

The Future of Online Education in Increasing Access and Reducing Debt with Aaron Rasmussen

Oakley: Hi, this is Eloy Ortiz, Oakley, Chancellor of the California Community Colleges. And you're listening to another episode of the California community colleges, chancellor's office podcast. Over the last couple of years, the world has been changing for higher education. And that's certainly true here in the California community colleges. Our colleges have had to sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly transition to online education, transition to remote education. And all of our colleges have had to flex a new muscle using digital assets, changing the way that we deliver our education using technology to engage with students. And that's been an important muscle that the California community colleges have had to exercise looking forward. I don't see how our system or any system of higher education can be successful without using that muscle more. Our students are now expecting that kind of engagement. They're expecting that kind of content. They're expecting us to continue to deliver high quality online education.

Oakley: And so that leads me to the topic in my guest today. I'm very proud to have an alum of the California community colleges as our listeners know we have. And as no, we have a great many outstanding individuals that have come through the California community colleges. And so today is no exception to that. So I'm very proud to have our special guest. His name is Aaron Rasmussen. He is the CEO and founder of outlier.org. And we'll talk more about outlier. The outlier is a company that's creating some of the world's best online college courses. So we'll get into that a little bit, but let me tell you a little bit more about Aaron. As I mentioned, he's a product at the California community colleges. He attended Diablo Valley College. He went on to earn a bachelor's of arts and computer science and a bachelor's of science in mass communications from Boston University.

Oakley: And by the way, while attending college, he was also a Pell grant recipient. So he knows a little bit about the challenges that our students face. Certainly. And we'll talk more about that. Some more about Aaron. He is also co-founder of masterclass, and I know many of our listeners have come across masterclass there. He served as both the creative director and CTL responsible for the company's aesthetic production process. And technology masterclass has been a phenomenal success. And I know many of you have seen their commercials, but they've had such guests at Serena Williams, Gordon Ramsey, Malcolm Gladwell, and many, many, many other stars and figures in America. So he's seen a lot of success and he's bringing that success to bear for students across the country through outlier.org. So let's jump into the conversation, welcome to the podcast. Aaron, thank you so much for having me Eli.

Oakley: It's great to have you. It's great to have somebody who's doing this work across the country, making it more accessible for students to gain access, but also we're always so proud to have products of the California community colleges. It's great to have you. So let's talk about that experience. First you're California community college experience.

And recently back in 2021, you penned an op-ed for the wall street journal. It was titled community college is the smart choice and you focused on how the stigma of attending community college is so misplaced. That's certainly something that we appreciated reading in the California community colleges. And as I've told you in the past, I'm also product of the California community colleges, but for our listeners, tell us about your experience attending community college and what prompted you to write this op-ed

Rasmussen: Yeah. Uh, great question. And I am, I'm very much a, a proud product of the community college system as well. The first course I took was in Oregon, actually at blue mountain community college mm-hmm <affirmative>, but the majority of my courses were at Diablo valley college. And what's interesting is about eight of my family members attended Diablo Valley College. So wow. The systems treated us very, very well. That's great. One of my favorite things is my sister, my mom, and I all took the same astronomy class. <laugh> at Diablo Valley College by Dr. Castle, and we all loved it. There's a planetarium there, et cetera. It's great. Right. So basically what happened was I graduated high school a little early and went to BU on a Pell grant mm-hmm <affirmative> and realized very quickly that that was simply too expensive, right to afford. And that these community college courses were excellent and they transferred into BU so I took as many classes as I possibly could.

Rasmussen: Mm-hmm <affirmative> at the community college and then transferred them in. And then what prompted me to write that op-ed in the wall street journal, which originally was titled, we need to rethink the stigma attached to community college, something like that, maybe a little gentler, right? It was actually a TikTok <laugh> that I did. So I, for fun posts on my art to TikTok, I do about a video a month mm-hmm <affirmative> and I got this question about how did you learn how to do what you do? You know, these younger people watching my TikToks, you know, saw that I was doing sculpting and, you know, cutting metal and then also graphic design and 3D design. And mm-hmm, <affirmative> all these different things. And I thought that's a great question to try to answer. So I made this little video about how did I go for growing up 12 miles outside of town of 600 people to knowing how to do all of this stuff. Mm-hmm <affirmative> and I just kind of told the story of, you know, going to BU and taking classes at community college, et cetera. Co-founding masterclass. I had a robotics company and now outlier all this stuff. Right. But the thing that people responded to was it's okay to go to community college. <laugh> right. So I saw these comments and it was really fascinating because other founders that must have been watching the TikTok as well, we're jumping in and saying, I'm the CEO of wherever. And I also went to community college.

