Frequently Asked Questions

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General

Why is this important?

The online college will be providing a meaningful educational opportunity for working adults to gain the knowledge and skills needed to gain a foothold and advance in our economy. The college will focus on providing greater economic mobility for 2.5 million adult learners in California between 25 to 34 who have a high school diploma but no postsecondary degree. The college will expand access to postsecondary educational opportunities especially for those adults who are unable to physically go to a campus due to work and family obligations. These are students whose needs have gone unaddressed by the current system and will be disproportionately impacted by the dynamic forces reshaping our economy. As Chancellor Oakley has stated many times, the modern economy is unforgiving of those without a credential, and we need a dedicated college that is designed to put the needs of working adults first so that they may jumpstart their career advancement and be set up to succeed in the future.

What evidence is there that access is the key problem for the identified focus population? What is the strategy for reaching that core audience?

There are 2.5 million Californians today who are not accessing higher education either online or in person. Of those, 1.2 million have high school degrees only and have not accessed any higher education whatsoever. Their absence in the current system is evidence that the traditional structure does not work for them. Experts observe that working adults need a system that is affordable, flexible, and customer service-oriented. Without quality, affordable, and flexible online options, many working adults are forced to pay the price, including the 100,000 students accessing online education at private California institutions who are facing significantly higher costs and greater likelihood of burdensome debt.

Several studies also show that older students tend to do better, compared to their younger counterparts, in self-directed, online environments. A recent internal study from Arizona State University indicates that the success rates of their California students accessing in-person and online courses are almost identical.

Efforts to reach working adult learners will include reaching them in their current networks. These efforts must include partnerships with employers and industries, labor unions, community-based organizations, state agencies, and others. Most importantly, extensive engagement with working adults will drive the design of the college's offerings and student supports to ensure the college meets the students where they are.

What is a short-term credential, and what are examples of them?

This college will offer short-term credentials. In the context of the online college, a short-term credential represents a short sequence of classes through which students can demonstrate mastery of skills and competencies that lead to a positive employment outcome, such as a wage gain or promotion. As part of the online college, a short-term credential would be driven by labor market needs, recognized by employers, and co-designed by a cross-section of disciplinary experts and industry. These credentials would be stackable, meaning they can be used to progress toward a more advanced certification or degree.

For example, the information technology field has a number of jobs that require minimum qualifications to promote to supervisor, and a short-term credential can be designed to help workers meet such qualifications to allow career advancement opportunities. Another example is a short-term credential that leads to food handler's license. In a world requiring continued upskilling, we see the short-term credentials which have a labor market value as an educational on-ramp, rather than a dead-end.

What will the college focus on for its initial short-term credentials?

The Chancellor's Office is in the process of evaluating options for the initial pathways. The college will focus on developing programs in fields with employment growth that promote greater economic mobility. The college will develop these program pathways in partnership with industry and employers, labor organizations, community-based organizations, and students themselves to ensure a greater likelihood of credentials with strong labor market value. The Chancellor's Office is exploring potential programs in several areas, including advanced manufacturing, healthcare, the service sector, in-home support services, and child development. These pathways will be identified and included in the Governor's May Revision.

Will the college be offering associate's degrees?

The college's focus will be developing short-term credentials that have labor market value and can lead to wage gain, promotional opportunity, or retaining relevant skills in a current job. The college will offer an academic program necessary to become accredited as an institution. However, such degrees will not be the focus of the college.

Can students who don't fit into the focus population take a class at the online college?

Consistent with the community college's open access mission, this college would be open to any interested student. While the college's focus would be the 2.5 million adults between the ages of 25 and 34 who have a high school degree but no postsecondary degree, are working or have family obligations, and are not currently accessing postsecondary education, there may be other Californians who could benefit from the college's flexible and affordable offerings.

Will dual enrollment be part of this college?

No. The college is not expected to seek out College and Career Access Pathways Partnership agreements.

