

California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office Podcast Episode 54  
**California Budget Support for California Community Colleges,  
with Ben Chida**

Eloy Ortiz Oakley: Hi. This is Eloy Ortiz Oakley, Chancellor of the California Community Colleges. You're listening to another episode of the California Community College's Chancellor's Office podcast. Today's a very special podcast for me. One because this is going to be my last podcast as Chancellor of the California Community Colleges. It's been a true privilege and honor to work for the California community colleges. And come August 1st, I will get started as president of the College Futures Foundation. So looking forward to that chapter. But as I get ready to close this chapter, we're going to end it with a bang. We're going to talk about Governor Gavin Newsom's higher education agenda. He was recently in Washington, D.C., touting his higher education agenda, touting his education agenda. And so I have a very special guest today who will weigh in on that agenda. Some of you may know that Governor Gavin Newsom announced in May of this year a multiyear roadmap for the California community colleges, which is part of a larger compact for higher education here in California. Very much aligns with the California Community College's Vision for Success, which we've talked about quite a bit on this podcast, and more importantly, or as importantly, is also laid out a very aggressive and important goal for the state of California. He has challenged us in higher education to ensure that 70% of working age Californians by 2030 achieve a postsecondary degree or certificate here in the state of California. Definitely an aggressive and audacious goal. And given that the California community colleges serve the most diverse and largest population of undergraduates in the state of California, it is especially important for our community colleges to engage in this goal and to ensure that California meets this goal. So here with me to talk about the goal, the roadmap for the California community colleges, plans for higher education in general, and to talk about the signing of a very historic budget here in the state of California, particularly for higher education, is Ben Chida. Ben has served as the chief deputy cabinet secretary for the office of Governor Gavin Newsom since January of 2020. Previously served as senior policy advisor for Cradle to Career, the office of the Governor, and prior to joining the Office of governor then was an attorney in international law firm and attorney advisor in the Executive Office of Attorney General, now Vice President Kamala Harris and a judicial law clerk for federal judges in California and on the D.C. Circuit. Early in his career, Ben was also a third grade teacher in New York City. And most importantly, Ben Chida is a product of the California community colleges, an alumnus of Orange Coast College. Ben, welcome to the program.

Ben Chida: Thank you so, so much. Chancellor Oakley, you know, you've been such an incredible leader and incredible partner, incredible advocate, incredible doer, kind of friend and a person. So it's been a pleasure working with you and I'm so honored to join you last of these podcasts and really looking forward to continuing working with you on all of these issues across the board. And I am just excited to dig in. So let's get started.

Oakley: Great. Well, it's been a pleasure working with you, Ben, as well. And I have a feeling that we're not done with each other yet. So let's jump into the questions. You're a product of the California community colleges. You attended Orange Coast College, which is in the same district as college. I attended Golden Knights College. So let's start there. Tell us about your experience at Orange Coast College. You attended Orange Coast before you transferred to UC Berkeley. What should listeners know about your experience and what are your takeaways about the role that community colleges play in California?

Chida: Yes, I know I've shared this with you before, but I really do believe that community colleges saved my life. And I really, really mean that. And it's not an exaggeration. I dropped out of high school my freshman year and I was just isolated in my room. Sometimes I think back on my life and I remember like the first time I left my house after several months and I went to a 7-Eleven and had a panic attack because it had been so long that I interacted with another person in English that it just didn't feel like my mouth could actually sound out the words. And so that's kind of where I start my educational journey from. And I felt rudderless. I felt hopeless, I felt worthless. And, you know, it was the position that I think a lot of Californians and a lot of students are in right now, having disengaged from school, having maybe been socially isolated, experiencing mental health issues and trying to find a way back. So I had started attending a continuation high school after about a year. Year of social isolation. After a few months, my teacher suggested I take a couple of courses at community college. So I took courses at Golden West, at Orange Coast, at Coastline, and I initially started with just a few here and there. Eventually I enrolled in a full course load. But really, community colleges are what reengaged me and gave me an on ramp back into education. It brought me back into that rhythm of being in that classroom every day. And unlike most other states, California community colleges give you a bona fide path back to unlimited opportunity. So I could see myself transferring to a world class university and everything beyond, which really is something fairly unique to California. But this was all really thanks to the countless hours of work that were often unseen by community colleges, leaders that I would never meet. Right? So I completed that, get the course work. And I know now that that was, you know, thousands and maybe tens of thousands of work coordination, collaboration meetings, you know, etc., etc., trying to figure this stuff out. And I guess what I want emphasize there is this, you know, how these sort of wonky, sometimes very difficult efforts can actually lead to very concrete benefits for students on the ground. And I think just in big picture, what this makes me think about in terms of community colleges is, as my story illustrates, the assumption that we oftentimes have that every student, you know, goes seamlessly from kindergarten through to college on a single, predictable path. It comes at a cost. It makes students feel like if they're not on track on that path, that there's something wrong with them, that they're somehow less than. And to me, community colleges are the antidote to that very proposition, because community colleges embrace the students who like me and who like actually most students, did not kind of go through that typical, you know, sitcom type college path that we all have expected, but is actually a fairly unrealistic expectation. And to me, community college is very much represent in so many different

