

July 31 Podcast Transcript

Eloy: 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. Today I'm joined by Heather Hiles, CEO and president of California community colleges newest college, Calbright College.

Heather, welcome to the show.

Heather: Thank you.

Eloy: So, Heather joined Calbright College in February of 2019. She comes to us as both a social entrepreneur, a person who has been engaged with education technology, with supporting the needs of single mothers, with supporting the needs of workers throughout California. So Heather, why don't we just take a little bit of time and tell us a little bit about who you are and what brings you to this work. What was your passion that led you to venture into this brand new college called Calbright and the mission that was created for it to serve?

Heather: Sure. I think the thread that runs through my eclectic career is that I am a social entrepreneur. I like to create solutions that have not yet existed. And I seem to be very compelled by helping people achieve either their academic or their professional goals and dreams.

And so my entrepreneurial side really started with my founding of SF Works, which was a series of employer-driven welfare to work training programs that I built out around the time of welfare reform in the late 1990s when people were put on lifetime limits and needed hard skills and needed access to living wage jobs. So I started SF Works and as I started to get people off welfare into jobs, I realized that they still needed other supports in order to break the cycle of poverty permanently. And that's when I founded Earn, which helps low income people save for assets, their first assets, either home ownership, starting a business or additional education.

And later in my career, I started a company working with foundations to help them improve their impact and build more strategy and have more strategic discipline around the kind of impact they're trying to have and worked with, you know, hundreds of foundations.

And then the last company that I started is called Pathbrite, which was to help people from all walks of life to be able to showcase what they knew and what they had accomplished and achieved either to employers or within the higher ed community in their colleges. And I really believe that people from all walks of life should have access to the best of technology and the best of learning experiences. And so for me, being able to bring cloud-based digital portfolios to students in public institutions who really needed to be able to have the best of technology was a real honor. And so we have about 6 million people in higher ed, primarily using Pathbrite portfolios for life for free.

So those are the kinds of things that drive me. And I did get to spend after I sold my company, a couple of years with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation doing a lot of research around what are the best possibilities and usages of AI and VR and blockchain for educating people who need access to content and information. So now being able to take what I've studied and researched and put it into practice here at Calbright college is very exciting for me.

Eloy: Well, it sounds like you were born to lead this college.

So a little bit of background for our listeners. Calbright College just launched this year. It is enrolling the first cohort of students later this fall, which is very exciting. About a year and a half, almost two years ago, Governor Jerry Brown, who led the state previously, worked with the Chancellor's Office to launch this idea based on certainly his experience in our experience here in the Chancellor's Office, seeing that there were well over 8 million Californians who had nothing more than a high school diploma and seeing the impact that automation was having on those workers, those most vulnerable workers in our workforce who are so important to the economy of California. Having a public online college rather than a for-profit was I think the greatest driver of the creation of Calbright.

So it's wonderful to see this all come to fruition and this is a brand new venture. A lot of people have had questions about Calbright College. What will it look like? How will it educate students? What kind of students will it educate? But from your perspective, will Calbright have faculty? Will it have classified staff like we have in other colleges? How will it be similar? How will it be different?

Heather: Well, we are very unique in the way in which we do, for example, curriculum development because we are building online instruction that is competency-based tied to specific jobs. We will create online assessments and specific competencies, deliver the content for competencies to people online so that they can on a flexible schedule, learn and assess through the competencies prior to going into apprenticeship programs and the rest of our training program. But all along the way, so we're working with employers in their curricula and we need experts in instruction design and curriculum development to translate that into the full learner experience.

And so we are working with already and we'll continue to work with all manner of different types of faculty and instructors to build that content and to deliver it. We don't have the same traditional titles as you would probably find in other community colleges, but every piece of learning and teaching is happening in different ways within our college.

Eloy: And Calbright College is statewide. So I know that's brought up a lot of questions about how will it interact with students who are already attending some community colleges, but isn't your target audience, adult workers who are not accessing the college and is it your goal to increase the number of students enrolled in our system, lead them to gain further and higher level credentials? What are your thoughts about how you see this college evolving?

