as a single decision point but as an unfolding process that occurred over time. Initial stressors, including academic pressure, financial strain, caregiving responsibilities, and emotional distress, were first managed through personal endurance and self-regulation. These stressors were interpreted through Indigenous values emphasizing responsibility to family, faith, and community, leading students to delay disclosure

until they perceived that seeking help would not compromise relational harmony. This process closely mirrors Indigenous grounded theory models that conceptualize change as cyclical and relational rather than linear (Haring, 2010). Students moved repeatedly between endurance, assessment, and selective disclosure as circumstances evolved, illustrating that help-seeking decisions were continually renegotiated rather than resolved definitively.

Contextual Stressors as Entry Points

Contextual stressors served as the initial entry point into the help-seeking process. Participants identified academic workload, financial obligations, and caregiving responsibilities as persistent sources of strain. These stressors were often intertwined, reflecting broader structural inequities documented in the literature on NHPI student experiences in higher education (Freitas et al., 2024; Greenall et al., 2023). Rather than interpreting stress as an individual failure, participants framed these challenges as expected consequences of fulfilling multiple roles. This interpretation aligns with research demonstrating that NHPI students often normalize high levels of responsibility as part of their commitment to family and community (McLellan et al., 2025). As a result, stress alone was rarely sufficient to prompt immediate help-seeking.

Cultural Obligations as an Internal Regulator

Cultural obligation emerged as a central mechanism regulating help-seeking behavior. Participants described strong internalized expectations to remain resilient, composed, and self-reliant in order to uphold family honor and avoid burdening others. These expectations functioned as an internal regulator, shaping both the timing and form of help-seeking. Consistent with collectivist cultural frameworks, participants emphasized that individual wellbeing could

not be separated from collective wellbeing (Rao et al., 2025). Seeking help prematurely was often perceived as risking disruption to family roles or signaling weakness, reinforcing patterns of endurance. This finding extends existing literature on stigma and burdensomeness by demonstrating how cultural obligation operates proactively to delay disclosure rather than simply discouraging service use (Cutrer-Parraga et al., 2024).

Relational Safety Assessment

Before seeking help, participants engaged in careful assessments of relational safety. Trust, dignity, and perceived burden were repeatedly identified as key considerations. Students evaluated whether potential helpers would understand their cultural context, respect their dignity, and maintain confidentiality. Faculty members and mentors who demonstrated accessibility and relational care were frequently identified as safe entry points to support. In contrast, institutional services perceived as impersonal or corrective were approached cautiously. This pattern aligns with research emphasizing the importance of cultural safety and institutional trust in facilitating help-seeking among Indigenous students (Freitas et al., 2024; Sakiz & Jencius, 2024).

Help-Seeking Pathways and Conditional Institutional Use

When relational safety was established, participants pursued help through relational pathways. Informal support from trusted peers, faculty, or mentors often preceded or replaced engagement with formal services. Institutional resources were most likely to be used when introduced relationally and framed as supportive rather than disciplinary. This conditional use of institutional resources reflects broader critiques of Western service models that prioritize individual intervention over relational engagement (Hart, 2002; Kirmayer et al., 2000).

Participants did not reject institutional support outright; rather, they selectively engaged with systems that aligned with their relational values.

Endurance Until Threshold

A recurring pattern of endurance until threshold was evident across participant narratives. Students described managing distress independently until emotional, physical, or academic strain became unsustainable. At this point, help-seeking was framed as necessary rather than desirable. This threshold-based help-seeking parallels findings in other Indigenous grounded theory studies, where action occurs after prolonged internal processing and reflection (Haring, 2010). Importantly, this pattern was consistent across gender, academic standing, and living situations, underscoring the shared cultural logic underlying help-seeking decisions.

Core Category: Relational Risk Management

Integrating these categories resulted in the core grounded theory of help-seeking as relational risk management. Participants continuously weighed the benefits of seeking help against perceived relational and cultural risks, including loss of dignity, burdening family, and disrupting social harmony. Help-seeking occurred when relational safety outweighed these risks and was deferred when it did not. This core process resonates with Indigenous epistemologies that frame decision-making as relational and ethically situated (Hart, 2010; Wilson, 2008). The consistency of this process across participants supports its theoretical robustness and highlights its relevance for understanding NHPI student help-seeking within Indigenous-serving higher education contexts.

