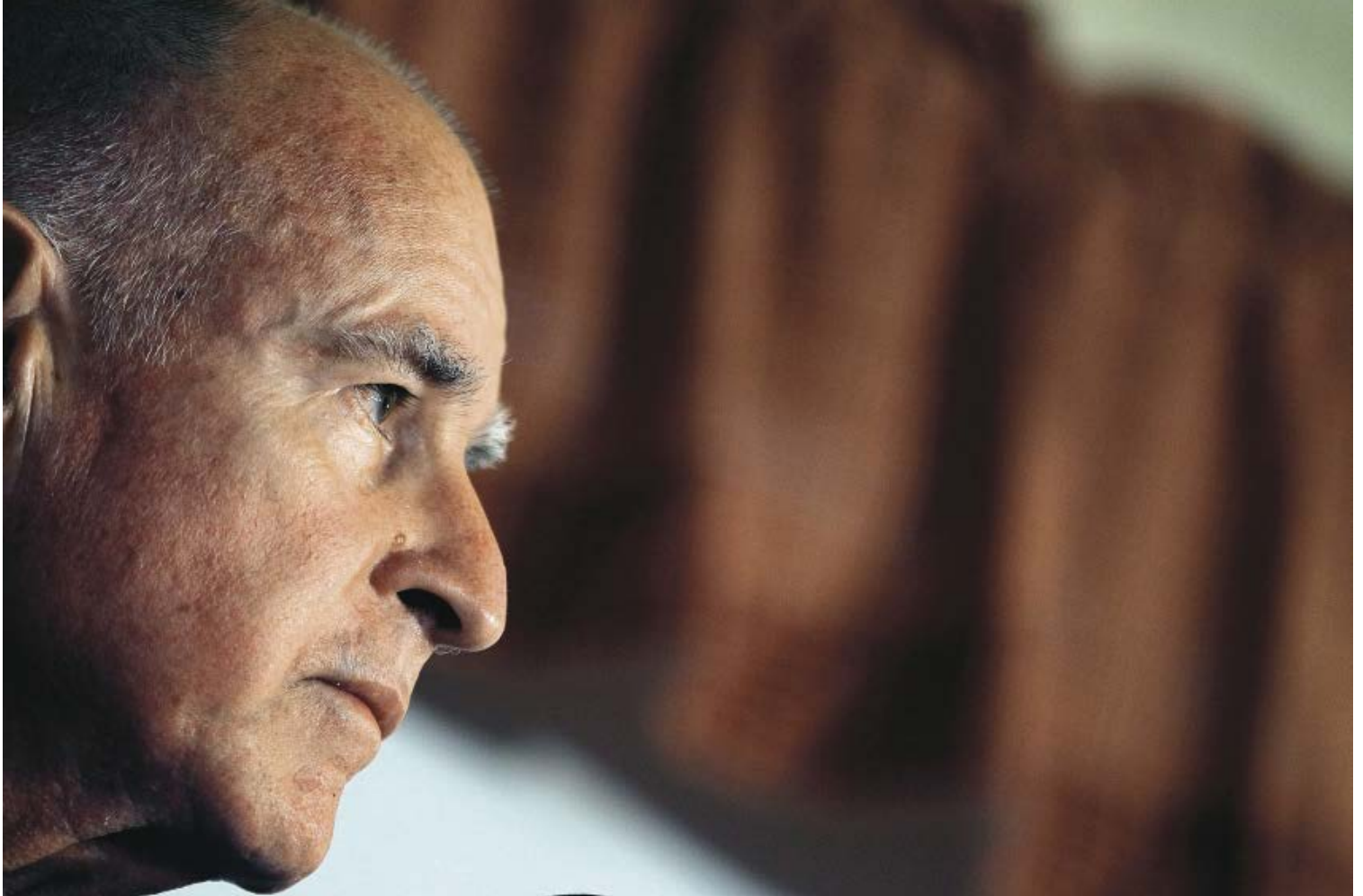


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## Can a Huge Online College Solve California's Work-Force Problems?

By *Karin Fischer* | JULY 29, 2018

SACRAMENTO



Justin Sullivan, Getty Images

Jerry Brown, California's governor, has pushed for an online community college to serve adults looking to earn certificates and other workplace credentials.