Heather: Absolutely. Our whole mission and reason for being is that we wanna help underemployed people up-skill and get better jobs with living wages and benefits. And we know over time, people have the ability to earn the most money if they have credentials and degrees today. I don't know if that'll always be the case, but it is the case today. So we wanna do everything to encourage people who have for some reason not completed an AA or another degree in higher education. So we meet a lot of people who initially wanna come into our programs.

Our first target population is people ages 25 to 34. The majority of those are Latin X and single heads of households. So mostly women with one or two children who are the sole breadwinners and caretakers of their household and their families. And oftentimes they have one or two parents as well that they're supporting. And so we wanna help them earn as much money as possible and be successful in that way. A lot of those people also have some

units and credits maybe that they had before, but haven't translated that into an AA.

And so we're trying to partner with all of our other community college brethren and sisters to help people get those credentials. And so we've actually talked to some of our partners about like co-op programs where they can come in to an employer site after hours or on the weekends and provide instruction to help people complete their AAs.

So we need to meet people where they are. If they've already gotten their AAs but they haven't had the job to really show what they can do, we wanna help them get the job. And if they wanna get a degree and now have the confidence to complete that degree, we wanna help them do that. So we just wanna be supportive to them being successful.

Eloy: Right. So another component of Calbright is this innovation lab that was embedded into the creation of the new online college. Now we've heard a lot about innovation in places like Arizona State University, Southern New Hampshire, Bradman, others that are innovating this space. But this is truly unique now to the California community colleges. So how do you see that knowledge that you're going to gain transferring to the other 114 colleges?

Heather: Sure. The good news is that I have built IP from scratch. I have patents around Pathbrite portfolios, and I know what it takes to invest in our own technology stack and to make that accessible and usable by other organizations. And so I have a mindset of how we can build the technology that doesn't yet exist and make sure it's available for free to all of the other community colleges and then could even be licensed by other states or other organizations if they wanted to use the same kinds of processes or technology. It's very important to me that we own and build our own IP so that it belongs to us in the public sector and belongs to our people. That is a an important resource. I think.

Eloy: So Calbright is using the education delivery model called competency-based education, which is very different than our traditional way that we educate in community colleges as well as most public higher ed institutions. We're used to a seat-time method, a credit-hour method. So, thinking about one of your first modules, which is medical coding, how does CBE differ for

that learner in the way you're thinking about how Calbright is going to deliver that?

Heather: Sure. So we are in the final stages of formalizing our partnerships with actual employers. So I can't speak to those directly today. But what I will say is what we've been able to do is look at in-house within hospital actual medical coding jobs and to identify the 30 competencies, both hard skills as well as soft skills like communication and those sorts of skills and break those into very digestible components where someone can have an assessment online and show, "Oh I already have that competency of communication but I need to learn this one."

And they have the ability to demonstrate their capabilities to the employer real time. So if I already have 15 out of the 30 competencies required for the job, I can assess out of those and just learn the ones that I haven't learned yet. So that's why all of the education is self-paced. So I might take six months and you might take one month to learn the same things because you already had the information or knowledge. But then as soon as I complete those competencies, I can go into paid internships or apprenticeships at the job site and show what I already know to the employer. And then I don't become part of a program, I don't become a label or a number of, I become Heather Hiles who shows that I can be a medical coder and I have the ability to work in the obstetrics division or whatever.

Eloy: Sounds very personalized.

Heather: It's very personalized. And I build a relationship because even at the employer site, those are people. They're the managers, they're the mentors, they're people too. And once they know that I'm a person and I can do the job, they want me to be there.

Eloy: So you're being very intentional about bringing in the hiring managers, the employers.

Heather: Yeah. We're even training them how to be good managers and we're actually asking them to be mentors to each of our students one-to-one.

Eloy: So talk a little bit more about what the expectations are for your partners on the employer side. What do you expect from them?