Oakley: <laugh> that's great.

Rasmussen: So that it became this discussion and the comments about that doesn't look bad to these like big private universities, et cetera. It doesn't look bad to employers. This is news to us. So then I talked to a few students and it was totally fascinating. I talked to this one young man who told me that he didn't know community college was real college <laugh> geez, until junior year of his bachelor's degree. And he keep in mind, he's like getting a good degree. He thought it was some sort of remedial school. Right. So that's what inspired me to write that article is I just, you know, I, I called the

community college system, the hidden gem of the American educational system, because I don't know why it's hidden. Right. You know, I don't know why it ended up with this stigma, but it did. And we need to lose that because everyone's concerned about the cost of college. Mm-hmm, <affirmative>, it's out of control, you know, what's super affordable community college, you

Oakley: Know, that's

Rasmussen: Right. You know, what has really,

Oakley: Especially in California,

Rasmussen: Especially in California, you know, who had incredibly high quality professors community college, right. When we went to make the calculus course for Outlier, I actually tried to look up my DVC <laugh> college calculus professor, because she was just phenomenal. Right. And unfortunately, she'd retired many years before it turned out. I was a little older than I thought I was.

Oakley: That happens to all of us. It

Rasmussen: Happens to all of us, but yeah. And then it was really fascinating writing that article because then the Wall Street Journal actually published a number of letters from readers. Mm-hmm, <affirmative> reinforcing it, you know, kind of the next week's issue, just saying, Hey, I really appreciate this. And I got a lot of great messages from people as well, including students mm-hmm <affirmative>. And I went back and I revisited some of those and told them, Hey, for employers like me, because it's fun. I've been a student a lot. I've been an employer a lot. Now in many ways, I'm an educator. Right. I can say with confidence that I love seeing community college on a resume mm-hmm <affirmative>, you know what I mean? That shows this just ability to make your own path. Right. And what more do you want in a great employee and team member than somebody that can figure out their own path? So, yeah, that's what inspired that article. And I think I mentioned there too, I also went to Santa Monica College, right. For just one class though. That was more, I was like in my mid twenties and sad after a breakup. And I wanted to just go do some art classes. And I think Arnold Schwarzenegger went to SMC too.

Oakley: So I was gonna say, you're in good company. I am. Well, our former governor and the Terminator is an SMC product as well.

Rasmussen: That's amazing.

Oakley: Well, you're in good company. And I think when people take a step back to realize just how many successful people and, you know, we in California can count our own, but they're all across the country. We tend to focus on the big names, the stars, you know, the Arnold Schwarzeneggers of the world, the Tom Hanks, the George Lucas. But you also have the president of USC. Carol Folt went to community college. I went to community college. So you see, once you pull the curtain back, just how many people

been so successful. And of course I'm fortunate enough to have four kids. They've all gone to community college and they're all doing all right. So I think if there's anything that your interview shows is that it is a great place to get your education and no one should ever regret having the opportunity to go to community college. So appreciate you sharing that story really appreciate you penning that up at it. Really got people talking and it always helps us to get the word out. So from that experience, how did that inform what you're doing today? I mean, you sort of got into a high quality, very slick, well produced education materials, you know, sort of on the masterclass side. And now you're over doing outlier. What is motivating you to do this work?

Rasmussen: Great question. I mean, I'm kind of a perpetual student. I get a lot of intrinsic value out of learning, but then I also like to turn around and apply it very quickly. Mm-hmm <affirmative> so that's something that I'll probably love for the rest of my life. And I love to share that with people, you know, I definitely wish that everyone had the same relationship to learning. And I think a lot of people have kind of unnecessarily struggled with it. Mm-hmm <affirmative> and can very much erroneously think there, for example, not good at math, right? When really, maybe they weren't in a good situation where they had the teacher that meshed with them. There's a reason we filmed the calculus class three times with three different teachers. <laugh> is you can find the teacher that meshes with your style. We also did three different applied subjects.

Rasmussen: You know, one sort of a calculus is applied to social science. Mm-hmm <affirmative> one is we call it kind of the best of which is like all the classic examples and, you know, physics and baseball, et cetera. And the third we call fast track calculus. That's John R Schley's a former NFL player for the Ravens and, uh, PhD from MIT. And he teaches math sort of in the language of math mm-hmm <affirmative> and it's just clear, concise, and right to the point. And we find different students prefer different styles, right? And some students prefer different styles for different units. Right? You might have been sick the one day that we talked about, you know, why intercepts in high school mm-hmm <affirmative> and then suddenly you're staring at this thing, having no clue what they're talking about. And you need a little bit of a longer explanation, right?