**J**erry Brown was taking a victory lap.

The call went out to reporters early on a recent Monday morning: The governor would attend that day's meeting of the California Community Colleges Board of Governors. A few minutes after 11, tieless and relaxed, Brown slid into a seat on the dais. He was just in time — and not coincidentally — for a discussion of the state's newest, and wholly online, community college.

The virtual college, the 115th institution in California's two-year system, is Brown's baby, its approval in June the capstone to his sunset year in office. The college is meant to serve a population too often left behind by higher education: under- or unemployed adults who need new skills to land a job, secure a raise, nab a promotion, just to maintain a toehold in a swiftly changing workplace. An online institution, its advocates say, will allow so-called stranded workers — there are 2.5 million Californians without a postsecondary degree or credential between the ages of 25 and 34 alone — to take short-term courses whenever, wherever.

Reaching those workers will be necessary for the world's fifth-largest economy to continue to grow and thrive. And if the online college enrolls even a fraction of its target audience, it would become the largest provider of distance education, public or private, in the nation. The scale — and the potential for innovation — has people across the country looking West.

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Given the floor at the Board of Governors meeting, Brown, a Democrat, couldn't help crowing. "This is a no-brainer, it is obvious, it is inevitable, it is a juggernaut that cannot be stopped," he said. "California is a leader, it will lead in this. And I say, hallelujah."

For all the governor's certitude, it may be premature to declare the online college a sure fix to the state's yawning gaps in educational and economic opportunity. The unknowns are many: Will job seekers or employers find value in an institution that offers only certificates and credentials, as is the plan for new college, not the degrees so frequently required for middle-class work?

Digital learning promises convenience, but will harried parents and overburdened breadwinners be any more likely to log onto a computer than set foot in a classroom? If they do register for an online course, will they flourish? After all, studies consistently show that students — low-income and first-generation students most especially — do better in face-to-face or hybrid courses.

Backers of the new college, like Eloy Ortiz Oakley, chancellor of the community-college system, pledge to

consult with employers and unions to make sure the competency-based credentials offered are prized in the workplace. Research has identified interventions that can help online course takers perform well; starting from scratch, such strategies can be baked in. "We will do as much as possible," Oakley says, "to give them the best opportunity for success."

Success, for the college or its students, cannot be guaranteed, but the national spotlight on the online-education experiment here is assured. Governor Brown's claims may be audacious, but so, too, is his, and California's, ambition.

**B**rown's first elected office, in 1969, was as a community-college trustee in Los Angeles. His ideas about online education go back nearly as far: Toward the end of his first two terms as governor, in the early 1980s, he picked up a book by a pair of French futurists that theorized about the impact of digital communications on society. The tome was intended to raise alarms about computerization's reach, but Brown was inspired.

By the time he returned to the governor's mansion, three decades later, he was a firm proponent of online learning, enthusiastic about its potential to open the doors of college to those who couldn't, or wouldn't, set foot on a campus. He advocated for college credit for massive open online courses and for deals between the state's public colleges and private providers like Udacity. But a pilot project to offer MOOC-like introductory courses was shut down because of poor student performance, and faculty opposition killed the online credit push.

Undaunted, Brown pressed for establishment of the [Online Education Initiative](#), a virtual exchange that allows community-college students to take courses from campuses across the state. Some 7,800 courses are now available through the initiative.



Jeffrey Greenberg, UIG, Getty Images

The new college is being created to help California's adults improve their job prospects in growing fields like IT support.

But the pace of change was not fast enough for Brown. Last year he directed Oakley, the community-college chancellor, to draft plans for an online-only college. Unlike the Online Education Initiative, which serves a largely traditional-age population that intends to transfer to a four-year college, the new institution would have a different audience: working adults.

The need is real. Sixty percent of jobs in the state require some sort of training beyond high school, but the majority of Californians ages 25 to 34 do not have even an associate degree. Though the high-tech economy here is thriving, many workers are vulnerable to automation and other employment shifts.

What's less certain is whether online education is the answer. A half-dozen [recent studies](#) have all come to the same conclusion: Community-college students struggle with online learning. They are less likely to complete the online-only version of a course, receive a passing grade, or earn an A or B than are their counterparts taking in-person or hybrid courses. (Paradoxically, students who take some distance courses are actually [more likely to graduate](#) than those who don't take any.)

California is no different. In 2014 the Public Policy Institute of California examined community-college students' passing rates online as well as their grades in subsequent courses in related fields [and found](#) that success rates in online courses were 10 to 14 percentage points lower than in traditional classes.