Heather: Sure. So what I've articulated to employers is we're expecting the employers to pay for people to learn their jobs. And to be very specific, we're expecting them to pay \$6,000 per person to go through the competency-based training and the apprenticeship. If the employer then wants to continue to have us do some of the ongoing employer of record type services, post employment, we could do that for another fee for the employers. But up front, we've got the employers investing in Californians to learn the jobs here in California.

And too often I see companies that are outsourcing their best jobs to other places in the country and outside of the country. Too often I see Californians being bypassed and ignored for the same opportunities. And the same companies oftentimes are sitting on billions of dollars of cash and they could be investing them into us and to the workforce of the future. And a lot of the companies are understanding that it's time for them to start investing in us.

Eloy: And labor seems to take a very important role in the conversations that have been happening with Calbright. Some of your labor partners include SEIU-UHW, CSEA, other very well-known labor organizations. How are you integrating the role of Labor into your planning and into your thinking, and how do you see this playing out over time?

Heather: Well, on the front end of our learner experiences and design work, we are in very deep partnership with the unions because it's actually the members of the unions that we're gonna start to serve first. So our first cohort of learners will start the training programs October 1st of this year. And because we have to start small and then scale things, it's important to us that we work with a community of people who wanna co-develop with us so that we can listen and learn from our learners.

And so we're working with the members throughout the state. We're actually very intensively, the rest of this month and the months to come, gonna be spending from the learner perspective, from the coaching perspective, from the IT perspective, we're gonna be getting feedback every day from these learners. Does this work for you or does that work better? What do you think about that?

And then there'll be our first cohort of trainees and a lot of the people, for example at CSEA, they are people who have a community and are in these unions, but they're also the support staff and kind of the lowest on the totem pole of K-12 schools and they don't get invested in professional development. So they might be IT, but they don't get upskilled. And so they want to be up-skilled. They want better jobs. So they're perfect for us. And similarly, with lots of the locals within SEIU, they're asking for opportunities for improving their skills and having better jobs.

Eloy: So let's transition a little bit as we begin to wrap up. Let's talk about the news lately. There has been a lot of talk about employers stepping up to invest in the upskilling of their own workforce. We hear every day news about changes happening because of automation. Changes happening because of the introduction of AI into our lives, into our workforce. And most recently, we've heard about a huge investment from Amazon as well as a recent partnership through Guild Education and several education providers like Brandman and Southern New Hampshire working with Disney, with Walmart, with Discover. So there's a lot of emphasis on upskilling America's workforce.

How do you see Calbright fitting into that? And especially, we have a governor now, Governor Gavin Newsom, who is going to launch his future of work commission. So obviously, this is top of mind to him and his administration. What is building the Calbright platform due for California as we move into this future where both employers and labor organizations are spending a lot of time and money thinking about how to upscale the workforce?

Heather: Yeah. You know, I was in Seattle last week with a very senior executive at Amazon Web Services. And when I told her what we were building, she said, you know, "This is needed everywhere." I said, "Yep, once we build this platform, you know, other states can license it and learn from us." And she said, "No, the whole world needs this platform." I'm like, "Well that's a lot. I don't know." But I do think, which is not unusual for the state of California, I do think we are on the cutting edge of being able to assemble all the right pieces of the technology plus the in-person experiences to lead the way and show a lot of us had to do workforce development from beginning to end properly. And I take that challenge very seriously. I'm very excited

about it. I've only been thinking about it for about 30 years, so that's fine, but...

Eloy: And you're only, what? Thirty-one?

Heather: Well, no. I turned 50. It's fine. But I do think that there is a big opportunity here and it is so heartening to me, it's so exciting to me. Whether I'm with Amazon or Salesforce or Autodesk or other companies, they're coming to us now and saying, "Hey, we realize we've left behind a lot of people and we want to invest in them. We don't know how to do it at scale. We need supports to make it happen. We need you to come to us, you know, in the middle. But here's what we've got." They've got curriculum, they've got the jobs, they know about the job prospects and growth for the future. They also have a lot of them like Amazon, the 700 million is dedicated to existing employees who are in low level jobs and need upskilling. So those are delivery folks. Like my niece, Amber used to be a delivery person there and she couldn't make a living wage just doing that job, but would have loved to have gotten free up-skilling to get promoted within Amazon.

