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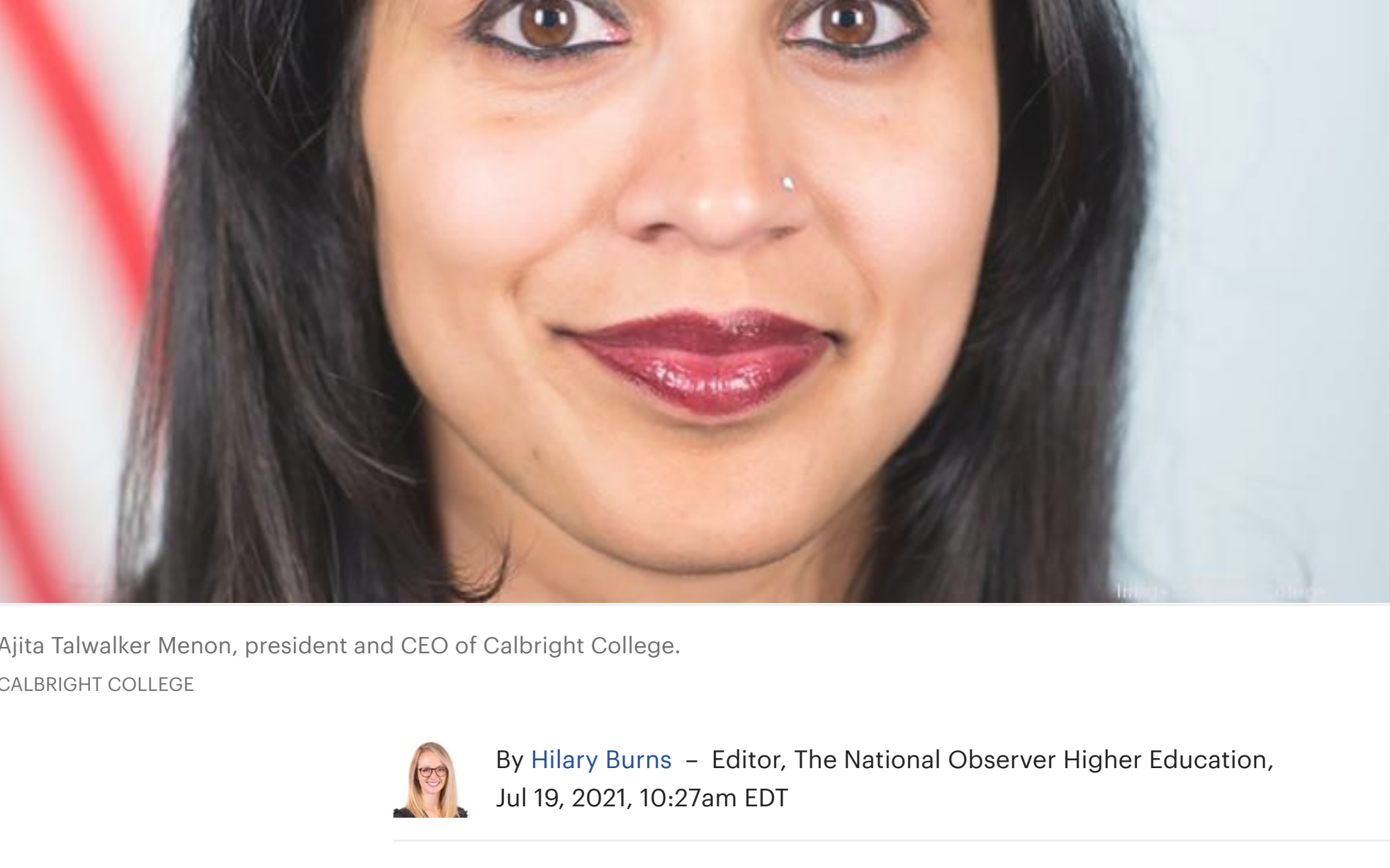
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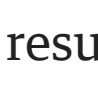
Education

California's new community college got off to a rocky start. Here's how its president plans to right the ship.

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Ajita Talwalker Menon, president and CEO of Calbright College.
CALBRIGHT COLLEGE



By Hilary Burns – Editor, The National Observer Higher Education,
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IN THIS ARTICLE

Colleges & Universities
Topic

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion
Topic

Ajita Talwalker
Person

Ajita Talwalker Menon has the unusual opportunity of leading an upstart, public community college aiming to educate a diverse spectrum of Californians online. She has about 18 months to prove herself before hitting a deadline that could result in the school's closure.

