

Connected Bay Area recruiter gets no bid contract as online community college staffs up

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Dan Morain <https://calmatters.org/articles/blog/carolyn-carpeneti-online-college-contract-newsom-willie-brown/>

MARCH 18, 2019

Bay Area executive recruiter Carolyn Carpeneti has been awarded a \$500,000 no bid contract to help staff up the California online community college. Carpeneti has a daughter with former San Francisco Mayor Willie Brown.

California's new online community college director, hoping to quickly establish her executive team, pushed Monday to grant a no-bid contract of up to \$500,000 to an executive recruiter who is a friend and long has been a part of San Francisco's political scene.

[Heather Hiles](#), president of the nascent online college, has a goal of starting classes this fall. The community college board approved Hiles' choice of executive recruiter Carolyn Carpeneti, even though some community college board members abstained, contending the contract should have been put out to competitive bid.

"I felt like she was far and away the best qualified," Hiles said. Citing her goal of starting classes in a matter months, she added: "If I don't get it staffed up, I can't get it built."

Before becoming an executive recruiter, Carpeneti was a political fundraiser whose clients included then-San Francisco Mayor Willie Brown. Brown and Carpeneti became romantically involved and [had a daughter in 2001](#). In 2003, the [San Francisco Chronicle reported](#) that "nonprofit groups and political committees controlled by the mayor and his allies" paid Carpeneti \$2.33 million over a five-year period.

In the early 2000s, Carpeneti did consulting work for former Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, then-Gov. Gray Davis, and former Lt. Gov. Cruz Bustamante, among others.

"That's not my concern," Hiles said of Carpeneti's relationships. "My concern is who is best qualified."



In an interview with CALmatters, Carpeneti said she shifted to executive recruiting more than a decade ago, and has focused on recruiting in the tech and educational fields. She called Brown a good friend and father, but said he has had no role in her executive recruiting business.

Over dinner with Brown on Saturday, she said, she mentioned the potential of her online community college gig. He had never heard of the online college, or the contract.

Carpeneti did, however, say that her relationship with Hiles was key to her hiring.

"I highly admire her," Carpeneti said. "She is the reason why I even took on this contract. I really believe in the mission. If the right people are in place, ... this can be a beacon for the rest of the nation."

Hiles came to the community college system from a venture capital fund. She is a Yale graduate, founder of digital portfolio platform Pathbrite and a former official at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

Hiles also is connected to San Francisco politics, having overseen communications for Gov. Gavin Newsom while he was running to succeed Brown as mayor of San Francisco in 2003. Newsom subsequently appointed Hiles to a seat on the San Francisco Unified School District board.

Gov. Jerry Brown pushed for creation of the online college, viewing it as key to helping train 8 million-plus underemployed and unemployed Californians who are not able to gain new skills by attending traditional brick and mortar campuses. Many of the students likely will be women, Hiles said.

Carpeneti and her firm, The Leadership Group, are supposed to recruit six top executives, including ones who will oversee product and marketing, and finance and administration; plus others identified as "chief learning officer," "chief of workforce programs," "chief success officer" and "chief people officer."

Carpeneti's goal is to have the people in place by May. Her pay would be capped at \$92,000 for each person she recruits. The [contract says](#) she will conduct a new search for free if the recruits leave before serving in their positions for one year.

"We're moving fast and trying not to break things," Tom Epstein, president of the community college board, said at Monday's hearing.