Indigenous Conceptual Framework: Relational Risk Management

Figure 1 presents an Indigenous conceptual framework of Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander (NHPI) help-seeking derived directly from participants' narratives and constructivist grounded theory analysis. The framework conceptualizes help-seeking not as a linear progression or discrete decision but as a relational, cyclical, and culturally embedded process situated within Indigenous values and worldviews. Rather than positioning help-seeking as an individual behavior driven by awareness or motivation, the framework centers relational accountability, ethical decision-making, and collective responsibility as the primary organizing principles guiding students' actions. At the center of the framework is the core process of relational risk management, which represents how NHPI students continually assess the relational, cultural, and ethical implications of seeking support. Participants did not describe help-seeking as simply recognizing a need and accessing a service. Instead, they engaged in ongoing evaluations of how disclosure might affect family relationships, cultural expectations, dignity, and social harmony. As one participant explained, "It's not that I don't want help... it's figuring out who I can talk to without it becoming a whole thing" (Participant 1). This core process reflects Indigenous epistemologies that locate decision-making within relationships rather than within autonomous individuals. The alignment between axial coding categories and the components of the Indigenous conceptual framework is summarized in Table 3.

Table 3

Axial Coding Categories Mapped to the Indigenous Conceptual Framework

Conceptual Framework Component	Axial Category	Description	Illustrative Excerpt
Contextual Stressors	Accumulated academic, financial, and caregiving demands	Stressors were ongoing and overlapping rather than episodic	"It's school, work, family... it's everything all at once." (Participant 6)

Cultural Obligations	Internalized responsibility to family, faith, and community	Obligations shaped perceptions of appropriate help-seeking	“I was taught to be strong and not put my problems on other people.” (Participant 8)
Relational Safety Assessment	Evaluating trust, dignity, and burden	Help-seeking required relational assurance	“If I don’t feel safe with someone, I won’t open up.” (Participant 5)
Help-Seeking Pathways	Selective use of trusted individuals and mediated services	Faculty and mentors served as gateways	“Talking to my professor made it easier to get the help I needed.” (Participant 2)
Outcomes	Relief, delayed intervention, or cumulative strain	Outcomes varied based on timing and relational context	“When I waited too long, everything just piled up.” (Participant 7)

Surrounding this core process are five interconnected components that together shape help-seeking trajectories. Contextual stressors serve as the primary entry point into the process. Participants described academic demands, financial pressures, employment obligations, and caregiving responsibilities as overlapping and persistent rather than episodic. These stressors accumulated over time and created conditions under which students were required to decide whether to continue enduring distress or seek assistance. Participant 6, a senior balancing advanced coursework and family responsibilities, shared, “It wasn’t just school. It was school, work, and trying to be there for my family at the same time. Everything kind of hit all at once.” Similarly, Participant 7 noted, “When I focus on school, I feel like everything else kind of falls behind—my family, my other responsibilities.” These stressors were consistently interpreted through the lens of cultural obligations, which functioned as an internal regulator of help-seeking. Participants described deeply internalized expectations to remain resilient, self-

sufficient, and emotionally composed in order to fulfill responsibilities to family, faith, and community. Seeking help prematurely was often perceived as risking burdening others or disrupting relational balance. Participant 8 articulated this clearly: “I don’t like to put my problems on my family. They already have their own things going on, so I just try to handle it myself.” Participant 1 similarly explained, “I was taught to be strong and not make my problems other people’s problems.” These narratives illustrate how cultural obligation delayed help-seeking not because support was unavailable, but because seeking help carried perceived relational and ethical consequences.

Before engaging in help-seeking, participants engaged in relational safety assessments, carefully evaluating trust, dignity, confidentiality, and the likelihood of being understood within their cultural context. Relational safety was not assumed based on a person’s role or professional status but was established through demonstrated care, familiarity, and relational investment. Participant 4 described why she approached a faculty member rather than formal services: “I’ll talk to a professor before I go to counseling because they know me. They understand where I’m coming from and won’t judge me.” Participant 5 echoed this emphasis on emotional safety, stating, “If I don’t feel safe with someone, I won’t open up. I have to know they really care.”

When relational safety was established, participants navigated help-seeking pathways that prioritized trusted relationships. Faculty members, mentors, and peers were frequently identified as preferred sources of support and often served as gateways to institutional resources. Formal services were not rejected outright; rather, they were accessed conditionally and typically mediated through trusted individuals who could contextualize students’ needs. Participant 2 explained, “Talking to my professor made it easier to get the help I needed. If I had just gone straight to counseling, I don’t think I would have done it.” Participant 3 similarly noted, “Once

someone I trusted told me about the resources and helped me understand them, it felt less scary to actually use them.”

The framework also recognizes outcomes as part of the ongoing help-seeking process. Outcomes included relief and support when help-seeking aligned with relational safety, delayed intervention when endurance persisted, and cumulative strain when stressors compounded without support. Importantly, outcomes did not represent endpoints but shaped subsequent cycles of relational risk management. Even when help-seeking was delayed and strain accumulated, participants described opportunities to re-engage with support when relationally safe connections became available, reinforcing the cyclical and iterative nature of the process. Participant 2 reflected, “I don’t really ask for help unless it’s really bad. I try to deal with it myself until I can’t anymore.” Participant 7 described the consequences of prolonged endurance: “When I waited too long, everything just piled up. It felt like I was drowning instead of just struggling.”