ways the opportunity to actually map on to the lived reality and lived experience of students and families in our systems.

Oakley: Well, I couldn't agree with you more, and our experiences in many ways are similar. I attended courses at Coastline and Golden West and just stumbled my way through until I found some footing. And I'm here because of that experience. And this is true of tens, if not hundreds of thousands of students every single year that don't have that opportunity to go straight from kindergarten to senior in high school, be prepared to transfer to selective for university. The majority of students, predominantly the majority of students, have stories like ours, and that's why it's so important. So I really appreciate that you and certainly your boss, the Governor, recognize the importance of community colleges. How do community colleges fit into your roadmap and your plans for higher education going forward?

Chida: Yeah, so the roadmap really represents partnership, not only partnership with the community colleges and between the community colleges, but with the other segments, but also with our K-12 schools and with our workforce pipelines. So the roadmap, very intentionally, as you noted, builds off the vision for success. We weren't coming in to rewrite the playbook or to launch a bunch of bright, shiny things. Quite the opposite, really. Our diagnosis of the problem isn't a lack of initiatives. It's a lack of a multiyear set of investments and a multiyear focus on implementation, on operations and delivery. So another way to put it is it's a mindset that's fundamentally centered on trusting our leaders to do good work if they're empowered and given the space to do so. A mindset of getting all leaders and doers working off the same music sheet, and a mindset of shared accountability where there is no use and finger pointing because we're all ultimately accountable for delivering for our students and families. So, you know, the roadmap is one set of sort of goals and commitments and directions that we have and we share with our community colleges. But it's really helpful to think about the roadmap, along with the UC compact and the CSU compact and also with the other K-12 budget investments that we made. Because all together they stand for the proposition of let's recognize that we need each other to be successful. Let's recognize that we need to collaborate on different things. Things as wonky as data sharing and make sure that, you know, what we have on paper here is telling us the state will invest this amount, the institutions will work to deliver on these results and these outcomes. And the USC is the uses and the CSU's we'll do X, Y and Z, the community colleges will do A, B and C and is trying to get everyone really sync up on a multi-year plan that we can drive implementation on. And that's really what the roadmap represents to us, which is not the governor coming in and. Everybody. Here's the whole new plan, everybody, but rather the governor rallying all the leaders and doers throughout the state and trying to get us all working towards a common vision, which I think we have in California, which I'm super, super excited about and the governor is very excited about.

Oakley: So many of our listeners are also part of a broader higher education community. There anything you want to highlight from the compacts involving CSU and UC? Obviously

for us in community colleges, they're an important partner for us. We are increasing the number of students that are transfer eligible. So transfer it's a big part of this, but also this partnership in communities between CSU campuses, community colleges, UC campuses to really create an expectation that every member of a community has access to higher education. What are some of the things you like to highlight in general about the roadmap and your plans that includes CSU and U.S.?

