Congratulations, Graduates!

By Dr. Richard Kelley

For my family and, no doubt, for many other members of our ‘ohana, June has been particularly busy because of a number of school graduations to celebrate. There are ceremonies and parties to attend, funny-looking caps to admire, and speeches to be uplifted by – or sleep through. However, for me, graduations also bring to mind how much and how fast educational systems and the business of education are changing not only in our own country, but around the world.

I have long had a deep interest in both public and private education. In Hawai‘i, I worked with the state Department of Education to develop performance standards for public school grades 1 through 12 and served as a trustee for Punahou School, a private school, for many years. After moving to Colorado, I served several terms as a trustee for Kent Denver School. Currently, I am a trustee at the University of Denver.

To provide perspective on my personal timeframe, consider that I became a trustee at Punahou School shortly after its best-known alumnus, Barack Obama, graduated in 1979. In those years, the school’s business office did most of its accounting by pencil on paper spreadsheets. Computers were not introduced to Punahou or most other U.S. educational institutions until the mid-1980s, and Internet access did not come until the mid-1990s.

Since then, while computers and the Internet have changed education dramatically, there is every reason to expect that the next decade or two will bring even greater changes at speeds that Captain Kirk of Star Trek might call “Warp Six.” The changes that have already taken place required significant investment, revision of programs, teaching technique, and revision of mission and time frames too. The changes we can look forward to will require more of the same – much more!

The good news is that a high-quality education at almost any level can be obtained anywhere on earth and even into space. The Khan Academy, based in California, provides free courses, from grade 1 to college level, in a wide range of subjects. With Stanford Medical School, the Brookings Institution, the Museum of Modern Art and many other outstanding institutions continually adding more courses to the Khan Academy’s offerings, the choices are immense. And, believe it or not, it’s all free.

My granddaughter Nani Naish, Bitsy Kelley’s eldest daughter, is using Khan Academy materials to enrich the elementary school math courses she is teaching this summer.

Many commercial, for-profit educational institutions have developed their own e-classes.
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Dr. Chuck Kelley, Jean Rolles, Bitsy Kelley, Linda Jane Kelley, Jenny Kelley and Kathy Carey

Colleen Heyer, Kelley Heyer, Maile Heyer and Judd Klinger

Pua Black

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for delivery on the Internet and have added online discussions and coordination, making it possible for students anywhere in the world to get specialty training or a college degree. This has been a wonderful opportunity for members of our armed services stationed around the world, even on ships at sea.

It is also wonderful for my daughter Linda Jane Kelley. Earlier in life, she delayed her college plans to raise a family and pursue a career with Ironman, the company that produces Triathlon events around the world. At age 50, she decided to get her college degree and seek new challenges and opportunities. The University of Phoenix, a for-profit institution with 112 campuses and 100 degree programs, available either in the classroom or online, made it possible for Linda to complete her college studies at age 54 without having to relocate to a city with a university. At her graduation ceremony last Sunday at Honolulu’s Blaisdell Center, many members of the Kelley family were present to celebrate as she received her diploma, dressed in the traditional cap and gown, along with several hundred other students.

But our family has had more graduations to celebrate this year. My granddaughter Kelley Heyer, Colleen Heyer’s eldest daughter, received her high school diploma from Punahou School. In addition, Kelley’s class chose her to deliver a speech at Baccalaureate ceremonies. It was fantastic!

My granddaughter Pua Black, also Bitsy Kelley’s daughter, will receive her bachelor’s degree in psychology from Oregon State University this weekend.

All the educational institutions mentioned above, as well as the vast majority of educational institutions around the world, are coming to grips with the need for a thorough restructuring of the traditional ways students are taught.

The cost of university tuition, room and board has risen nearly three times faster than the general level of inflation in the U.S. over the past three decades. These costs now exceed $50,000 a year at many universities, causing many graduates to enter the workforce under a crippling burden of debt. As a result, many colleges and universities are considering or have implemented a number of initiatives such as:

• Expanding the use of online courses.
• Reducing the number of professors and turning some teaching jobs over to lower-paid instructors.
• Re-evaluating policies on teachers’ tenure, the sacred cow of education.
• Examining the need for and the cost of classrooms, offices and other campus facilities.
• Considering the use of competency assessments to award degrees as opposed to seat-time credit hours.

Advocates claim this reduces costs, shortens time required to graduate and provides a better measure of student learning.

Yet, in this ever-more-complicated and challenging world, the need for high-quality education is greater than ever and will continue growing for the foreseeable future.

Congratulations to all of this year’s graduates, wherever you are! We in the older generations know the issues. Now it is up to your generation to join us in solving them.

Good luck!