Calbright College opened in 2019 but most of the original leadership team left in 2020 following a number of missteps, including questionable hiring practices, according to a scathing state audit published in the spring. The report also blamed the school's former executive team for missing a handful of budgeting and enrollment goals that have put Calbright far behind schedule in "achieving its mission."

As CEO and president of Calbright, Menon now has until December 2022 to right the ship, including developing "a clear and robust strategy for how it will accomplish its mission." That includes growing enrollment, the audit said. The college currently has about 500 students.

Menon previously served as a White House special assistant for higher education policy during the Obama administration, leading efforts to expand college opportunity and completion. She recently spoke with *The Business Journals'* Hilary Burns about the opportunity she sees to help retrain and reskill students outside the 18-to-24-year-old range, particularly military veterans, former prisoners, immigrants and working adults. She also weighed in on what went wrong at Calbright in its early days. The following is an edited transcript of their conversation.

You have faced obstacles from state lawmakers who are calling to terminate Calbright. How is everything going?

We're actually very excited because earlier this spring our board of trustees approved a three-year strategic vision for the college. Emerging from what has been for all of us an extraordinarily challenging year, it was exciting to be able to use that as a way to reinvigorate and refocus the efforts of the college around the urgency at the moment.

The strategic vision sets us on a course towards higher-quality growth for the college. We have 500 students, but the strategic vision puts us on a growth trajectory within the next three years. And more importantly, perhaps, is that the students will reflect the state's tremendous racial diversity and geographic diversity. And more than 90% of our current students are adults over the age of 25 – those who really need a different kind of college that can present new opportunities for them, coupled with the ways in which we might support their transitions in the labor market.



Could you talk more about how you're trying to improve Calbright's graduation and enrollment rates by 2022 as your auditors have outlined?

The strategic vision sets a framework for us to really dig into the operational planning in response to the recommendation of the auditors. For most folks, it's unfamiliar to have a startup public college, being built from the ground up. That is why the time frame for the full development of the college was seven years. And we're still very much in the first half of that game.

I mention that because I think the work that we're wading into to strengthen our processes and some of the implementation plans that we have are exactly where our focus is going to be for several months. That is going to set a very solid foundation. We're all in this space where we're trying to remake what the future of higher education looks like. We're thinking about a more student-centered approach, and the idea of keeping our population and their unique needs at the forefront of everything that we do.

When you see some of the programs that we've launched recently since I've taken the helm of the college, they are very focused on supporting those (career) transitions. So, when we look at who's the most economically displaced right now, we look at restaurant workers, we look at folks who are in low-wage customer-service roles. We recognize that there's a great deal of uncertainty about how those industries are going to rebound. And this moment of displacement can also be a moment of opportunity and of hope for people. We see that with a lot of the students that are coming into our institution. We help them find the opportunity to build on those skills to transition them into new areas of the economy.

What went wrong in the early days?

I think we give little grace for how hard this work is. There were several missteps on the part of the prior leadership and you can identify those problems from the audit report itself. There were several legitimate things that needed to be corrected.

And so when I first came into the organization, we undertook a review and we spent a great deal of time making sure that we were setting up the college to be on stronger footing and honoring its responsibilities as a public institution, but also laying the groundwork for improvements to the student experience and instructional programing. When you are a startup, you have to set all the business processes and systems and that takes a considerable amount of time. That's part of why there's a there's a timeframe for implementation that's articulated in the statute.

There were definitely some missteps on the part of my predecessor, which were corrected. I'm excited about where we are right now because it's literally an opportunity for us to hit the accelerator and we've got a great team in place.

What attracted you to this position, especially given how much work this will be to get up and running?

I get asked this question all the time. I would not have thought that I was headed for a career for the college president's office but I think the opportunity that we have with his particular college to really transform the broken parts of higher education for this population of learners.

There are a lot of things that traditional colleges do really well, and they were built to do certain things really well. But the needs have evolved so greatly and very little has evolved in higher education and in workforce over that period. As these trends and these economic conditions have shifted so radically, we have not innovated and evolved in the ways that we need to.

In this moment as a higher-education leader, it has to be about where you can place yourself to have the greatest impact for addressing some of the structural challenges, the parts of our systems that haven't worked for some populations of learners. We don't want to repeat the missteps of the last recession where we saw many members of our communities fall out of the labor force, which made it very difficult for them to rebound in a meaningful way. That has me excited every day because I think this is exactly what's needed.

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