Chida: Yeah, I would say trying to make it easier for transfer students to enter into the UC and CSU, which I give all the credit in the world to you and to the chancellor's office writ large for this. Right. So in my mind, you all fought tooth and nail to get additional funding to all the community colleges throughout the state. And on top of that, within these compacts. You all fought tooth and nail to make sure that we heard you in terms of what CSU in the U.S. needed to do to make it easier for transfers to enter into their systems, to lower the barriers and to streamline the pathways. You know, I think one of the key things to look at when you look at the U.S. and CSU compacts is there's an entire section on interstate mental collaboration and it gets pretty tactical, gets around discussing data sharing modules and working on collaborations when it comes to course numbering and all of these different elements that aren't going to make headlines but are the critical work that, like I said earlier, is a type of thing that really makes a difference in students lives. And so it's the work that we should be focused in on. And so I think overall, when it comes to the CSU and U.S. compacts, it's their section that's on and it's segment of collaboration. It's more the commitments that they made to make transfers a lot easier because what we heard over and over was, you know, from the U.S. and CSU side, they were sometimes indicating that, hey, you know, we're not really sure if we're getting the number of transfer ready students as we would like. And then what we kept hearing from community colleges and from high schools was, hey, our students aren't able to get into the season. CSU's, there's not enough seats, it's too hard to navigate in. And so this is a perfect illustration of where we think we could be a value add as the governor's office, because we can convene all the different parties and say, Hey, we all agree, let's try to increase transfer rates, let's figure out what you can do and what you can do and what you could do. And let's have a model of shared accountability and which we are all holding ourselves accountable to reaching these objectives, as opposed to getting stuck in the mire of finger pointing or saying who ought to be doing more and who ought to be doing less, etc.. So that's what really excites me about this entire framework for the path ahead.

Oakley: So you mentioned an important part of the work that you've been leading, which is the cradle to career data system, including the work that you've been doing, creating and supporting the California Guidance Initiative, which the community colleges have been working on for quite some time, that the tool that they've produced has been an important part of the collaboration between our system and K-12 and CSU and others. So tell us about how the cradle to career data system is going and why is it important to achieving the goals that you've laid out in the roadmap?

Chida: Oh boy, yeah. The data system was one of the very first assignments that the governor gave me during transition. Like I think it was like day two. And he was like, then there's this thing like it stuck in my craw. Like, I'm a data person, I'm a data leader, and it is a sour spot in our sort of picture in California, and I need you to solve it. And so I've been working on it ever since. I was already very excited about this type of thing. But the governor, as you know, as a numbers person, he wants to see numbers. He wants to sort of understand how different things are working, not only in the talking points, but actually in the data. And so this was a top priority for him. Look, ultimately, we have a \$170 billion TK-16 budget this year. That is incredible. That represents an incredible opportunity to do great things for students and families across the state. But it's not going to get anywhere without data. And so for us, the data system is the backbone for that massive agenda. And what's most exciting about it is we are about to leapfrog every other state. So you asked, how are things going? Things are going incredibly well. And I think by almost all accounts in terms of making sure that we have consensus, that we're actually making sure that not only do the institutional leaders, but also advocates and families and everybody has a voice in the process. The Data Quality Campaign recently wrote a federal, national level sort of white paper praising the work and the process to date. I'm most excited about the role of the data system in two ways, and these are pathbreaking approaches nationwide. The first, as you mentioned, is CCGI and related sort of operational tools. So usually when we talk about large general data systems, what we're talking about is what can we learn from this data? What is the analytical use case for this data? We wanted to push a little bit harder and say, look, data infrastructure that helps academics write white papers is roughly the same data infrastructure that helps us build tools that can be helpful to students and families and to instructors and counselors throughout the state. So let's do that. And so the data system prioritizes that from the get go. And one manifestation of that is the expanding and scaling of CCGI as a college guidance tool that can be used using real data for our students between K-12 and higher ed. And hopefully that will help bridge that transition and that jump from K-12 over to higher ed, which includes financial aid, which includes, you know, figuring out which major you want to have, which includes how to get admitted and matriculate in the first place. And the second exciting thing about the data system is most of the time you just focus on sort of educational data, K-12 data, post-secondary data, and then call it a day. We started with a different playbook or a different mindset. We wanted from the very get go to pull in Health and Human Services data, because it's critically important for us to understand how our students are doing, not just from an academic perspective, but from a whole person perspective. So we want to know how are they doing in terms of mental health, in terms of basic needs, all these different things. We want a picture and a data system that can help us understand how we can hold ourselves accountable to actually serving our students and all these different measures. And so, you know, there's still a lot of work ahead of us, but I hope that people who are listening to this can imagine just in a few short years, we are going to have a robust system that pulls in Health and Human Services data, as well as educational data, as well as workforce data to help really give us a full