What's the name of the online community college?

The college is currently referred to as the California Online Community College.

Will the online college impact student enrollment from other colleges? Why or why not?

The online college's focus will be to provide educational opportunities to working adults who are not currently accessing higher education. Therefore, the college is not expected to compete with other community colleges because it will be providing additional access for students not currently being served in higher education.

There are currently 2.5 million California adult learners between 25 to 34 who have a high school diploma but no postsecondary degree, which is a larger number of students than is served by the system in its entirety. This college represents an opportunity to grow the system's overall enrollment. Beyond the short-term programs offered by the online college, the college is expected to teach its students how to access further educational opportunities through their local community colleges.

This proposal also dovetails with the Administration's proposal to the community college funding structure. By moving away from exclusively funding community colleges based upon enrollment by including components for student diversity and student outcomes, colleges in general won't be competing with each other or the online college for students but focusing on improving access and outcomes.

Is there a plan to backfill the districts with any funding they might lose?

No. The online college will not impact student enrollment from other colleges.

Other Options

Online courses are already offered at many community colleges in California. Why create a new college when colleges are already offering online courses?

The California Community Colleges offer a wide selection of online courses and programs, but those courses and programs are focused on expanding access to existing courses for traditional college students. The online college will focus specifically on the working adults who are currently unserved in the higher education system and need a higher wage, improved economic mobility, and protection against future recessions. The online college will offer programs using a model of competency-based education for this focus population. The college will also provide short-term courses and credentials or "bursts of education" that are stackable toward a degree, flexible course scheduling and start times not tied to the academic calendar, and specialized and technology-enabled student supports. The new college will combine and coordinate all these features into one entity to create an online experience specifically geared toward increased wages for students.

Why is it necessary to create a new entity?

The current structure is not serving these individuals. The existing structures of the community colleges make it very challenging to produce "on-demand" and flexible offerings that are envisioned for the online college. Regulations tie the colleges to a traditional academic calendar and semester schedule and prevent them from offering flexible course start dates. Additionally, the new online college will need to offer on-demand student support, at times late at night or on the weekends. Given the existing structures and the need for a focused strategy to serve these individuals, it is necessary to create a new entity.

How is this proposal different from the Online Education Initiative?

The Online Education Initiative (OEI) is focused on traditional college students. OEI established a technological infrastructure to expand online offerings at all 114 community colleges, built services to support students taking online courses, and established a Course Exchange to allow students to seamlessly enroll in online courses within six currently participating colleges. In serving traditional students, OEI focuses on serving the transfer needs of students, such as building out the Associate Degree for Transfer pathways, as well as creating online classes for bottleneck gateway courses required to transfer.

The new online college will offer programs for working adults who are not currently accessing higher education and need wage gain and promotional opportunities.

Wouldn't a regional model work best when it comes to working with employers and labor organizations to identify and address need?

Creating the online college with a statewide focus allows it to benefit from work done through the Strong Workforce Program, to better understand how to serve regional workforce needs. However, by focusing the college's efforts on statewide economic needs, the system can be responsive to the size and scale of particular upskilling needs across key occupations and industries. In doing so, they can provide an important on-ramp for career advancement and deepen the potential talent pool for future demand-driven credentials generated through the regional consortium efforts.

Given that the new college will need to contract with different entities to help with the in-person support services, why not just work with schools that have the facilities and supports? Why is it better to create new contracts?

From the onset, the online college will work with colleges and organizations with physical facilities and quality support services and will provide educational experiences that can be adapted to the needs of working learners. As the college seeks to support workers in particular industries that have a job skills need, the college can also work with existing regional consortiums—which includes community colleges—to analyze and address the regional industry needs of the state.

The college is expected to partner with labor organizations to provide support for workers, and these labor organizations have infrastructure and the opportunity to allow for the demonstration of skill attainment.

Faculty and Instruction

Who will teach at the online college?

