

Chancellor's Office Podcast Episode 36 – Transcript

Chancellor 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. Today, I'm joined by the secretary of the California Labor and Workforce Development Agency, Julie Su. Julie is an amazing advocate for not just the state of California, but for the workers of the state of California. She's a nationally-recognized expert on workers' rights and civil rights, and she's dedicated her distinguished legal career to advancing justice on behalf of poor and disenfranchised communities. She's also a past recipient of the MacArthur Foundation Genius Grant.

Today, I'm gonna be talking to Julie Su about the situation that California faces. We've had this tremendous COVID-19 pandemic just really strangle the state's economy. We have an economic crisis on the heels of that that continues to extend, and millions of Californians have lost their jobs, who have lost hours. And so, Secretary Su is right in the middle of this storm, leading California's economic response to the COVID-19 crisis, so we'll be talking today about her role, about how the California Community Colleges can help in California's recovery, and what she sees going forward, in terms of California's economic recovery. So, with that, I want to welcome Secretary Su. Secretary, it's great to have you.

Secretary Su: Thank you so much, Chancellor Oakley. I'm thrilled to be here, and also just extremely grateful for your leadership, and the partnership that we've had since I've been in this position.

Chancellor Oakley: Well, I think you've done an amazing job since you've stepped in. You stepped into, I'm sure you weren't expecting this firestorm, but you've just done an amazing job of continuing to push California forward and think about where we need to be in the future. And speaking of the future, before this pandemic hit, before the economic crisis, you were leading an effort in California to begin to think through what the future work needs to look like here in California. Now, I imagine we've been launched into the future because of this pandemic, but you co-lead and continue to co-lead the Future of Work Commission. Can you tell us a little bit about the commission and what the goals of the commission are, and what you're finding through that work?

Secretary Su: Yes, absolutely. Thank you so much. So, last year, the governor appointed a future of work commission that was made up of a real cross-sector of leaders in California, focusing on basically creating a new social compact for California workers, that was centered on economic equity. And it's important to note that in addition to my work on behalf of the governor, helping to shepherd the work of the commission, our friend and collaborator, Lande Ajose, who's the governor's senior advisor on higher education, was also charged with that.

So, it's a real recognition of the inextricable link between future of work and educational opportunities. So, our charge was to really study, understand, and analyze what future jobs could look like in California over the next many years.

And I say, you know, what jobs could look like, because it's both a descriptive thing, like where are jobs going, and we need to know, but also, what could they be? What possibilities are out there? How do we imagine work? And I think that part of it was particularly exciting, because we don't want to take the future as inevitable, right? We don't want to assume that, you know, whatever some of the conversations about technology taking over jobs, or, you know, the robot apocalypse, right, we were very deliberative about saying that's not a future that has to be, and if it's not a future that we want, then we can be very intentional in policies, in, you know, whose voices we listen to and who we bring to the table, to make sure that the jobs that characterize California in the future are good, quality jobs that make us really proud as a state, that make our economy strong, and that take advantage of the full talent of our people.

So what we did, through a series of convenings, was focus on various aspects of the future of work. And, you know, frankly, there's a lot of challenges there, right? About a third of California workers make less than \$15 an hour. That is a huge sector of our economy that is really considered low-wage workers, and in this pandemic, we've just seen how devastating that is, right, when you have workers who are, you know, have to choose between going to work when they're sick or not making a living at all, that's not just a crisis in work, but it's a public health crisis. We also see that about 20% of those making less than \$15 an hour have a college degree. So, it really forces us to confront issues that I know you care greatly about too, which is, you know, what is the connection between college attainment and quality jobs? And wanting to, you know, create a stronger, better, more reliable path to good jobs, where people can support themselves, you know, create a life, enjoy the fruits of the California dream. So that's a really big priority for the commission, and for me in my role, and for the governor.