picture of how our students are doing and not only give us a picture, but also help us create tools to help the students directly. And that's the sort of promise of the data system writ large for that is exciting.

Oakley: And it certainly was an issue where we were lagging behind most states in the country in terms of our data system. So this is going to be a huge job, a huge advantage for us as a state. So thank you for your work. And now let's jump to another very important issue that this governor has put forward for higher education, and that's the 70% attainment goal. Tell us a little bit about the goal. It is probably the most aggressive goal in all of the 50 states. Tell us about how we're going to achieve this goal.

Chida: Yeah, so it's a lot of what we were just discussing. The governor wanted to make sure that we set attainment goal number one, because it's sort of table stakes at this point for what you're going to do as a state. And it was similar to the data system, something that we felt was sort of missing puzzle piece, so to speak, in what was part of the playbook of most states, and that we should make sure that we at least catch up with every other state. But like you said, we wanted to set an ambitious target. We wanted to have a big, hairy, audacious goal to drive toward as a North Star and to really try to marshal energy towards in terms of the how it's all this work that we're talking about, right? It's the two compacts and the road map. That's the sort of play by play of how exactly we're going to try to get to those goals in terms of graduation rates, transfer rates, affordability and all these other elements that are necessary components of trying to achieve that goal. Big picture. It's also the \$170 billion TK-16 budget. Just to give you a sense, when the governor came in, that mark was roughly around \$130 billion. So over the course of about three, four years, we increased that budget from \$100. You know, a little bit less than \$130 billion, to \$170 billion. So pretty remarkable. And in terms of how to get there, that's really sort of our sense of how to do it. Of course, ultimately, it's going to depend on the legwork of leaders and doers throughout the state, many of whom are listening here.

Oakley: So that's why I'm so excited to, you know, engage and to make sure that we're discussing these big goals because, you know, it's going to be on all of us to make progress on this in our own ways over the course of many, many years. So you just in passing mentioned some pretty big numbers at T.K. to 12 budget of \$170 billion with a B. I mean, those are amazing numbers. I mean, K through 12 budget is bigger than some states budgets. So let's talk a little bit about the budget. It is, I think, by all respects, a historic budget with a historic surplus of nearly \$100 billion. So this budget, in my view, is a huge win for community college students in particular, given the investments the state is making community college students the opportunity. To improve the Cal grant system for community college students in future years. So what are your thoughts about the budget just recently signed by the governor and how do you see it impacting the trajectory of the state going forward?

Chida: Yeah, I feel a mix of sort of blessing and also deep, deep sort of urgency, sort of bordering on anxiety or dread because it really is like we have just this moment before us, right? We have this big window. And I want to emphasize, you know, this budget was massive, but so is the last budget. It was momentous, too. And so it's sort of a multiyear set of investments that we're trying to drive here. The thing that I'm most excited about is not just the scale of these investments, but the structural and transformative nature of them. So, you know, outside the post-secondary space on tech, we're adding a whole new grade underneath kindergarten. So when you start walking into your kids schools, you're going to start seeing this whole new grade that exists in all these schools. And that's structural. That's a structural change. And there's also any number of other structural change that we had from last budget and this budget. So we talked about the data system to me that the structural play, the compacts and a roadmap, those are structural plays. Those are trying to create the structures that break down the silos between the different segments and between the different sort of stages of education that we see. Another one that I'm very excited about that we're rolling out over this year and next year are the K 16 collaboratives. Those are regional. That's a solution. That's an effort to try to drive structural change at the regional level. So we have like this state level, structural effort around things like data systems, but then we also have like a vertical pipeline going down into our regions and our communities and our counties and our locals trying to drive and replicate that change there as well. So, you know, big picture, when you're talking about the budget, in my mind, I think implementation, implementation, implementation, I wake up with that urgency and that anxiety every single morning because we just got back from D.C. And I worry sometimes that we as California public leaders are among the last defenders of the view that public institutions can and must do good and big things for the people. And every other state is looking at us thinking, Oh, well, you have this big old budget, but what are you going to do with it? And in my mind, I want to prove all those haters wrong. I don't want just the headline grabbing, you know, big new investments to occupy all the space. What I want is for us to not only have those headlines, but also deliver on the right, to deliver on the ground live reality of the student experiences. And so to me, that means everybody listening to this, this means rallying leaders and doers from the state and county and local level, everybody on this common vision. And I do feel like we are on that path, given that so much in so many cases, we're so values aligned. And for so long all we were missing were the resources. And we are missing the collaboration. And now we have that. We're moving on those paths and I'm super excited about delivering on that for people.

