



HIGHLIGHTING STRATEGIES FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

California's new Calbright College faces questions weeks before opening

President says new community college will be ready for students Oct. 1.

ADULT EDUCATION

AUGUST 6, 2019

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California's new online community college officially starts in eight weeks but it has yet to have a formal application for students or identify employers that will host its three new industry-certified programs.

But Calbright College's new president, Heather Hiles, said the institution is on track to meet those goals by its Oct. 1 start date.

"This is not meant to be the fully loaded, fully technologized program," Hiles said. "We're right on schedule for all the things we need to set up our training programs."

With this first group of students, Hiles said the online community college is starting small just as any other startup would. Calbright officials will focus on increasing enrollment once they figure out what technology works and

doesn't work for the college's target group of adult learners, she said. They've set a goal of launching with no more than 400 students who would learn skills online and in the workplace.

So far, about 160 prospective students have [filled out a form](#) on the Calbright website expressing interest, said Taylor Huckaby, the college's communications director.

He said the college has not yet followed up with those people. It's unclear how many students will enroll, but as an open-access institution, the college would select almost any applicant until it meets its initial enrollment limit.

Hiles said plenty of people are interested in attending the college, but beyond news stories, officials haven't officially marketed or recruited students.

The college's pool of applicants includes more than 8 million Californians who work in low-paying jobs, she said. "I'm meeting people every day who are struggling and who want better jobs and opportunities," Hiles said.

Hiles said the college is hiring instructors and recruiting coaches and faculty for students. But officials could not say how many instructors had been hired. Huckaby said the jobs are being posted on the community college system's online registry.

Some of the instructors are coming from other community colleges in the state, Hiles said.

Calbright is receiving \$20 million annually for operating costs from the state, in addition to \$100 million in startup costs to be spent over seven years. Students are not expected to pay tuition.

The online community college began as a pet project of former Gov. Jerry Brown and was funded by the Legislature last year in an effort to improve the workforce prospects of 8 million so-called "stranded" Californians who are underemployed, working multiple part-time jobs or stuck in jobs that don't pay living wages. The target group is adults between 25 and 34.

But questions are surfacing from two faculty groups over whether the college's offerings are truly unique.

The community colleges' Academic Senate sent a letter to the system's board of trustees Monday questioning if Calbright's proposed associate degree violates the law by duplicating existing programs within the system and because the degree is not tied to a specific major.

California Federation of Teachers, the union representing 30,000 community college employees, including many faculty members, has been opposed to the controversial online college since Brown first proposed it. Last month the union also sent a [letter](#) to the community colleges' board of governors questioning whether Calbright was meeting the goals set by the legislature. The group threatened a lawsuit if the online college failed to immediately meet the goals.

"They may be ready for a limited number of students but how much money do we put toward a small number of students," said Jeff Freitas, president of the California Federation of Teachers, a collection of teachers' unions. "Wouldn't that money have been better served in our current college system?"

The state required Calbright to submit a [report](#) detailing how it had begun to meet certain milestones by July 1, which included recruiting students, developing courses and an accreditation plan. The report was presented to the board by that July deadline and given to the state Thursday, Huckaby said.

While the state does ask that Calbright officials define goals and map out specific policies for students and staff, "we question whether their full report is meeting all of these," Freitas said. He said union officials have not yet reviewed the report to determine whether Calbright is meeting the law.

The report, obtained by EdSource, explains that Calbright officials have been in contact with regional and national accreditors, describes the program path for each certificate students can receive from registration to job placement and includes policies such as a code of ethics and employee discipline.

CFT also claims Calbright is violating the state's education law by duplicating programs offered at other local community colleges.

"If it makes a student choose between a college in their own county where they're supposed to go versus the online college then that's competition to me," Freitas said.

Calbright will open with three programs offering industry certifications in cybersecurity, Information Technology and medical coding. CFT researchers found at least 15 examples of these programs in other community college districts.

But Hiles said Calbright's programs are unlike anything the colleges offer.

"Medical coding and cybersecurity on its face do sound similar," Hiles said. "But when you look at the training programs we're creating, we focus on specific jobs," Hiles said.

The proposed Associate in General Studies degree from Calbright doesn't duplicate what the colleges currently offer because it's not designed for transfer to a four-year college or university, according to Calbright's milestone report.

"We absolutely want learners interested in Calbright to make the judgment that this is the right program for them," she said. "If they want a traditional associate degree from other community colleges we support that."

The Calbright courses will be hybrids, of a sort, with a mixture of online and on-the-job training, said Huckaby. Although Calbright's main offices are based in Oakland, there won't be a physical location anywhere for students to attend. And because these are competency-based programs, they will be self-paced, so students can take as much time as they need to finish.

"You are actually learning specific skills for employers who need specific software," she said. "We will have the competencies for those jobs and none of the colleges do that."

Competency-based education gives students credit for the skills they've previously learned on the job. If students don't have those skills, then they take the courses to learn what they are missing. Students have to show they've mastered the competency rather than complete a certain number of hours or achieve a grade.

"Most people don't understand what we're doing because the jobs already exist," Hiles said. "In most cases, the hard-skill competencies already exist." Calbright will also provide coaching and life skills for people who are working but want to earn more money or advance up the career ladder, she said.

Calbright officials have been in talks with labor organizations such as the Service Employees International Union, SEIU, to market Calbright to its 700,000 members. But negotiations between Calbright and SEIU are in an early stage.

"At this point, we don't have a formal partnership with any organization," Huckaby said. "Despite being in such early stages, we're looking forward to working closely with any partners who would be willing to collaborate."

"We believe there is a need for an alternative to traditional academia or expensive for-profit education that meets workers where they are regardless of race, industry or income level," said Mike Roth, a spokesperson for SEIU California, in a statement.

The college is also applying for regional accreditation from the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges, which accredits all of the other 114 community colleges in the state, Huckaby said. Calbright will need that accreditation because it is legally required to offer at least one associate degree program. The legislature is giving the new college until April 2022 to be pre-accredited or become a candidate for accreditation. The college must get full accreditation by 2025.

Richard Winn, president of the accrediting commission, said it's hard to determine how long the accreditation process will take for an institution such

as Calbright. The accreditor will visit Calbright's offices to examine the curriculum and operations, he said.

"The question mostly is how quickly can they achieve their goal and pick up and run with students enrolled," he said.

The college will also pursue national accreditation from the Distance Education Accrediting Commission, or DEAC, officials said.

"For an institution such as Calbright seeking to receive accreditation for certificate programs in entry-level course work, we don't expect it will take very long to review industry-standard curriculum if the right people are in place with experience," said Leah Matthews, executive director of DEAC. "It can take as little as 18 months, but that's when there is a very solid foundation in place."

Matthews said Calbright officials have been in contact with DEAC but have not started the process for accreditation.

"Expectations are high for Calbright," she said. "But they have a deep bench of people with experience in working with accreditation."

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