Like other colleges, the online college will have a faculty. The college will leverage the great talent in the system, providing new opportunities for existing community college faculty with disciplinary and online expertise, and will hire additional community college faculty to support the program pathways that are established by this college.

Would faculty regulations be the same or different? What will be the minimum qualifications for faculty?

Unless otherwise specified in law or regulation, the regulations that apply for faculty across existing colleges will apply to the online community college faculty, including minimum qualifications.

What are examples of places where the college can turn to for initial learning and information gathering?

Examples may include, but would not be limited to, Arizona State University Online, Rio Salado Community College, and Colorado State University Online.

Will the faculty be part of a collective bargaining unit?

Yes. Just as with any other college, the college will collectively bargain with faculty. As stated in the trailer bill, initially, the college will meet and confer with representatives of its employees, and as the college becomes more established, it will transition to collective bargaining with representatives of its employees.

Delivery of Online Instruction

Is the online college completely virtual?

The online college will collaborate with numerous entities, including, but not limited to, employers, labor organizations, community-based organizations, existing community colleges, and libraries to ensure students are able to access the in-person experiences and supports they need to successfully complete their educational objective. These supports might include accessing computer labs or science labs, online tutoring, in-person meet-ups, meetings with coaches and mentors, and hands-on experiences through apprenticeship and work-based learning activities with employers.

Does online education work? Does online education provide the same quality as a traditional educational setting?

Online education is a broad term that can mean completely online courses, massive open online courses (MOOCs), and courses with both online and in-person components (hybrid courses). Most studies focus on the success of online courses for traditional students rather than working adults.

Recent online education trends indicate increasing student enrollment and improving course completion trends. In 2015-16, roughly one in three California community college students, or roughly 800,000 students, were enrolled in at least one online community college course. Online course completion rates have been improving over time at the community colleges. In 2006, there was a 12 percentage point gap in success rates between online and in-person courses. Today, it's less than 5 percentage points. Evidence indicates that the gap is closing, and students continue to succeed in online courses at higher rates.

Several studies also show that older students tend to do better, compared to their younger counterparts, in self-directed, online environments. A recent internal study from Arizona State University indicates that the success rates of their California students accessing in-person and online courses are almost identical.

When it comes to success for online and in-person courses, student support matters. Environmental factors such as effective course design, creating regular and effective student interaction, and wraparound support services are vital. The online college will be designed with the student supports needed to accommodate working adults who need wage gain and promotional opportunities.

Given discrepancies in internet access between urban and rural areas, how will rural students be served?

Most Californians have access to broadband services. A 2016 PUC report indicates that approximately 95 percent of California households have wired broadband availability. Recent legislation authorized an additional $330 million in broadband funding and established a goal intended to reduce the urban-rural gap in access to broadband. Additionally, the Administration has proposed $5 million one-time General Fund to support additional broadband connectivity at local libraries.

Many Californians have access to smartphones that provide internet access. As a result, the college will develop or adapt technology that is mobile-friendly. With a smartphone and a computer, a student may also have the ability to use hotspot technology to access the Internet.

Will students take courses directly on their phones?

The online college is expected to augment online education by developing and adapting technology that is mobile-friendly for students. While not all coursework, exercises, or support services can be completed or accessed on a smartphone, students would benefit from a technological platform that is friendly to smartphones, including completing tutorials at any time or accessing student supports as needed.

How would the college address any equity gaps for underrepresented minority students?

Research indicates that the context in which the online education is delivered matters for student success. Environmental factors like effective course design, institutional support, faculty support and development, student orientation, wraparound support services, and creating regular and effective student interaction are all vital to success in online education. Providing these services will be a core focus of the college.

The bill creates a research unit that will study achievement gaps and disseminate that information for broader application across all community colleges.

Will the college make online content and technologies accessible to individuals with disabilities?

Yes. The college will subject to the same requirements and standards as all other colleges to ensure that students with disabilities can access the educational benefits and opportunities of online courses and technology. The online college will comply with all state and federal website accessibility requirements.