Encircling the entire framework are Indigenous values and worldviews, represented visually as an encompassing boundary rather than a discrete component. This placement signifies that all aspects of the help-seeking process are embedded within Indigenous relational logics, spirituality, reciprocity, and collective wellbeing. Culture does not operate as a variable among others; it provides the ethical and epistemological context within which all help-seeking decisions are made. Together, these participant narratives demonstrate how the Indigenous conceptual framework emerged directly from lived experience. Help-seeking among NHPI students was not avoided or resisted but strategically navigated through ongoing assessments of relational risk, cultural obligation, and safety. By centering participant voice, the framework reflects Indigenous epistemologies that locate wellbeing and decision-making within

relationships rather than within isolated individuals and offers a culturally grounded lens for rethinking support practices in Indigenous-serving higher education contexts.

Discussion

This study contributes an Indigenous, process-oriented grounded theory of help-seeking among Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander (NHPI) college students by conceptualizing help-seeking as relational risk management. Rather than framing delayed or selective help-seeking as avoidance, stigma, or individual deficit, the findings demonstrate that NHPI students engage in deliberate, culturally grounded decision-making shaped by relational accountability, cultural obligation, and ongoing assessments of safety and dignity. Help-seeking, as described by participants, is not a failure to act, but an ethical process of navigating responsibilities to family, community, and self within institutional contexts that are often misaligned with Indigenous values. By centering relationality as the primary organizing logic of help-seeking, this study challenges dominant higher education and mental health frameworks that conceptualize help-seeking as an individual, autonomous behavior driven primarily by awareness, motivation, or symptom severity (Hart, 2010; McCabe et al., 2024). Participants' narratives reveal that decisions about whether, when, and from whom to seek help are embedded within social relationships and cultural expectations rather than based solely on perceived need. This finding aligns with Indigenous epistemologies that locate wellbeing within networks of relationships and collective responsibility (Cajete, 2000; Wilson, 2008), and extends existing NHPI scholarship by articulating how these epistemologies actively shape help-seeking processes in higher education contexts.

Connecting Findings to Existing Literature

The findings align with prior research documenting low utilization of formal mental health services among NHPI and other Pacific Islander populations (Cutrer-Parraga et al., 2024; Sabado-Liwag et al., 2025), while offering a more nuanced explanation for why such patterns persist. Previous studies have identified stigma, self-reliance, and perceived burdensomeness as barriers to help-seeking (Cutrer-Parraga et al., 2024; Sabado-Liwag et al., 2025); however, the present study demonstrates that these factors operate within broader relational and cultural logics rather than as isolated individual attitudes. In this study, participants were aware of available services and were open to receiving support. However, they carefully navigated help-seeking to avoid burdening family members, disrupting relational harmony, or compromising cultural dignity. Consistent with research emphasizing collectivist orientations among NHPI students, participants prioritized family and community wellbeing over individual needs, reinforcing patterns of endurance documented in prior studies (McLellan et al., 2025; Rao et al., 2025). This study extends that literature by identifying relational safety assessment as a key mediating process between stress and help-seeking. Decisions were shaped not only by perceived distress but by evaluations of trust, cultural understanding, and potential relational consequences—factors that are largely absent from dominant help-seeking models (Hart, 2010; McCabe et al., 2024).

The central role of faculty members and mentors as relational access points further supports existing research highlighting the importance of culturally responsive institutional relationships (Freitas et al., 2024; Sakiz & Jencius, 2024). Participants' preference for relationally mediated support underscores the limitations of service delivery models that prioritize anonymity, efficiency, or clinical neutrality without attending to cultural safety. As

Freitas et al. (2024) argue, culturally unsafe environments can unintentionally reproduce mistrust and discourage engagement, even when services are technically available.

Theoretical Contribution

The primary theoretical contribution of this study is the articulation of help-seeking as relational risk management. This grounded theory reframes help-seeking as an ethical and relational process rather than an individual behavioral choice, challenging deficit-based interpretations of delayed support-seeking that continue to dominate higher education discourse. By centering Indigenous epistemologies, the theory foregrounds relational accountability and cultural dignity as core mechanisms shaping help-seeking decisions (Hart, 2010; Wilson, 2008). The Indigenous conceptual framework developed in this study further contributes by offering a culturally grounded model that integrates contextual stressors, cultural obligations, relational safety assessments, help-seeking pathways, and outcomes within a cyclical process. Unlike linear models of help-seeking, this framework reflects Indigenous understandings of balance, reciprocity, and ongoing negotiation (Cajete, 2000), making it particularly relevant for Indigenous-serving institutions seeking to design more responsive approaches to student wellbeing.