Chancellor Oakley: So, Secretary Su, on that topic, I mean, one of the things that we have found in the California Commission Colleges, and we took a hard look at the workforce as well, and found many of the things that you just mentioned, which are incredibly disturbing. And if we look at the gaps in income and wealth creation here in California, there's clearly a dividing line between those who have higher levels of education and those that do not. So, what do you feel the role of the California Community College is in preparing the workforce that you see in the future, and in particular, around this question of equity, particularly equity in terms of supporting those workers that have the least amount of education, and particularly workers of color, that we have

found, in our system, are some of the most vulnerable individuals in the workforce?

Secretary Su: Right. So, I mean, the community colleges of California are one of the strongest vehicles we have for advancing equity. And that is both a function of who makes up the student body, right, and of really, one are the key pathways to jobs, right, which is attaining the right skills, as well as the connections, the awareness of what jobs are actually out there, right. One of the biggest barriers, especially for African-American, Latino, young people, and this is really exacerbated by the current economic recession, right, the pandemic-induced recession that we're in, is just knowing what job paths are available. So I would say the community colleges are absolutely critical.

Now, part of the challenge, and one that I feel, you know, the governor's really committed to, and I feel like this is the challenge of our time, is how do we create those jobs that are going to, you know, support people, right, that are gonna, and gonna make people wanna pursue their education, finish their education, to get to, right, to make sure that people know that there's a end goal there that is something, you know, worthy of, and people can want to pursue. And so, I think, you know, it's an important point to say that skills and training, education, can only do so much if we don't focus on creating the kinds of jobs that people are gonna want to do and deserve to have, and again, take advantage of the full talent and beauty and diversity of California.

But one of the things, the very concrete things that, again, I'm so proud to be working with you on, Chancellor Oakley, is being smart about partnerships between community colleges, between employers, right, and between the workforce that we wanna train. So it doesn't make sense at all to have people train for things that aren't going to be needed. Right, doesn't make sense to train for jobs that are not available. And it doesn't make sense to train people for things that they don't actually wanna do, so, so much about the innovation that we are really making a hallmark of our work in this administration is creating those right partnerships. Right, so we have a set of high road training partnerships that are industry-led, meaning employers, employees, community colleges, work together, and we really support them and fund them, provide a lot of technical assistance in them, so that the training that people are getting is actually for a job in the area where they live, right, that's aligned with their passions and talents, and the education, the training, and ultimately the job, are all there together. So I think those high road training partnerships are just a really key model for how we...

You know, and they're very focused on equity, and, you know, ensuring that people who have otherwise faced major barriers to employment have access to those training programs.

Chancellor Oakley: Yeah, I completely agree with you. One of the things that we talk about a lot in the community colleges is how do we shorten, sort of, the feedback loop between government, education institution, and the employers, you know, so that we can better benefit the worker, who's trying to find that career path, trying to get the skills to get into that career path, and trying to understand what that career path leads to, and, unfortunately, in years past, that feedback loop is too long. You know, by the time people get information, by the time they receive the training, some of those jobs are already beginning to change. So, we have government, we have the educational institution, we have the employers. What are some of the things that you think, how could we improve the partnership between the education institutions, in this case, the community colleges, and the employers? What ingredients do you think we need to use to get that partnership working better?

Secretary Su: Yeah. So, I agree with you so much that I think that that feedback loop, you know, the ability of institutions to change rapidly in response to changes in the economy, and also, the idea that we need to be really forward-looking about where jobs could be and where they could go, that was a big charge of the Future of Work Commission too, is to really kind of identify where is the economy and could the economy be going, so that California, again, we kind of harness the huge advantages of California, and we're an extremely large state, diverse in many ways, including our economies, and so, there's lots of sectors that we feel like, you know, if we invest in and grow, they could be where the good jobs come from, right? And the other beauty of it is that we have so many goals, in terms of improving quality of life in California, right, like, you know, creating more housing, so that everyone is sheltered, clean water and clean air, public transit, all of these things are opportunities to create good jobs in the communities that need them the most.

