



Chancellor's Office Podcast CCC21044

Episode 44 – Transcript

Chancellor Eloy Ortiz 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. The community colleges have been at the front lines of the recovery from the pandemic. And as we think about how we recover with equity, we have to keep in mind, not just our traditional students, but the millions of adult learners, adult workers who have been hit hard by the pandemic and the economic fallout. About two years ago, working with then governor, Jerry Brown, the California Community Colleges launched a new college, Calbright College, which has been designed to serve adult learners, primarily online, through a competency-based education platform. And when Calbright was launched, no one knew that we would be in the middle of a pandemic a few years later, but here we are. And so the need for quality online education has never been more important, the need to reach adult learners, workers who have been hit hard by the pandemic who need the opportunity to gain skills and competencies that they need to get back into the economy has never been more important.

Chancellor Eloy Ortiz Oakley:

So today I have the pleasure of being joined by Calbright College CEO and president, Ajita Talwalker Menon. Ajita became president and CEO of Calbright College in July of 2020. Before that she was the interim CEO from February, 2020. Before coming to California, she served in the Obama administration as special assistant to the president for Higher Education Policy at the White House Domestic Policy Council. And before that, she spent lots of time working in the US House of Representatives, in the Department of Education and in various high-level roles, serving as someone who was shaping higher ed policy for the country. So it's a great privilege and pleasure to have Ajita Talwalker Menon join us today. Glad to have you with us, Ajita.

Ajita Talwalker Menon:

Thank you so much for having me, Chancellor Oakley.

Chancellor Eloy Ortiz Oakley:

All right. So let's talk about how things are going. You've been in this role as CEO and president of Calbright College working your way through the various challenges of getting a brand new college up and running. What's the role of CEO been like so far and what are shaping some of your highest priorities?

Ajita Talwalker Menon:

Thanks. It's a great question. It's an extraordinary time and one thing that has been interesting about it is I am not alone. There's actually a whole crew of us amongst our sister colleges in the system who have taken on the helm of a college in this crazy pandemic recovery period that we're finding ourselves in. And I think as I talk with all of them, one of the things we share is just this experience, like the other community colleges, we are adjusting to this role, but also adjusting to understand what has meant for our students, what this has meant for our faculty and staff. And I think in some ways, we were really ready at Calbright to absorb the transition to the remote working environment. And in other ways it's been a challenge because there's been such a rapidly evolving need amongst our student population.

Ajita Talwalker Menon:

And I think part of that challenge has been coming to understand how we adjust to support those students, but doing so while in the early stages of developing an organization and getting a college off the ground. We're just two years into a seven years startup timeline and that has been both an amazing journey, but also quite a bit, I think, it has also presented such a tremendous opportunity for us to really think about how we design what we do, the kind of culture that we build at the college and how we can orient that culture around responding to the most acute needs we're seeing.

Ajita Talwalker Menon:

My highest priority continues to be focusing on how we take the work that we have done to date and really expand it to move into high quality growth for the college. And our board of trustees just adopted a strategic vision for Calbright for the next three years to provide us a roadmap to really addressing the core challenges and equity we're seeing by the communities that were designed to serve. Even before the pandemic, there were eight million Californians who lacked a college credential and who were at risk in the economy. And those are the same communities that are bearing the brunt of this pandemic. And so my priority is around both deepening our understanding as a college of those needs, but also responding to how we can really be thinking about how we feature those communities who are facing a tough road to recovery.

Chancellor Eloy Ortiz Oakley:

Right. So, for our listeners who I know are certainly familiar with community colleges, or certainly familiar with the California Community Colleges, can you explain what Calbright is for those listeners who are not that familiar with Calbright? And particularly since it is the community college system's first and, at this point, only college that is completely competency-based, how you view competency-based education as well in the context of Calbright College?

Ajita Talwalker Menon:

Absolutely. I think as a college, we are truly unique. We were built to serve working adults who we've talked a lot about with a kind of program that meets them where they are, meets their needs. And what that means is these individuals who are juggling family responsibilities, sometimes they're doubling up as a teacher or a caregiver at home under current conditions. They really need flexible options that are built around how they're experiencing life. And Calbright programs are designed to be self-paced, not term-based as we see in traditional education. And they're also, when I say designed around the needs of the learner, I mean that they are not just online, but they are skills-based. So they identify both how we can leverage and honor the skills that working adults bring to the table when they enter our institution, but also how we can support them to either acquire new skills or transition skills that they have into areas of growth in the economy, into a trajectory for economic mobility and economic stability.

