Language Learning For Workforce Needs

We need people who can:

- provide interpreters to service the court and medical systems
- train teachers and implement foreign and heritage language early education
- provide bilinguals for supervisory positions in our companies and State agencies
- serve as flight attendants and customer service representatives

The above constitutes only part of the list that the 50 leaders from the business, education, and government sectors provided at the Hawai‘i Language Summit last March. The summit was part of the state-wide Hawai‘i Language Roadmap Initiative (HRMI), co-sponsored by the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa and The Language Flagship, a federally-funded program established to shape advanced language education. The initiative recognizes the importance of promoting competency in critical world languages such as Chinese and Korean, as well as in languages of the Pacific Islands and Asia that Hawai‘i is so rich in.

Hawai‘i is among a leading group of six states that is committed to addressing the specific language needs of their respective communities. The primary goal of the HRMI is to help create an educational environment in Hawai‘i that prepares its workforce for the challenges of an ethnically and linguistically diverse global economy by providing the prerequisites for participation in this economy—high levels of proficiency in world languages and a sophisticated understanding of world cultures.

In preparation for the summit, University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa faculty produced a discussion paper outlining economic and demographic data useful to set the context for workforce development. The authors included results from interviews with a wide range of government, non-government organizations, and business representatives. A second report outlined key aspects of how a linguistically and interculturally competent workforce would result in actual economic gains for the State of Hawai‘i. The report estimates the rate of return for investment in language education at between 5% and 14%.

In May of 2013, working groups were formed to develop initiatives and projects to address the short-, mid-, and long-term language needs of the State. These ideas will be incorporated into the final phase of the Hawai‘i Language Roadmap Initiative and provide strategies and specific actions to improve language and cultural education.

For more information on HRMI, visit http://nflrc.hawaii.edu/languageroadmap/

Governor Neil Abercrombie, College of Languages, Linguistics, and Literature Dean Robert Bley-Vroman, and Senator Daniel Akaka attended the summit in March. (Jennifer Crites photo)