So, if we're really deliberate about that, then we can meet our larger, broader quality-of-life goals, along with creating jobs. And so, making sure that we are in constant collaboration and communication between government, the private sector, and our colleges is really key to that, so that we do have time to gear up for the right jobs of the future. Now, the other thing is, you know, the community colleges are amazing for young people just getting into education, but they're also amazing avenues for continuing, ongoing, lifelong skills training. So, the other partnership we have is through the employment training panel, right. We administer training funds to employers who are trying to upskill their existing workforce. And again, we're just so proud of the many

partnerships we have with 29 different community colleges, where employers have said, "Here's the skills I need." Your entire network of colleges have said, "We can play a role in helping to provide that upskilling," and that's another way of, you know, not just preparing people for entry-level jobs, but really making sure there's economic mobility in a career, which I think is also just really key, as we look to what we want work to be, right? We want people to be able to move up.

Chancellor Oakley: Right. So, as you're talking, I realize that many of our listeners may not know just how many pieces are in your agency, that deal directly with Californians in the various parts of the workforce. Can you just take a minute to describe what your agency does, and what comprises your agency?

Secretary Su: Thank you so much. Yes. So, the labor agency, but I've been saying this since COVID, because it really provided a framework for how to think about the work that we do, that, you know, so much of what we talked about, right, Chancellor Oakley, was not created by COVID, but really amplified and accelerated by it. So, we really do three things. The first is make sure that we provide benefits to the unemployed, and services the unemployed. So a big part of that over the last four months have been the over 7 million Californians who have applied for some form of unemployment insurance...

Chancellor Oakley: Wow.

Secretary Su: Yeah. Just really, you know, devastating, one indicator of how this pandemic has affected the people of California. So, it's services to the unemployed. The second is protecting the health, safety, and wellbeing of the employed. So, making sure that workers have a healthy and safe workplace, that they have paid leave when they need it, right? This has been a huge, again, you know, challenge in the pandemic, is making sure that workers are able to isolate, quarantine, stay home when they need to, to stop the spread. But that's also making sure that workers are getting basic minimum wage, and overtime, and those job protections, so we do enforcement.

And then the third is what we've been talking a lot about, is future workforce development. Right, creating pathways and links for Californians to jobs. And so, in some ways, I think about, you know, the work of the labor agency is really, you know, what was designed to respond to the kinds of challenges that we face right now, and we have to do that in a way where what we come out of this with is better than what we entered it with. Right, when you said from the beginning about equity and who has access, right, who gets unemployed, right, we've seen a really dramatic racial disparity in terms of who's lost jobs, right, in

hospitality, in service work, a lot of our African-American/Latino communities and some of our low-income Asian communities have been really devastated. Also, who has been those essential workers on the front lines, who put their bodies on the line throughout this pandemic, also, there's a racial disparity in that, huge overrepresentation for Latino workers in particular.

And, you know, I would be remiss if I didn't mention our undocumented sisters and brothers, right, who have, you know, experienced other kinds of vulnerabilities but have not had any access to unemployment insurance benefits. Under federal law, they're just not eligible at all. So, that's been a real challenge. But then also in looking at the future job pathways, so much of jobs, you know, again, it's about skills, and it's about training, but it's also about networks, and we need to think more about who has networks, who knows who, right, who gets to learn about jobs, and we're trying to be really, really deliberate about that.

Chancellor Oakley: Right. So, you mentioned, I mean, most people think about the traditional pipeline in higher education. You know, you go to high school, you get on a path, whether it be get a career certificate, you're transferring, you're getting the associate's degree, but you've hinted to a population of Californians that we don't always talk about in higher education. That's the adult worker. And you and I have talked a lot about this. So, I'd love to unpack a little bit more what you think needs to happen for adult workers, particularly in light of what's happened in this economy. We have so many people displaced, and as you've mentioned, many of those workers were already vulnerable before this crisis. So as you think about the future of work, what kind of upskilling or higher education solutions do you think we need to ensure that our workers are able to not just have a foothold in the economy, but to actually thrive in this economy that is quickly becoming the future of work?

