

California Politico Pro

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California legislators skewer state's first-ever online community college

Senators grilled Calbright College officials for four hours in a tense Capitol hearing Thursday, openly wondering whether former Gov. Jerry Brown's proposal for the state's first online community college was a mistake.

The Legislature approved the opening of Calbright College in 2018 as a fully online, go-at-your-own-pace program aimed at working adults with a more flexible format than the state's other 114 community colleges.

The school officially opened last year and now serves more than 400 students, offering certifications in information technology, medical coding and cybersecurity.

The state has spent \$100 million toward startup costs and expects to provide \$20 million for Calbright annually. But the program is off to a rough start, including the abrupt resignation of Calbright CEO Heather Hiles in January, less than four months after the college started accepting students.

In a joint Senate Budget and Education Committee hearing on Thursday, lawmakers called into question the college's "extraordinary funding levels" and why it is being treated separately from the state's other community colleges — many of which already offer online courses.

"I still don't understand why our existing programs can't do the same thing," Sen. Richard Pan (D-Sacramento) said. "What would we had gotten if we would've decided to put the money in our existing community college system?"

Sen. María Elena Durazo (D-Los Angeles) compared Calbright to a charter school. She and other Democrats have fought against the privately operated K-12 schools, arguing they unfairly operate under different rules while using the same pot of education funding as traditional schools.

Calbright is overseen directly by the California Community Colleges Board of Governors instead of being part of a district and having its own trustees.

"We said, 'Let's be innovative, let's find a different way of reaching our working class communities,' but that doesn't yet to me justify having a separate entity and a separate governing system," Durazo said. "Frankly I'm a little concerned of the potential of taking away from other community colleges. It's kind of like a charter school."

Calbright has drawn fire in particular from the California Federation of Teachers, which represents community college faculty. The union says the new program unnecessarily duplicates existing programs and takes issue with the \$385,000 salary Hiles received.

California Community Colleges Chancellor Eloy Ortiz Oakley admitted the school is off to “a rocky start” but defended the program, arguing it’s not duplicative of other schools because it offers courses outside the traditional academic calendar and focuses on getting students "a living wage."

“This is all this faculty and staff are asked to do: serve working learners. Unlike most of our other colleges, Calbright is focused on that one mission,” he said. “This whole question of why would we need another college sort of begs the question why do we have 114 colleges to begin with.”

Calbright officials announced earlier this week that Ajita Talwalker Menon, a former higher education adviser to President Barack Obama, will serve as interim leader of the school.