Implications for Practice and Policy

The findings have important implications for higher education policy and practice, particularly for institutions serving Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander (NHPI) students. Prior research indicates that while universities have expanded the availability of mental health services, utilization remains low, especially among culturally minoritized students (McCabe et al., 2024; Zhao et al., 2025). For NHPI students specifically, barriers such as stigma, family

burdensomeness, institutional mistrust, and lack of cultural responsiveness complicate engagement with formal services (Cutrer-Parraga et al., 2024; Freitas et al., 2024; Sabado-Liwag et al., 2025). These findings suggest that expanding counseling services alone is insufficient if relational safety and cultural dignity are not addressed. Consistent with research highlighting the importance of cultural safety in behavioral health settings for Native Hawaiian students (Freitas et al., 2024), help-seeking is shaped less by service availability than by whether engagement feels relationally safe, culturally respectful, and aligned with Indigenous and collectivist values (McLellan et al., 2025; Rao et al., 2025).

Institutions may therefore benefit from rethinking how counseling and support services are positioned and accessed. Embedding support within relational and culturally grounded contexts, such as academic departments, cultural centers, peer mentoring programs, student success initiatives, or community-based spaces, may reduce perceived stigma and increase accessibility. Evidence from peer-support interventions demonstrates that relationally embedded models can improve help-seeking behaviors and mental health outcomes among college students (Pointon-Haas et al., 2024). Moreover, inclusive environments that actively involve faculty and prioritize cultural sensitivity have been shown to foster trust and increase engagement with support services (Sakiz & Jencius, 2024). For NHPI students, who often draw strength from communal and familial ties (McLellan et al., 2025), faculty members, mentors, and trusted staff may serve as critical relational intermediaries when equipped with cultural humility and institutional support. Institutions may also benefit from investing in culturally aligned mental health first-response training for faculty and staff, enabling them to serve as trusted points of contact and facilitate relationally grounded referrals when additional support is needed.

Institutional messaging also plays a central role. Research indicates that stigma and self-stigma significantly inhibit formal help-seeking among Pacific Islander populations (Cutrer-Parraga et al., 2024; Sabado-Liwag et al., 2025). Framing help-seeking as an act of *kuleana* (responsibility), care for self and community, and cultural strength, rather than as a response to individual weakness or crisis, may better align with Indigenous relational logics and collectivist orientations (McLellan et al., 2025; Rao et al., 2025). These findings further suggest that endurance may be understood not solely as individual perseverance, but as a relational process shaped by cultural obligations, family relationships, and commitments to collective wellbeing. Within this context, seeking help may represent a means of sustaining responsibilities to family and community rather than departing from them. Policies and practices that prioritize visibility, relationship-building, cultural safety, and institutional trust (Freitas et al., 2024) may foster greater engagement with support services among NHPI students and other Indigenous populations. Collectively, these implications reinforce the need for systemic, culturally grounded, and relationally embedded approaches rather than solely service-expansion models within higher education.

Limitations and Future Research

This study is situated within a single faith-based institution in Hawai‘i and reflects the experiences of a relatively small sample. While grounded theory does not seek statistical generalizability, future research should examine relational risk management across diverse institutional contexts and NHPI subgroups. Longitudinal research may further illuminate how help-seeking processes evolve over time, particularly given the cyclical and ongoing nature of relational risk management identified in this study.

Conclusion

This study contributes an Indigenous, process-oriented understanding of help-seeking among Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander college students by conceptualizing help-seeking as relational risk management. Rather than framing delayed help-seeking as avoidance, stigma, or individual deficit, the findings demonstrate that students engage in ongoing relational assessments shaped by cultural obligations, family responsibilities, and commitments to collective wellbeing. Participants navigated help-seeking through considerations of trust, dignity, relational safety, and accountability to others, reflecting Indigenous ways of knowing that locate wellbeing within relationships rather than within isolated individuals. In doing so, this study challenges dominant assumptions that help-seeking is primarily an individual behavior and offers a more culturally grounded understanding of how support is sought and sustained.

The findings further highlight the importance of developing relationally embedded approaches to student support within Indigenous-serving higher education contexts. Faculty members, mentors, peers, and trusted community members emerged as critical relational pathways through which support became accessible, meaningful, and culturally safe. By centering Indigenous voices and lived experiences, this study underscores the need for institutions to move beyond service-expansion models and toward structures of care grounded in relationship, reciprocity, and collective responsibility. Ultimately, this research contributes to a growing body of Indigenous scholarship that recognizes help-seeking as a relational practice through which students sustain wellbeing, honor cultural commitments, and maintain connections to family, community, and lāhui.

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