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Calbright College challenges the stigma of online learning.

“We were not proposing ‘just another college’ but one that focused on the needs of the student and the employer, above the needs of the academic institution.”

Creating a new approach to preparing and supporting working adults in our ever-changing economy was so far out of the box that there was much opposition to the conversation. But after a two-year advocacy and public affairs *campaign* led by *Karen Zamarripa Consulting*, the first statewide online, competency-based community college was created, giving an estimated 8 million working adults (between 25 and 34) access to short-term certificates and credentials. **Calbright College** started enrolling students in Fall 2019 and its future graduates will have the chance to remain competitive in the ever-changing workforce — earning real living wages, benefits, and security for themselves and their families.

Calbright College exists today not only because former Governor Jerry Brown envisioned the need for new opportunities for working adults outside the state’s traditional higher education structure, but also because *Karen Zamarripa Consulting* advocated for its creation from the very beginning. Our team created a campaign and a movement to overcome the status quo. We leveraged political and policy knowledge, as well as previous successes with comprehensive advocacy campaigns, to make the vision a reality. We did so much more than simply lobby legislators. Here’s our story.

In 2017-18, then-Governor Brown called upon the *California Community Colleges (CCC)* and system Chancellor, Eloy Oakley, to develop a new training and educational approach for working adults – a statewide online community college to provide quality, competency-based and online programs so students could move quickly and efficiently to their certificate or credential. After some due diligence and research, the Governor’s budget proposed the establishment of a new college district, now known as *CalBright College*, with combined ongoing and one-time funding of \$120 million.

People in and around higher education met the Governor’s proposal with skepticism and in some cases, outright opposition: we proposed a college that would focus on the needs of the student and the employer above the needs of an academic institution. This was not “just another college.” The CCC Academic Senate and the faculty unions were quick to object to the proposal, arguing that the new district was unnecessary given local programs and an underlying belief that online teaching and learning is not effective. Local community college districts up and down the state worked their legislators

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at home and often behind the scenes against the proposal, arguing that they had programs that met the needs of working adults in their community, and the new college would negatively impact their enrollment and funding levels.

Governor Brown worked closely with Chancellor Oakley to see this endeavor come to life; however, we still needed an effective campaign to succeed. The team worked hand in glove with the two leaders and the Board of Governors on traditional advocacy efforts in the State Capitol, but it was clear we needed to do more than that to get over the line. As a result, we implemented the following key components:

- **Coalition Building:** Employers, public sector unions, local and statewide chamber of commerce, community-based and economic development organizations, reform advocacy groups and others were sought after to not only endorse the proposal but advocate locally with legislators and in Sacramento. We had the support of organizations such as the Bay Area Council, NEXT GEN, Campaign for College Opportunity, NAACP, WEAVE, California Hispanic Chambers of Commerce, to name a few.
- **Neutralize Union Opposition:** The Democratically controlled legislature has a long-standing commitment to unions. The best way to counter the opposition of faculty unions was to seek the endorsement of others. The team worked hard to get the endorsements of the SEIU-UHW and SEIU 1000 each respectively interested in preparing their members for new jobs and/or promotions in such fields as medical coding and business IT. We were also able to get the support of the California School Employees Association (CSEA). And ultimately, we achieved neutrality from the California Teachers Association (CTA) with language that assured union representation for the faculty and staff of the new district.
- **Coordinate Advocate Efforts:** Coalition members and other stakeholders were called upon throughout the process to meet with legislators and key staff, testify at critical budget hearings, write letters of support, and participate in print and social media efforts. These “third party” voices augmented the work of system advocates making the issue real at home for legislators.
- **Strategic Communications:** Working closely with public affairs partners we were able to use earned media to tell our story to a broader public who seemed eager to learn more about this proposed alternative. A self-paced program for working adults caught fire in many communities, regions

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and workforce sectors given us even more of the support needed with elected officials.

The success story for **Calbright** has only just begun – and the future is brighter for millions of single parents and working adults who need the convenience of short-term credentials and certificates without the burden of strict schedules and excessive costs and associated debt.

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