Rasmussen: So one experience from the California community college system, that informed it was the understanding of just the transfer of credits mm-hmm and the fact that those classes, it wasn't just about offsetting the cost at BU they prepared me well for my future courses at BU I felt no deficit whatsoever in going from a DVC calculus course, right into discrete mathematics and, and everywhere I needed to go at BU mm-hmm <affirmative> right. So this just created a question mark in me, this wasn't an idea at the time. It was just, huh. That's interesting. Mm-hmm <affirmative> the second part was I wanted to take physics at DVC so badly. I wanted to take physics ever since I was in high school and every summer I would go, I would sit in the physics class for the first week and it was always full. And they'd say, well, if enough people drop, you can be in it.

Rasmussen: And I never got in, you know, <laugh> and this is to your point with sort of the online future of community colleges. There's this incredible resource there mm-hmm <affirmative>, but opening up more broadly is going to be incredibly important. Now, with Outlier, obviously we're trying to create called a national option for this mm-hmm

<affirmative>. So everyone has the option. Nobody has to deal with the, not getting into physics, but I think on the local level for community colleges, it's also just a good reason for them to be expanding their offerings into the online space to serve more students. Right? Because ultimately our goal at Outlier is increase access to high quality education and reduce student debt. Mm-hmm <affirmative>, that's what community colleges do already. Right. You know, which is fantastic. We're just trying to provide that option. Mm-hmm <affirmative> for as many people as possible, not just in the U.S., but worldwide.

Oakley: So let's dive into Outlier a little bit more, especially for our listeners who may have been living under a rock lately. Haven't visited Outlier.org. So how are you organized? What is the future of outlier in your mind? What do you want to do? If a student comes on and wants to take a course, what should they expect? And do you gain credit from your courses? How does that work

Rasmussen: Have great questions in all? It turns out difficult things to solve that we've fortunately made it through. Good. So Outlier.org has a partnership with the university of Pittsburgh mm-hmm <affirmative> and Pittsburgh actually provides oversight on our course creation and the running of our courses, our assessments, et cetera. And they are the ones that provide credits for the courses. So each course gives you three credits from the University of Pittsburgh, these credits. And we've asked students where have these transferred, right? Mm-hmm <affirmative>, that's not something we can kind of top down, go for so we go bottom up. We talk to the students, they've transferred to Harvard, NYU, Penn, Georgetown, right? Community colleges, state schools, public schools. Mm-hmm, <affirmative> far more places than I think we even expected. Mm-hmm <affirmative> when we first did this, this partnership in this, you know, adventure together. So all of our courses, except one, provide credits, we now have a free college success course.

Rasmussen: Mm-hmm <affirmative>, which is for, you know, students that are first generation students, or maybe from a low income background, like myself, mm-hmm <affirmative> who need to understand the hidden curriculum. What do you do about office hours and one-on-one and, and all sorts of things. Right? So then when a student comes into Outlier, it is open access mm-hmm <affirmative>. So you do need to take a pretest for calculus. Our number one goal is making students successful. And that means we need to make sure they're prepared mm-hmm <affirmative>. So we don't want somebody coming into calculus, wrecking their confidence because they didn't have an enough algebra before. So we make you take a test before you can even buy the class. Mm-hmm <affirmative> hardest way to buy anything, right? You, you gotta take algebra to buy this car, you know <laugh> so they come in, they take the test or they just go directly into the class and a new cohort starts every two weeks.

Rasmussen: So it's super straightforward. It's semi self-directed. So you're not just kind of thrown in and hey, good luck. I hope you finish it in 14 weeks. You are in with a cohort of other students that you can chat with. Mm-hmm <affirmative> you have access to about a third of the class at the time. Right. But we stay up on you. If you, uh, miss one of your quizzes, we're gonna reach out and talk to you. Now, we also provide student support

and student success resources mm-hmm <affirmative> so you can get one on one tutoring, for example, for math. Great. So this provides what we've found to be a very successful, scalable online solution mm-hmm <affirmative> and our completion and passing with credit rates are equivalent to in-person courses. And as far as we know, that's the first time that's ever happened.