Ajita Talwalker Menon:

It is a unique approach to higher education that is exclusively population-centric in a way that I think is really necessary for the times that we're in. Competency-based education overall, I think, is such a critical tool when we're talking about working learner population. They are individuals who are not empty vessels that come into our institutions. They are individuals with assets, with skills, with knowledge and learning how we can assess and value those skills in accelerating the pace in which they can reach higher levels, whether it's a credential, but perhaps most importantly, so they can ready themselves for advancement in their career or advancement in future educational opportunities. So I think competency-based education is critical. The way we do it at Calbright is particularly instructive. And the one piece I'll add to that, because I think this is going to be very important for us as a system going forward is going to be the role that credit for prior learning and the ability for individuals to really have our educational institutions validate the skills that they come to us with.

Chancellor Eloy Ortiz Oakley:

That's right. I think this is a conversation that many of us have been having, not just in community colleges, but throughout higher education. How do we capture and value that prior learning that so many of our adult students come with and how do we give them credit for that so that they can move forward? So, as our listeners know, we've

talked about the vision for success for the California Community College lots of times. And the context of the vision for success is really all about how do we meet students? How do we think about equity? And so in the context of Calbright College, I know one of the main commitments for the vision for success, really two of them. One is to design with the student in mind, to design with the student at the center of that design. And one other is a commitment to foster thoughtful innovation. So as you think about designing with your students in mind, as you think about thoughtful innovation, how do you see Calbright adding to those commitments?

Ajita Talwalker Menon:

Yeah. I think we are ready and already contributing in that regard, and hope to do a lot more. One of the things we started with when I came in was to really look at who has been affected, and that's not just demographic study of who's experiencing the brunt of this pandemic, but an understanding of how people are experiencing the labor market, how people are experiencing workforce conditions. And when we look, we see in our state in particular, but this is true nationally, some of the hardest hit industries where individuals who are in lower wage roles have traditionally been retail, hospitality, frontline healthcare work, those types of areas. We need to be thinking about how to design ourselves and design new innovations, not just that fit their lives, but also that allow them to transition into those new careers.

Ajita Talwalker Menon:

And so we've started addressing this with the way in which we are launching a new set of program pathways to help individuals transition into new careers in technology. And here, we started with the premise that these are individuals that come to us with frontline customer service skills, and those can be translated into the technology aspects of many different industries that are being disrupted by the way that customer relationship management, as a tool, is transforming those industries. So our programs become then about how we think about transitioning individuals from those more manual roles and those frontline roles and customer service into roles where industries are growing or into the aspects of those roles that set them up for a different kind of career trajectory. So the reason that those types of innovations are important is because they're not just novel, right? They're actually previewing a different kind of approach that requires us as educational institutions to not just to think about current economic need short-term programs.

Ajita Talwalker Menon:

This is the language that we use a lot of the time, and the language doesn't let us see around the bend. And we need to see around the bend for our communities. And so much of what we think about focusing on for the future has to be building and growing the intelligence that we have about what's going to be happening in the economy and how we choose where we focus our efforts and who those efforts are focused around. That becomes as much of the important work that we do as does implementing the right kinds of technologies to be able to support and scale that for individuals. So often, when we think about innovation, we think about it in the technology context. And I think technology absolutely gives us a unique opportunity to address some of these things, but at the base of it, the real innovation is the way we evolve ourselves to do our work differently, the role that individuals in our institutions see for themselves in doing this work.

Ajita Talwalker Menon:

And I'd love to sort of highlight an internal example because we're in the middle of implementing a integrated student support model, which has been a very transformative experience for a lot of our faculty who come from the community college system. And here, I think it has been tremendous to hear from them about the way that their outreach to students, their connection to students, their conversations with students have made an impact in the progression of those students. And just one small example, I heard from a faculty member who was calling through to some students who had not been active for some time. And there's many reasons why, as we all know, students are being overtaken by life in particular ways.

Chancellor Eloy Ortiz Oakley:

Right.