Oakley: No, I think you're absolutely right. I think everything that we've mentioned, the work that's being done in the budget and the last several budgets, the work that happens in collaboration between all the system leaders, you and the governor's office really gives this state an opportunity to lead. California's always been a leader, but this gives us a chance to be very specific about our leadership and our education. So we very much appreciate the work and the investments that have gone into the work that you're doing. So tell me about your trip to D.C. and many of the things that we're talking about or the reason one of the

reasons at least you were D.C. and that was for the governor to receive recognition for his education agenda. And obviously, that agenda has been very much driven by the work that you're doing. So it was a media filled trip. How was it? And did you get a sense for where the nation is going with higher education and had a position, California, in that discussion?

Chida: Yeah, absolutely. So, you know, in California, just for folks who are listening. California won the premier award given to a state. So the Education Commission of the States awarded California with Frank Newman Award for Innovation and Education Policy. And the reason for why was the structural and transformative, transformative elements from last budget and this year's \$170 billion K 16 budget. You know, here's the reason why the governor really wanted to make sure that he went to D.C. to accept this on behalf of California, which is we look around this nation and look at the state of the discussion of education policy. That's a bit of a disgrace. Right. We're talking about issues that are frankly just nonsense. It's about othering students and families and teachers. It's about, you know, like things that, you know, critical race theory and things that are hardly taught, you know, are not taught in K-12 schools in that way. We're talking about these issues that are, frankly, highly divisive and highly loud, but are not all that substantive to the day to day lives of students and families. And here we are in California trying to drive this real change for students and families. And we're preoccupied at the national level with discussions that are divisive and hate filled in othering and just generally nasty and awful. And so the governor felt like he had to go to D.C. and at least bring some voice to this and bring some attention to the fact that, hey, we're doing some cool things in California for those of us who are real doers and leaders, come, let's work on stuff. Let's work on real change. Let's not focus on these sideshow issues that really just are there to suck up oxygen and pretend like you have a real education agenda, even though you don't. So that's really why we went to D.C. That's what we saw. It was certainly confirmed as wild as, you know, in terms of the level of disengagement people had and a lack of awareness people had with what was happening in California, it was truly shocking. People just aren't eyes open on it because this current media ecosystem really sucks up all the oxygen for all this conflict and confrontation and controversy. That's certainly what we saw as well, and that's what we're hoping, at least in California we can avoid and we can focus on the real sort of I mean, potatoes issues that'll make a difference for our students and families.

Oakley: Yeah, no, I agree. So let me ask you just a couple more questions as we begin to wrap up. So we've talked a lot about the positives. A, what about the opportunities that are in front of us in the state, in the education system, in California? What are some of the challenges that your office faces and what should we expect going forward in the years to come? All the uncertainty that's going on national and throughout the globe.