Secretary Su: Right. I mean, you know, if we'd been having this conversation six months ago, we would have still dealt with these questions. I think now, we are looking at, you know, roughly seven million unemployed Californians looking for jobs where the future of that work is more uncertain than ever. Right, which industries are going to recover, which places of employment are going to re-open, really, really big challenges. I do think though, in light of those challenges, we shouldn't back off from the ideals, the principles, that commitment to equity that we had at the beginning, or, you know, kind of level our aspirations too much.

So, I think for adult workers, all along, as we've talked about, right, what we really want to be, you know, we wanna be a state that is known for not just making sure that people can work, but that people can work in jobs that they

want to work in, right, where a job is not just a source of income, but a source of deep personal satisfaction, as well as impact. And so I think one of the things, you know, we've really seen this through COVID, is the need for people to adjust, to move, right, some of it's just adjusting to new ways of working, so, even on the telework side, right, I think there's a tremendous amount of skills building that needs to be done for adult workers in particular. Right, many predictions are that a majority of workers who use to go to work are gonna be working from home, even after, so, you know, there's a lot of adjustments that need to be made to make people successful in that, and I think that's an important part of it.

But I also think, you know, where are our jobs shifting, right? There's a workforce that's being kind of created through this pandemic, around public health needs, around contact tracing, and so, really trying to make sure... And contact tracing only works if you have people, you know, who are sick willing to report to those contact tracers about where they've been. So, to me, having trusted members of the community, who are familiar with the community are really important for making those jobs work. So I think some of it is for adult workers, and I think this is true for all workers, but for adult workers, really recognizing the assets and skills that they bring, through the life experience that they've had, and how do we build on those, develop those, right, so that we're allowing people to pursue, again, work that is meaningful for them, but that's also connected to the needs in our community.

I think the other piece of this is, you know, the racial reckoning that we're seeing in our country, you know, born out of tragedy, but I think there is some opportunity there to really look at how are we as a state stepping into this moment of a need for racial justice, and looking at jobs around, you know, ensuring that there are community leaders who can help us to develop more racially just communities, racially just workplaces, and that kind of thing. I think it's about, you know, imagining what kind of jobs those may lead to, that will help to ensure, again, that we recover better, that we move to a better place than we've been before, and that what are all the skills involved in doing that kind of community leadership work.

Chancellor Oakley: Right. So, as you were thinking about the future of work before this pandemic, now we're in the middle of it, we have literally millions of employees working from home, we have, I would say, millions of students learning from home, what are some of the things that you think will be good that come out of this period of working from home, of trying to create businesses from home? Do you see an upside coming out of this pandemic, and what are some of the things that maybe the community colleges could think about doing to support a new style of working?

Secretary Su: Yeah, I think that's so important to note. So, one of the sort of immediate, and, you know, unintended, obviously, outcomes is that we have seen some improvement in climate measures, right, we have just so much less travel, less commuting. I think that there is a very important job aspect to that, which is that one of the challenges we've always had is quality jobs in places where a lot of people can't afford to live, right? And that's partly why we had the commute issues, right? So, you know, jobs in the Bay Area, the people were commuting for, you know, an hour or two each way a day to get to. People working in city centers like LA, but living out in the Inland Empire. And so, I think the move to telework opens up a lot of opportunity for who can get jobs now, and who can do them, right? And again, there has to be a very deliberate skill-building side to that, right, we have to be both deliberate about, again, creating pathways for people who would normally be left out of those opportunities. I mean, as we've seen through this pandemic, right, the ones who can telework tend to be higher income, right, and, you know, tend to be those from more privileged backgrounds, and those who are working in riskier settings are oftentimes, are low wage and workers of color.