Fees, Financial Aid and Funding

What is the student fee structure?

The online college will maintain the longstanding tradition of keeping community college affordable. The cost per unit structure for the community colleges would continue to be set by the Legislature, and this would apply to all colleges, including the online college. Under this proposal, the Legislature would authorize the college to offer an experimental tuition model for students, such as a subscription model for students to take as many courses as they would like for a set time period. Any such experimental model would need to be consistent with general per-unit fee required of all colleges and any fee structure would include fee waiver options that fulfill the intent of existing waivers.

Will those students enrolling in the online college be eligible for free college (also known as AB 19 or the College Promise Program)?

Students enrolling in the online college would be eligible for fee waivers that are consistent with the intent of College Promise Waivers and AB 19 waivers.

How will the online college fit into the new funding formula?

The online college district would be eligible for general apportionments funding under the new funding formula. For the first three years that the district can claim apportionments funding, the district's Student Success Incentive Grants—that is, the part of the formula that reward student success—would be based on the statewide average for all other community college districts.

Moreover, the growth in enrollment for the online college district would be computed separately from the other community colleges.

Will all the categorical programs apply to the online college?

As with all community college districts, the proposed district will be eligible to participate in categorical programs. The Chancellor's Office will monitor participation and funding to ensure it does not disparately impact other colleges' categorical funding.

Will the college qualify to receive Proposition 98 funds?

Yes. The college will be established as a local education agency within the community college system and thus will be eligible for Proposition 98 funds. Additionally, the trailer bill language specifies that no Proposition 98 General Fund may be used to support the state operations of the Chancellor's Office.

Governance and Accountability

What is the governance structure of the online college?

The Board of Governors of the California Community Colleges will initially serve as the governing board. No later than 2025, a district-specific Board of Trustees would be established.

The online college will be an independent body that is governed by a local, independent district that is guided by principles established by the Chancellor's Office. The independent college will work closely with the Chancellor's Office, but just like with any other college, the online college will be run by a college president and his or her staff. The Board of Trustees would be comprised of five voting members, with one member appointed by the Speaker of the Assembly, one member appointed by the Senate Committee on Rules, and three members appointed by the Governor. Additionally, there would be two nonvoting members appointed by the Governor.

How will the college ensure that it is successful?

The Administration expects the college will, at a minimum, be held to the same accountability standards as all other community college districts. Additionally, the Administration's proposed trailer bill reflects an implementation timeframe for the college to ensure the college is progressing toward full implementation, and the college will report accountability metrics to the Legislature and the Department of Finance.

Will the college be accredited? How is this college able to offer courses before accreditation?

The online college will seek accreditation from a U.S. Department of Education-recognized accrediting agency. There will be a ramp-up phase in the initial years of implementation that prepare the college for accreditation. Specifically, the college will develop an accreditation plan within the first two years of implementation and will apply for accreditation by the third year.

As a general matter, new colleges must enroll students before seeking accreditation. There will be a ramp-up period for this college, and during that time, the expectation is to begin the process of accreditation planning, along with establishing other start-up processes for the college. To mitigate the impact on students during this process, the college is expected to design credentials that have value to employers and students.

Before the college is accredited, students will be eligible for state financial aid programs such as community college fee waivers, but not federal financial aid. It is not unusual for new colleges to offer scholarships to the initial group of students to help offset any costs associated with their program of study, and that is an option this college will explore.

Why not put the online college at an existing district that already has accreditation?

Accreditation is granted to colleges and not to districts. Placing the online college within an existing district would not expedite or allow the college to skip the accreditation process.

What are the procurement requirements for the online college? What competitive bidding and contracting requirements will it have?

The existing competitive bidding and state contracting requirements would apply to this college in the same manner that they apply to all other colleges. A local district has slightly more flexibility than a state agency, but state law still applies to all state, county, municipal, and special districts.