Ajita Talwalker Menon:

And she had this experience, she was having these phone calls, and mostly people were nervous when they picked up the phone because they thought they had done something wrong because they thought the only reason that an institution was going to be calling them was because they were behind on a payment, or hadn't turned their laptop in or had had some sort of infraction. And just how encouraged those students were and how our faculty felt and experienced that, that feels like as much of an innovation as some of the ways in which we are cleverly using Slack and other types of communication tools to engage with our students.

Chancellor Eloy Ortiz Oakley:

So Calbright is part of 116 community college system. How do you see Calbright interacting, partnering with the other 115 colleges who are much more of a traditional community college than Calbright? What opportunities for collaboration with programs, with faculty at those other 115 colleges, what do you see going forward as those opportunities?

Ajita Talwalker Menon:

I think the opportunities are vast, and we're already hearing about that. The more conversations I'm having with colleagues in the system, the more I'm coming to understand that there's a lot of work for us to do together. And when we think about it in the context of solving shared problems or shared challenges that we're experiencing as system institutions, that becomes the focal point for the collaboration. So we've started to work with a number of colleges, Compton, Bakersfield, we're in conversations with current district and coast district and a number of other institutions throughout the state. And the approach is similar. The way that the conversation eventually evolves is to understand areas in which individuals in our communities are experiencing gaps, either gaps in the workforce system or ways in which they are finding difficulty or challenge in accessing some of the opportunities that currently exist.

Ajita Talwalker Menon:

And I think the way in which, if we approach it that way, if we approach it from an openness to think about where we want to apply different types of testing conditions, to understand how to build better interventions or different approaches to solving challenges that we're facing, that becomes an important part of the secret sauce. And I'll give a couple of concrete examples because I think it helps to illustrate it more than just the abstract. In our conversation in Compton College, there was a recognition that there was sometimes a challenge in the work that Compton was doing in community with adult basic education individuals. And it was hard to convert those into post-secondary enrollment progression. And if you look at a lot of the focus group work that we did, and a lot of the research that we did on communities that could benefit from Calbright and benefit from programs that are designed around adult learner needs, we begin to understand that for many communities, that educational opportunity usually may not feel real for people.

Ajita Talwalker Menon:

And understanding how calibrate programs could serve as a bridge to programs at Compton College has become a very important part of the work that we're doing together. In other instances, we have found that in our work and in the data that we've collected and perhaps in the unique way that we're collecting data, that adult students and African-American students have been falling out of the CCC apply application process. And for us, we understand the equity implications of that for our institution, because that's the core of who we're designed to serve. But that is an impact that is going to be felt at other system campuses as well. And there, we suggested some sort of very practical ways in which open CCC and CCC apply could provide greater visibility for institutions who are engaged in their own recruitment efforts, who are doing their best in some cases to support what we're all experiences as enrollment declines for populations that are particularly pandemic affected.

Ajita Talwalker Menon:

And I think this becomes very important, not just because we all want to be serving this group of learners better, but perhaps because the most concerning thing is that if we don't find new ways of reaching new markets of learners, they will be targeted and they'll be targeted by a riskier option. I've done a lot of work, as you alluded to, in my career around looking at the for-profit college industry.

Chancellor Eloy Ortiz Oakley:

Right.

Ajita Talwalker Menon:

And this is exactly the demographic that is targeted by those institutions, with the promise of flexibility, the promise with convenience in online delivery. But with poor outcomes, right? With higher debt, with low completion and in ways that often leave them worse off. So when I think about this work, and I think about Calbright and I think about the collaboration we can do as a system, I think about it in the context of the reality that many institutions are experiencing. It is not lost on me that something like, I want to say it's like 36% of first time fall enrollments for adults over the age of 25, it's a decrease that we've seen at community colleges at the same time that for-profit colleges have seen a 13% increase in enrollments after years and years of decline. And those are warning signs for us that we can be strengthening and evolving the work that we do collectively together against that threat.

Chancellor Eloy Ortiz Oakley:

Right. I think it's a great point. Certainly it's been my experience as I look at the landscape, for-profit enrollments were always a concern to us here in California. We had two catastrophic situations with Corinthian Colleges and ITT and others, and that's never good for California students. But as I look at the landscape, as you mentioned, the colleges, one, for-profit in nature have been very aggressive at going after students. I can't help but notice the commercials in the middle of the day when I'm having a bite here at my home office, during the pandemic, a number of for-profits are advertising. But also as I look at the numbers across the country, the nonprofits that have specialized in online learning for adult learners, they have also picked up enrollment. So something is happening. And I think we, as a public institution, need to respond, we need to understand why those programs are appealing to our students and try to do the best we can to reach them where they're at.