So, as we think about telework, I think if we're deliberate about opening up those opportunities, we also then have a very close connection to the skills and education piece of it, which is how do you do that? Right? Adjustment, for many, has not been smooth, because there's a whole skill set around technology, right, and bridging technological divide, digital divides, but also just understanding how to transfer work that can be transferred to a telework setting, right? We've seen a lot of work, including, frankly, public sector work, right, state jobs, that people have moved to... So, how do you provide good customer service in a telework setting, right? What systems do you need, and then what kind of training do people need to do that? So, I think that those are opportunities for us, and I think, you know, California can really be at the forefront, both because we, you know, have the innovation and technology side of things, but also that real commitment to equity and access that are gonna be really important.

Chancellor Oakley: Right. So, you know, I really appreciate all the ways that you've couched this issue, and as we begin to wrap up, for our listeners, you know, many of them are going to school in the community colleges, thinking about going to the community colleges, trying to figure out how to come out of this pandemic and economic crisis in better shape than they were going into this, and I know sometimes that's hard to imagine. But if there's anything that you can say to our listeners about what you're doing, and what you see in the future of California as we begin to crawl out of this crisis, what kind of hope do you have for California's workers?

Secretary Su: So, I think that what this pandemic has really revealed is that an economy that is based on so much inequity, right, where there's, you know, we've seen for a 40-year trend of kind of the hollowing out of middle jobs, so we've got high wage jobs and low wage jobs, that that is not a sustainable economy. The governor has always said, you know, we want to build a California for all, so that it's not an economy that is characteristic of a California for all. So, I think that, in some ways, that, like, you know, lends into just how inequity is not just bad for those at the low end of the economic scales, but also, they are, in a public health crisis, they are public health problems, right? We can't stop the spread of COVID if we don't keep workers safe, if people don't have a choice whether they go to work or not. And so, those kinds of inequities have really been highlighted, and I think there is tremendous commitment, especially here in California, to doing something better about that. So that's a real opportunity.

I'll also say, for young people, I know it's scary, I mean, you know it because you live it, but also, studies show that when people join the job market at a time of economic recession or depression, it's not only bad for your immediate wages, but it could create a lifetime of depressed earnings, right, so we have a lot of work to do there, and we're really focused on what we can do for youth to double down on what we know works, right, which is making sure that we're creating pathways, that we're doing the work we're already doing together, which is aligning education with future job opportunities, you know, skills, and opening up pathways, being really deliberate about breaking down barriers, I think that's a really important piece of it. And then, again, you know, what you've already noted, right, which is that what we've learned is that there's a need for people to really be flexible, to evolve, right, we're seeing workplaces, you know, including workplaces you wouldn't expect, right, like janitors learning how to understand infectious disease, so that they're able to keep themselves safe in the workplace, right? There's lots of opportunities to inject an upskilling of work in hopes that that will also be tied to an upgrading of the jobs themselves. And I think that's just so key to our fight against poverty, right, to our fight for good jobs, and, again, just really grateful to have leaders like you, who are willing to take a look at systems that people have long said, "These things move too slowly. These things," you know, "transition too hard to what we need." The workforce system is the same. So we've been really working to make it more nimble, to make it more responsive, and to take advantage of some of the opportunities that are created right now.

Chancellor Oakley: Well, I really appreciate you taking time out of your very, very, very busy schedule. I certainly, as a Californian, a native Californian, feel

good to have you in the role that you're in, so thank you so much for what you're doing for California, and thank you for taking time to be on our podcast.

Secretary Su: Thank you so much for having me.

Chancellor Oakley: All right, well, you have been joining me in my conversation with Secretary Julie Su. Been a pleasure having her, and I wanna thank all of our listeners for tuning in again, and we will be back again shortly. Thanks for joining us.

Announcer: Be sure to join us for the next California Community Colleges podcast. This has been a California Community Colleges presentation.