Oakley: Nope. That's great to hear, you know, I think anyone who looks at one of your courses, certainly from my perspective, what I was struck by is how cleanly produced it is. How very, in some ways it sort of has this Hollywood look very well produced. Is that something you've done intentionally? Or is that something that sort of just has happened?

Rasmussen: It's a combination of things. So we very intentionally produced these courses at a super high quality mm-hmm <affirmative> one, because we want the students to feel the prestige of an online course mm-hmm <affirmative> and I think it was easy for students to look at an online course. That's filmed with sort of a webcam and think is this real college, right? The answer is, yes, it is real college. You know, that is a great instructor. They just happen to be on a webcam. Mm-hmm <affirmative> the second part of that though, is I like to say that beauty is crystallized attention. So we're social animals. I'm in New York right now, traveling if I'm on the street and I see everybody looking in a direction, I will look in that direction. Mm-hmm, <affirmative>, I'm wired to do that. Is it food? Is it danger? Is it something exciting?

Rasmussen: Beauty is a way of saying someone focused on this mm-hmm <affirmative> someone cared about it. Essentially, a group of people has looked at this, so it's not just sort of a flashy aspect of our advertising, which it is, right. Like we really try to provide that motivation and emotionality in getting through these courses. Mm-hmm <affirmative> but it's also about getting the actual learning into the student because they want to look. They want to see these really charismatic instructors do their work right now. What I should mention is a lot of what we do at Outlier is actually not video. About, you know, 60 to 70% of the course is interactive learning. Mm-hmm <affirmative> active learning, guesswork, dynamically, generated problem sets, et cetera. Right. And that all comes together and is all based on all this just great educational psychology research that we discovered mm-hmm <affirmative> by discovered. I mean, it had existed for 50 years and you know, not many people had adopted it and we just talked to the best scientists out there and said, you know what moves the needle mm-hmm <affirmative> and we created a custom learning management system from scratch. So we could take advantage of all of that great research those out

Oakley: There. So if somebody asked you the questions, how is Outlier different than say Coursera or Skillshare or something like that? How would you answer that question?

Rasmussen: Yeah. So I love Coursera. Um, mm-hmm <affirmative> I love taking the courses on there in general. They're not for credit, like what we mm-hmm <affirmative> right. So even if you have a good experience, you can't prove that to anyone mm-hmm <affirmative>. So we're one of the few places you can get high quality college credit. Secondly, we're full college classes. Mm-hmm <affirmative> frequently on a Coursera or Skillshare. Those

are much more short form classes. Right. Which is great for like a casual learner. But you know, our students, we always talk about like the biggest nightmare would be one of our students goes from our calculus one class to a calculus two class, uh, at another institution and isn't prepared <laugh> right. So we, we spend a lot of time making sure this is a fully scaffolded, you know, well-aligned learning outcomes based course. Right. And that's the primary difference. There is, these are in many ways, a traditional college course in the density and depth of information. Mm-hmm <affirmative> whereas much of what's out there.

Oakley: Right. So it's real college.

Rasmussen: <laugh> it's it's real college. Exactly.

Oakley: <laugh> so let me ask you this. Many of our listeners are from community colleges here in California, across the country. Should they think of Outlier as a potential partner? And how would they partner with Outlier? Should they see them as a competitor? How would you describe outlier to folks in community college or a regional public university?

Rasmussen: Yeah. Great question. We always think of Outlier as a pathway. Mm-hmm <affirmative> our job is to get students started in college and then send them on to an institution to finish their degree mm-hmm <affirmative> or what have you. So, you know, looking at Outlier from the perspective of a community college in California, for example, I would look at it two ways, one as a source of highly qualified students. So come to us, right? We have what's called this OnRamp network. If I were a community college in California, I would look at Outlier in two ways, one as a source of highly qualified, excellent students from a diverse set of backgrounds. Mm-hmm <affirmative> and the easiest way to get access to those students is call us up. <laugh> there is an email on the website mm-hmm <affirmative> and you guarantee credit transfer into your community college.

Rasmussen: These are obviously super transferable classes. You would take them anyways. Mm-hmm <affirmative>. But what that does for us is it lets us tell our students, if you take a class here, this'll definitely transfer. If you can get into, you know, whatever Santa Monica Community College, Diablo Valley College, et cetera, mm-hmm <affirmative> so that's one way to do it is just think of us as like a great source of students. We want our students to go to you. We want them to be successful, right? We don't want our students to end up in a situation where they've taken a few classes and that's it mm-hmm <affirmative> unless that's exactly what they're looking for. Right? The second way I look at it is if a school doesn't have online capabilities in the way that they want, and they want essentially just to use our high quality online content mm-hmm <affirmative> to teach their students and we can do it with assessments and everything.