Chancellor Eloy Ortiz Oakley:

Now, I'm sure many of our listeners have heard of Ajita. But what do we need to know about you Ajita? What motivates you to do this work? Why did you choose to take on Calbright College of all the things that you could be doing right now? And what in your background really has called you to this work?

Ajita Talwalker Menon:

It's a great question. And I get asked this question a lot, because I think there were many people-

Chancellor Eloy Ortiz Oakley:

Why are you crazy enough to do this?

Ajita Talwalker Menon:

That were surprised that I decided to take this on amongst other opportunities. And I keep saying, this is exactly where I need to be right now to have the kind of impact that we need. We need a public option in California that is evolving to understand and serve the needs of those who have been the hardest hit, not just in the pandemic, but over a series of decades of economic backslide. And there is no more important work to equity, there is no more important work to the future of an equitable economic recovery than to get at the core of how we evolve ourselves, how we try new things, how we test, what works, how we scale what works. That is the business that I am hoping that more of us who have thought about these issues who have done policy on these issues and who've researched and tracked and experts in the field, we need to be moving into the space of doing and of supporting and of being on the front lines of that work.

Ajita Talwalker Menon:

So I definitely just felt the profound urgency of it. I joke, college president is the last job I really thought I would find myself in. And it is perhaps one of the most meaningful jobs that I've ever had, largely because the great potential it holds to make very important differences for the people who need us to. And I mentioned that in particular, because I think it is useful to know about me, that I do not think about Calbright as a bright and shiny object or a silver bullet solution. I am very much a systems thinker. I am very much a lifelong advocate for community colleges. And this is the way in which I think community colleges need to evolve. That's not just here, that's just in terms of education more

broadly. We are a system that cares about equity that has always been better than our four-year counterparts, frankly, at responding to needs in the economy in a relative sense.

Ajita Talwalker Menon:

But we are also built for a different time. We were built for a time when you had a single piece of training that you did and that vocation, or that degree carried you for the rest of your life, for the rest of your career. And that is just not the reality that people find themselves in. And so our system, if we care actually about equity, we have to put our money where our mouth is and our actions where our mouth is. It is just as significant to confront racial inequity and class gaps in the context of the way that our education system perpetuates it, in the same ways that we look critically at other systems, whether it's healthcare or policing or any of these other things. And I think it is scary for folks to confront that because we are so mission driven in education, we believe in what we do. And it's hard to disassociate yourself in some ways, take a step back and be critical of where we are. And I think that is a lot of the tension that people experience when they think about something like a Calbright.

Chancellor Eloy Ortiz Oakley:

Well, I think that's a perfect note for us to begin closing on. I couldn't agree with you more the need for Calbright, for all of our 116 colleges, couldn't be more important than it is today. And I think Calbright brings an important element to the California Community Colleges. All of our 116 colleges are uniquely positioned to help California and the country recover from the pandemic and the economic fallout and the racial reckoning that has gripped our country in ways that will set us up for success going forward. So I really, really appreciate you taking some time with us, Ajita, and telling us about Calbright, telling us a little bit about yourself and about how much you care about our community colleges. So really appreciate you joining us today.

Ajita Talwalker Menon:

Thanks so much. I appreciate, and thank you for the opportunity to participate. The last thing I'll say is the other thing that I think is so important about this work is that California is really on the cutting edge of things, and I hear this all the time as well. When I talk to people about this college, when I talk to people about the vision that Governor Brown and Governor Newsom have for the state and the fact that we have this opportunity before us, they are excited and encouraged. And I think other states are looking to California to see what we will do with this opportunity. And that is such an important thing. This is something that if we do it well, and if we find new ways of serving different communities of learners to address key gaps in equity that we're seeing, this becomes an important model for the country.

Chancellor Eloy Ortiz Oakley:

Well, as the saying goes, as California goes, so does the country. So I look forward to your leadership of Calbright, look forward to seeing where it goes. On that note, I appreciate you being with us. And you've been listening to my conversation with Ajita Talwalker Menon, president and CEO of Calbright College, one of the 116 California Community Colleges. So thank you for listening to another episode of the Chancellor's Office podcast, and we will be back with you again soon. Thanks for joining us.

Outro:

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