Chida: There are so many there are plenty of challenges. I mean, I know that everyone who is listening to this feels that we are all nationwide in California, probably in your own lives, too, in some sort of period of transition. There's a lot of transition happening. There's a lot of



questioning, priors. There's a lot of rethinking and reimagining occurring. And I know you feel that. I hope that people also feel the positive, the optimism, the opportunity that's there as well. But, you know, I think among the many challenges that face our state include, you know, climate and include homelessness and all these other high cost of living issues. In addition to that, you know, we're worried about the economic outlook generally moving forward. I would say when it comes to higher ed, I'll point out one of the many challenges that we all face, or at least one indicator of a challenge and kind of offer some thoughts on it, which is a big worry and a big point of discussion among you and your colleagues in your office is, you know, this enrollment, the numbers that we're seeing in terms of community college enrollments and the causes are described in any number of different ways. Right. So there's a labor market sort of rationale, which is the looking at the relative appeal of community colleges versus available jobs. Some people try to describe it as, you know, in terms of the changing demands, in terms of preferred modalities that students want to learn. And another cause is sort of the general questioning of the value proposition of higher ed and how that's playing into all of this. To me, they all boil down to the same question, which is how do we center on what our students need and really pitch them on the relevancy of education and higher education writ large? It's the same problem that I faced as a student. Right? Right. When I was when I started with this entire conversation is like I was a socially isolated student who felt hopeless and worthless and felt like there was no path ahead. Thankfully, California had our community colleges and other systems that help me at least kind of figure out some on ramp back in. You know, there are things we can improve there as well, but there's at least something there for me. To me, the key question right now is there are millions of bench leaders out there right now who are, you know, probably struggling with mental health, probably trying to figure out what's the point, what am I doing, what's my next step, how do I actually make, you know, find and make meaning for myself and my family and all these things and that we're seeing that play out in the numbers. So to me, like, one of the big challenges that I see and also an opportunity that I see is this disengagement and this disillusion. But the opportunity is for us to redesign and to repair our students on the value of a good education and how it will actually help them find and make meaning in their lives. To give you one really concrete example of that right now, which is, you know, if a student found a job in the climate sector, they could be pretty assured that for the rest of their lives, they're going to have a pretty steady job like on foot, fortunately anyway. Right. Like that is going to there's going to be work in the climate sector for quite a while. So let's say you enter into that. You could put up with any table for the rest of your life with that job. So you're solving for yourself or your family. But also you have all of our California regions trying to create the regional economic futures through things like the Community Economic Resilience Fund. They're trying to map out for the future, and many of them are trying to transition from, you know, fossil fuels to clean tech. And so, again, if you go into climate, you can contribute to your region on your community's future. And then lastly, if you go into that sector, boy, are you doing God's work when it comes to trying to help the state of California, help the nation, help the globe and help future generations. And to me, that is the recipe. That's what worked for me. And I think that works, will work for

others in terms of finding and making meaning, finding relevancy, finding passion in your work, which is a pathway that helps you provide for your family, helps you enhance and empower your community, and helps you serve not only the globe but some, you know, future generations and a broader sense of oneself. And so that's what I'm excited about in terms of the work that we all have ahead of ourselves together.

Oakley: Well, I can't think of a better way to end our podcast. And on that note, I think that's a great message, a very inspirational message to students across this great state of California. Like you, I've had a chance to be in other parts of this country, and I can't think of a more welcoming higher education system for students of all backgrounds than California. Higher education. And we have you, your team, to thank Governor Newsom since we're on my last podcast. I have to give a big thank you to Ana Monosantos Oh my gosh. And the both of them for their work in helping the state of California. Two people have worked behind the scenes for so many years. So a big thank you on behalf of all of us in the California community colleges for your work, your work with this budget and the initiatives you just touched on. So thank you and your entire team for the work that you're doing. And thank you for being on this program.

Chida: Thank you. It's great being with you.

Oakley: All right. Well, that wraps up our podcast. Again, I want to thank Ben Chida for being with us today. Ben has been serving as, for lack of a better title, leading the higher education policy here in California, being a great partner to the California community colleges and for being a great example of a California community college student and what can be achieved once you step foot on a California community college campus. So thank you for listening, and thank you to all of our listeners for listening to this podcast for so many years of podcasts. We'll continue, I'm sure, but for now. Thank you all for listening. This has been another episode of the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office podcast. Thanks for listening.

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This has been a California Community College's presentation.