

INSIDE HIGHER ED

Crunch Time for Calbright

California's new online-only community college grabbed headlines again with its CEO's departure. While some see the college as a doomed venture, others say it's too soon to pass judgment.

By [Madeline St. Amour](#)

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Some observers are raising red flags after the [unexpected departure](#) of the president and CEO of California's new online-only community college. But

others chalk it up to the normal growing pains associated with a start-up and say it's too soon to judge whether the college will be successful.

Calbright College, an initiative started by Jerry Brown, California's former governor, opened its programs to students in October. It's aimed at adult learners who don't have degrees and are underemployed. Calbright is completely online, statewide and competency-based. It doesn't offer degrees but instead features certificates based on skills that could lead to middle-income jobs.

Its first leader, **Heather Hiles**, announced this week that she will step down in March after a year on the job. A statement from Hiles said she plans to return to previous ventures now that Calbright is operational.

The news has raised some eyebrows and reignited the discussion of whether the college can be successful.

"Our legislative mandate remains that we have to serve these students, and that's what brings everyone to work every day," said Taylor Huckaby, a spokesman for Calbright. "We'll roll with the punches."

'I Don't Think We Can Wait'

So far, 464 students are enrolled in what Calbright calls its "beta cohort," which includes three programs. In each track, students enroll in college skills courses first before moving on to a "core curriculum" designed for the specific program. So far, 22 students have enrolled in the core curriculum portion, which the college's three deans are teaching as it works toward hiring faculty members.

Huckaby said they are “comfortable” with the number of enrolled students because Calbright is still hiring faculty and establishing partnerships with businesses.

The college was pushed to open before getting these pieces in place because of legislative deadlines, Huckaby said. The state required it to start programs by the fourth quarter of 2019.

Right now is “very much a research and development phase,” Huckaby said. After the beta phase, he said, the college will work under its intended model. Programs would start with an employer agreement. The college would create a curriculum based on the workforce demands for that employer, which would then offer a set number of jobs and apprenticeships to the students who graduate.

The college has had more than 100 meetings with potential employers since last summer, Huckaby said, but it’s not ready to announce any partnerships. Before the programs even opened, **critics have argued** that the new college is unnecessary.

“We have existing colleges that do all these same programs,” said Evan Hawkins, executive director of the Faculty Association of California Community Colleges.

Hawkins also finds the college’s inherent model “flawed.” Calbright plans to work with employers to train people in relevant skills. It would charge employers to train employees, reducing its reliance on taxpayer money, which Hawkins said is “incredibly problematic” for a public institution.

“From the very beginning, you have the idea of a start-up as opposed to a college,” he said.

Hawkins and the faculty union believe the state’s community colleges should be fully funded, as they are now the lowest funded of all institution types in the state. With more state support, the colleges could focus on similar programs he believes would be more effective locally than statewide.

“I think faculty are pretty frustrated,” he said. “This is one thing that all faculty are in agreement on -- that this is really a waste of resources.”

Sally Johnstone disagrees.

“What everyone’s saying -- that’s what they want to happen,” said Johnstone, president of the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems and one of the consultants who helped design the Calbright model.

Despite losing Hiles, she said, the college has strong leaders on the ground who are “keeping things rolling.” She believes Calbright is likely to succeed. Johnstone said designers considered several models for the project, including asking existing colleges to use this model, but ultimately decided something new was needed.

“The colleges have not radically rethought what it is that the workplace needs and how could they work with employers in ways that are meaningful for adult learners,” she said, adding that it doesn’t make sense to wait “around to try and get the colleges that now exist to change a whole bunch of what they’re doing within structures and systems that are not conducive to change.”

She added that the “governor didn’t want to wait, because I don’t think we can wait.”

Johnstone also said Calbright is a “threatening model” for traditional academic institutions.

“If it succeeds, it may well challenge the basic tenets of how you do things,” she said, adding that those in higher education now may have their “hearts in the right places,” but they’re operating within a structure that might not be as relevant as it was in the past.

“And that’s scary,” she said.

Still, without substantive changes, Johnstone said, higher education won't be able to serve the population of people that Calbright is trying to help.

Start-Ups Take Time

As for how the college is doing so far, “it is a start-up,” Johnstone said. She compared it to Western Governors University, a nonprofit, private online university founded in 1997 that now enrolls nearly 120,000 students and has 170,000 alumni.

“People in higher education in the western states thought it was the worst idea in the world,” Johnstone said of WGU. “So I’m not surprised to be hearing what I’m hearing about Calbright right now.”

When looking at a [history of WGU](#), some of the similarities are clear. It worked with employers, many in technology, to get funding; few students signed up in the beginning; it took a few years to find a leader who was more permanent; and much of the early news media coverage described it as a doomed venture.

As an outsider looking at Calbright, Scott Pulsipher, WGU's president, said it's too early to judge the college's success.

In WGU's case, it took five years to reach 1,000 students.

"That early phase of any new endeavor like this, that's not some quick turnaround," Pulsipher said.

With any start-up, Pulsipher said, there are two questions to answer: Is the product needed and valuable, and is the entity able to execute the product? Calbright is offering something different in the form of nondegree credentials that focus on workforce needs and provide more flexibility to students.

Now, he said, the college must prove the demand and that it can scale the idea, which will take time.

And, while WGU serves thousands of Californians and has articulation agreements with the state's community colleges, Pulsipher doesn't see Calbright as competition.

"There are far more individuals that need to be served than there is capacity to serve them," he said. "It's bad to see this as a zero-sum game."

An 'Early Experiment'

Some experts have doubts about whether the idea itself can work.

"I'm not sure that only nondegree credentials on their own could sustain a business model for most institutions," said Sean Gallagher, executive director

of the Center for the Future of Higher Education and Talent Strategy at Northeastern University. “You’d have to be operating at a very large scale.” Because the state of California is large, it does provide that opportunity. But Gallagher said Calbright may struggle to convince enough students to buy in to the idea.

Calbright’s intended targets are less likely to enroll in online programs, Gallagher said. Adults without degrees tend not to try online higher education as often as do those who hold degrees.

“The comfort with online learning and the means and time to pursue it has been historically greater at higher levels of the job market,” he said. “That means there’s a special challenge, at times, in enrolling students at this level of a program and in certain fields in the online education market.”

Calbright also must grapple with establishing a new brand, which will take time.

But there are advantages to starting anew.

“My sense is that there are aspects of the structure of higher education in California that have, at times, made it difficult to scale online,” Gallagher said.

All of these issues make Calbright an “early experiment” in this field, Gallagher said, though he expects to see more ventures like it.

David Schejbal, vice president and chief of digital learning at Marquette University, also has doubts about the model, particularly its focus on nondegree credentials.

“Degrees are still the coin of the realm,” Schejbal said. “The reality is that we don’t have any kind of common medium the way we do with credit hours and degrees” that allows for easy credit transfer or understanding from employers. While he thinks these new kinds of models are needed for the nation as a whole, getting the public and employers to latch on to the idea is difficult.

To change these perceptions, he said federal Title IV regulations that regulate financial aid funds need to change, too.

Because of the broader shifts needed to make real change, Schejbal said, new ventures should follow the current structure. The experiment won’t change the broader culture, he said. And without that change, the ventures are likely to fail.

“We, as a nation, are not good at education strategy,” he said. “It would be great if we got this one right. The future of the country depends on more educated citizens.”

Read more by [Madeline St. Amour](#)

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