Rasmussen: Mm-hmm <affirmative> we have a product called Studio, which allows schools to do this. We have a few schools out there that are using it. And the idea is one, you can just send your students to us. Mm-hmm <affirmative> like, if you don't have enough students, like my Physics problem, right? So there's like two students in this one class it's me and this one other kid, right. That couldn't get into the class. Now it makes no

sense for DVC to start another section for the two of us. So send the students to us, right. We'll teach them and then send them back with credits. And that way your students can stay on track, right? So one is as an educational resource for expanding your catalog mm-hmm <affirmative> and expanding the number of sections and the reach that you can have for your students. And the other way is a source of new students that you might not have ordinarily had and would be excited to have in your system.

Oakley: Well, that's great to hear, and I appreciate you articulating that. I mean, you know, some people may ask me, well, why am I having a guest who may be considered a competitor to our colleges? But the way I see it is we learn from each other. We're a network of educators and you know, the work that you're doing in at Outlier, it's impressive. So I think it's worth noting and worth taking a look at and seeing how we can be pushed by the work that you're doing. So I appreciate you telling us about Outlier. So as we begin to close, you know, you've been a student in the California community colleges, you've attended a well-known university. You are creating content now, where do you see higher education going? And how are you trying to impact the future of higher education?

Rasmussen: Yeah. Where is this all going? We're at a very interesting moment in higher education. Mm-hmm <affirmative> and the future has a lot of different diverse offerings for students. There's no way around that. And that's not a bad thing. Mm-hmm, <affirmative>, we're going to see augmented associate style degrees, right? Like what the Georgia system is trying to do with nexus degrees, where, hey, maybe two years of an associates, plus a couple more professionally focused courses like cybersecurity mm-hmm <affirmative> can send people from an associates right into the workforce in sort of higher numbers than we already do with that. Mm-hmm <affirmative> I think we'll see, you know, a lot of boot camps, a lot of kind of trade school options. And I think that this is all fantastic. Part of, one of my main desires in all of this is for a liberal arts education to be affordable.

Rasmussen: And for that style of education to survive, I got a huge amount of benefit from, you know, four years of classes, right? Albeit kind of scattered across the country in different institutions, et cetera. But I think it helped me one, be a more creative person. Mm-hmm <affirmative> two, understand other people's perspective better. And sort of what more do you want as a citizen of the world than to understand people's perspective. And I think the problem that we're having right now is, you know, I saw a study a little while ago that by 2025, the University of Chicago will be a hundred thousand dollars a year for undergrads.

Oakley: Oh my goodness.

Rasmussen: Now I used to always tell students to go get a history degree, 'cause I love hiring people with history degrees. Mm-hmm <affirmative> I don't think I can tell somebody to get a \$400,000 history degree. I don't think that's responsible with me. No, that's not necessary. Now there are better ways to do it. The current better way to do it, that I would say is go to community college for two years than finish your next two years at a

bachelor's degree. Mm-hmm <affirmative> we are trying to make that an option for people everywhere who might not be able to go for example, to a community college in their area, they're sort of dead zones in that or somebody that maybe can't get every course they need at a community college, et cetera. Right. So that's my ultimate hope is can we contribute mm-hmm <affirmative> to perpetuating the university system for lack of a better word. You know, it's funny. I, I think some people look at us and say, oh no, you know, are they trying to replace this? The answer is no, we love this mm-hmm <affirmative> this system, this idea of people teaching people, put a person on the moon, right. That's pretty good. That is a great place to start mm-hmm <affirmative> now let's figure out how to make it more accessible, more efficient and more cost effective.

Oakley: Right? I think that's a perfect way to close our podcast. That's exactly what we all wanna see as well, you know, greater access, democratize higher education and make this learning available to as many people as possible. So really appreciate you taking the time Erin to come on the podcast. It's great to hear your story. Always great to have product of the California community colleges. So thank you for coming on.

Rasmussen: Thank you so much for having me.

Oakley: All right. Well there you have it. You've been listening to Aaron Rasmussen CEO of outlier.org. And this has been another episode of the California community colleges chancellor's office podcast. Thanks for joining us. And we'll be back again soon.

Speaker 3: Be sure to join us for the next California community colleges podcast. This has been a California community colleges presentation.