So a lot of companies are realizing that this is the case. Uber has been investing, for example, in getting people their BAs, but now we think it's right for them to also, Uber drivers to get upskilled and get opportunities for better jobs. Whether they're within Uber or beyond Uber, but we think that they have an obligation to people who are driving 12 hours a day, 6 days a week and don't have time or money to do anything else to get more education or more training.

So we know that people have the best opportunities for making the most wages and the best salaries over time when they improve their credentials and they get the best education that they can. Simultaneously, on a parallel track, people need to earn as much as they can today so that they can afford to get more education. And some people get on the wrong side of that cycle and they can't seem to do either. And so we're trying to do the upskilling and the immediate job promotion stuff and work with other community colleges to make sure that people are getting their degrees and credentials and can earn the most they can over time.

Eloy: Right. I think that's a unique part of what you're doing. While we've seen this model in the for-profit industry, certainly with varying results, what

you're doing, and you're doing it as a public institution, transparent and accountable to the people of California, which I'm sure has its challenges, but at the same time creates a platform that is open to the people. So...

Heather: We are accountable to them.

Eloy: You're accountable to them, which is certainly something that I think many states should think about.

As we start to close. There's a lot of talk about these employer investments, a lot of talk about whether or not the same employers should have invested more in paying their employees more. And those are certainly legitimate and the right questions to ask. But given where this economy is going, from your perspective, do you see this need for up-skilling going away anytime soon? Do you see the changes in the economy? What's happening to Amazon, to Walmart and other large employers continuing to grow? What do you see as the future of the workforce and what should workers really think about doing going forward?

Heather: So, starting from the end question first, I think that we all need to be in a mindset and accept that this is a gig-based economy and that we all have to learn new skills every day to stay relevant. And whether you like it or not, I just think that that's reality. My mother had the exact same job for 35 years in the government and I've had like 35 jobs. I mean, it's just changing. And so...

Eloy: This is your last job, right?

Heather: Yes, sure it is. And so I do think that we have to help people be unafraid and believe that they can learn new skills and do new things. And part of it is a lot of us have been told we're not successful if we don't have certain degrees, we don't make a certain salary. And that doesn't mean we don't have all kinds of talents and all kinds of capabilities. So we need to build people's muscle and belief that they can learn new things. And it's just the way of the world. And so that's a lot of what we need to impart upon our learners. And then providing them free access to ongoing and continuing education is the other commitment we need to make. It's great to tell people to learn new stuff, but if people go into debilitating debt in order to get the information, that's not helpful.

So I think that everybody has a role. We in the public sector have a role to provide the information and the content. The employer community has a role in providing the information and investing in the workforce of tomorrow. As you asked, is this going away? No. All jobs are being changed by technology and the nature of almost every job I can think of that's at scale has been changed and is going to continue to change and so we can't just ignore that. We need to address it and embrace it. I think.

Eloy: Right. For me, this leaves me with hope, thinking about not just what Calbright is doing, but all of the 115 colleges in the California community colleges are focused on the needs of Californians and Calbright provides one more tool in the toolbox of the California community colleges and I'm sure what we learned from Calbright will become part of the other 114 and we will continue to do everything we can to serve Californians needs to upscale and continue to be the strong economy that we are. So it does leave me with hope that the California community colleges are innovating, are taking risk, are trying to change the way that we serve and adapt.

So I couldn't be more proud of the work that Calbright is doing. I wanna thank you, Heather, for your work and for your entire team. And it was a pleasure talking with you today.

Heather: Thank you. It was my pleasure.

Eloy: So you've been listening to another edition of the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office Podcast, this is Eloy Ortiz Oakley. I've been joined by the CEO and president of Calbright College, Heather Hiles. Stay tuned for the next episode of the Chancellor's Office Podcast, and we'll be back to you soon.

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