Troublingly, achievement gaps for students of racial and ethnic minorities were even larger online, says Hans P. Johnson, a senior fellow at the institute and an author of the report. Among the stranded workers the new online college hopes to reach, many are from minority groups.

Despite such outcomes, online courses are growing in popularity. While overall college enrollments in the United States are flat or even declining, the number of Americans learning online is on the rise.

Distance education offers just-in-time learning, a convenience that may be especially appealing to adult students balancing coursework with a job — or jobs — and a family. "We are the generation of Amazon and Netflix," says Alma Salazar, who leads education and work-force-development programs at the Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce. "We want things on demand."

Still, in California, it's not clear that there's pent-up desire for online education, nor is it a given that a virtual college would knock down the barriers that have kept millions of workers in the state from continuing their education. The state Legislative Analyst's Office noted as much in its [assessment of the proposal](#), writing, "The administration does not identify specific root causes responsible for low educational attainment among some groups. As a result, it is unclear if an online college would address these root issues."

Jonathan Lightman, executive director of the Faculty Association of California Community Colleges, doesn't mince words. The new college, he says, "has the appearance of a solution in search of a problem."

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Lightman worries that the online college could be a shiny new competitor, undermining the other colleges and luring students with the promise of flexible schedules and competency-based learning.

Serving working adults, after all, is something California's 114 community colleges already do, he says.



Rather than spending \$120 million on a stand-alone college — the 2018-19 budget contains \$100 million in start-up funds, plus \$20 million for continuing costs — lawmakers could have given more money to existing brick-and-mortar institutions for work-force training. Or they could have expanded the Online Education Initiative.



Anne Cusack, Los Angeles Times, Getty Images

One of the first certificate programs announced by planners of the new college is in medical records management.

"What," Lightman asks, "if it starts siphoning off students?"

Then the new college wouldn't be meeting its goal of reaching an unserved population, Oakley says. And unlike the system's other colleges, it will award no degrees, only short-term credentials.

Supporters of the online college say certificate programs make sense because they quickly give workers specific skills to get a promotion or new job. Each credential will be developed in partnership with employers and labor unions to ensure that it meets work-force demands.

In national research, workers who earn short-term certificates see a [modest but real](#) salary boost, although

the labor-market gains vary with the age of the student and the program of study. The two credentials announced for the online college so far, in medical coding and information-technology support, are in fields that are projected to grow over the next decade.

Still, the biggest job growth in the state — one for which demand far outstrips supply — is for holders of bachelor's degrees. Will workers want to invest in a short-term credential? "Is there really a market value to a certificate?" says Phil Hill, an education-technology consultant and an author of the e-Literate blog.

Oakley, in fact, agrees that, in the long term, many workers will need more than a credential to continue to advance. The online college, he hopes, will be an "on ramp" to further education — at the system's 114 other institutions.

**S**ome of the innovations adopted by the online community college — like the ability to start classes on a flexible schedule rather than keep to the academic calendar — could also eventually spill over to the brick-and-mortar institutions.

In starting from scratch, the architects of the college have carte blanche, the ability to take digital education in a new direction. Thus far they've laid out some general principles — and the ideas are far from revolutionary, online learning experts say.

Like the California college, [Western Governors University](#) emphasizes competency-based education, although it awards primarily online bachelor's and professional degrees. Kentucky's community and technical colleges have come together to form "[Learn on Demand](#)," a slate of self-paced courses for working adults. Rio Salado College, a two-year institution in Arizona, is a pioneer in online learning, one that boasts 40 university partners and 184,000 credit hours transferred last year. And, of course, for-profit providers have long made inroads in the online market and with nontraditional students.



Kevin Fiscus for The Chronicle

Gov. Jerry Brown (center) discussed the new online college last month at a meeting of the California Community Colleges Board of Governors. "California is a leader, it will lead in this," he told the board. "And I say, hallelujah."

If the new institution features a little of this and some of that, it will be by intent. Oakley says the college will unapologetically poach the best ideas from those that have come before. More than three decades on, online education is past its period of trial and error, and California can both benefit from the breakthroughs and avoid the mistakes of those came before. Call it late-adopter advantage.

In the early days, online courses were often just digitized versions of what had been taught in a traditional classroom: a recorded lecture and some slides. Now it's possible to purpose-build courses for a virtual environment. At Arizona State University, for instance, 30 instructional designers work with faculty members to create the optimal learning environment for their particular courses. For a photography course, that means finding a tool that makes it easy to upload and comment on student portfolios. A biology course uses a platform that simulates the experience of working in a lab.

Current technology makes it possible to have a more effective and immersive learning environment than



just a few years ago, says Michael M. Crow, Arizona State's president, who has been informally advising California on the new college. [Analytic tools](#) can help professors keep track of where students stumble — have they gone too long without logging in? repeated a lesson? failed a quiz? — and intervene. Higher-quality and more-available video can improve interactivity and help build a sense of community that too often has been lacking in online courses.

Professors can hold office hours by video conferencing and online chat, while automated bots send students messages to help them stay on schedule. Even career services are going virtual, with résumé-writing workshops and job fairs going online.



James Quigg, The Daily Press, AP Images

Credentials can help workers move up in growing fields like health care.

Nor will the new college have to look far afield for ideas. The Online Education Initiative has been working to develop a set of best practices, like a diagnostic tool to help assess students' readiness for online learning and 24/7 tutoring — including in languages other than English for non-native speakers — by phone and chat. "We know our students may need support at 3 a.m. on Sunday and on holidays, too," says Jory Hadsell, the initiative's executive director.

There are signs the interventions are working.

According to Laura Hope, executive vice chancellor for education services, the community-college system has narrowed the gap in success rates between online and face-to-face courses from the 10 percentage points identified by the Public Policy Institute of California to just 4 percentage points.

The Online Education Initiative serves a different student population than the new college will, but Hope and others say it provides evidence that with careful interventions, students can succeed in a digital environment. Key will be embedding those strategies across the curriculum so that all students benefit.

**B**ut if the online college echoes some of the best that's come before, it also is an opportunity to explore and innovate. The college's scale, if successful, could allow it to go all in on wholesale change, like investing in intensive advising or a state-of-the-art mentoring model. Or it could

seed multiple experimental approaches and identify what sticks. It could be distance education's largest demonstration project, a giant guinea pig.

Starting a college is an ambitious undertaking, but many observers say their real fear is not overreach but that the creators will not think big enough. "The more it imitates what we have now," says Richard Garrett, chief research officer at Eduventures, a consulting company, "the worse it's going to be."

With a deadline written into law that the first students be enrolled by the end of 2019, it could be tempting to bring on an outsider partner with greater experience in online education, says Garrett. But that could result in the full adoption of a pre-existing model, squandering the potential of starting with a blank slate.

For his part, Oakley says he would consider working with a third party, but he pledges not to "just go shopping for the cheapest outsourcing." Faculty members will control instruction and curriculum design.

First, of course, those faculty members will have to be hired, as will the president and top administrators. As a stand-alone entity, the college will also have to apply for accreditation. All this will happen under the watchful eye of lawmakers as well as faculty members across the community-college system, who, while they have dropped their outright opposition, remain skeptical of the online institution. And it will be without its biggest booster, Brown, whose fourth term as governor will end in January.

Under such scrutiny, there is pressure to get it right, and fast, says Hill, the technology consultant. He points to the University of Florida's online college, which, as in California, was pushed by elected officials. An overly aggressive timeline and unrealistic expectations for out-of-state enrollments cause UF Online to falter, though it has [since righted itself](#), Hill says.

"There's a lot of risk of 'I told you so,' " he says. "But if it works, other states will look to California."

Because of its sheer size — the community-college system here serves three times as many students as does the system in the next-largest state, Texas — it's axiomatic to pay attention whenever California announces new plans for higher education. Already, philanthropic groups like the Kresge Foundation and Walmart's Economic Mobility for Retail Workers Project have contributed \$3.5 million to help jump-start planning for the online college.

In this case, size matters. Unlike other recent blockbuster moves in distance education, such as Purdue University's [purchase of a for-profit behemoth](#), Kaplan University, the online college isn't about revenues

or prestige or branding. It's not a business decision — California community-college students [pay the lowest tuition](#) in the country — but an attempt to expand access to education on a grand scale.

If successful, the college could open up education to many more Californians. And so it will be judged not by its marketing materials or its revenue numbers, but on its ability to change employment outcomes, to shift social mobility, on whether it can be a lifeline to workers becalmed by shifting economic tides.

"This is not a slam dunk," says Crow, the Arizona State president. "No one has operated on this scale.

"They have in their hand the opportunity to take democratization of higher education to the next level."


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