
SENATE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

Senator Sabrina Cervantes, Chair
2025 - 2026 Regular Session

AB 1641 (Jackson) - Postsecondary education: segments: tribal colleges and universities

Version: May 19, 2026

Urgency: No

Hearing Date: June 15, 2026

Policy Vote: ED. 7 - 0

Mandate: No

Consultant: Lenin Del Castillo

Bill Summary: This bill expands the statutory definition of public higher education to include tribal colleges and universities (TCUs) located in California and operated by an Indian tribal government, placing TCUs within the same statutory category as California Community Colleges (CCC), the California State University (CSU), and the University of California (UC).

Fiscal Impact: The UC, CSU, and the Community College Chancellor's Office indicate that the bill would not result in additional costs to the segments. The TCUs would remain tribally governed institutions and separate from the segments' existing governance structures and funding formulas. However, staff notes that the placement of TCUs in the Donahoe Higher Education Act and its establishment as a fourth segment of higher education could potentially lead to additional General Fund cost pressures, such as providing General Fund support and unrestricted base increases, similar to what is currently provided to UC and CSU. These examples would require future legislative or budgetary action.

Background: According to the analysis of this bill by the Senate Committee on Education, a 2024 needs analysis prepared by California Indian Nations College as part of a feasibility study on tribal higher education in California describes TCUs as a unique higher education model developed to address longstanding access and retention challenges for Native American students. According to the report, tribal colleges emerged nationally to address access and success barriers experienced by Native students in traditional higher education settings, where institutions often lack culturally relevant academic support, Native faculty and mentors, and institutional structures that reflect Native student experiences and community connections. The report describes TCUs as serving functions beyond traditional academic instruction, including workforce development, language preservation, cultural continuity, and support for tribal self-determination. The report also cites evidence that Native students attending TCUs express stronger engagement and support than Native students in non-tribal institutions. For example, Native graduates of TCUs were stated to be twice as likely as peers in non-TCUs to report positive critical support measures during college.

As of 2023, there are 35 accredited TCUs in the country serving approximately 15,300 students. Responding to the higher education needs of Native students, TCUs serve an important role in facilitating college access and persistence for Native students. According to the report, TCUs continue to struggle with a lack of stable federal support and the decline of private funding.

Proposed Law: This bill expands the definition of public higher education under the Donahoe Higher Education Act to include TCUs located in California and operated by an Indian tribal government. This would place TCUs within the same act in statute as the CCCs, CSU, and UC.

Staff Comments: The bill amends the section of the Education Code for California's public higher education framework under the Donahoe Act and place tribal colleges in that section. In doing so, the TCUs would be in the same statutory category the CCCs, CSU, and UC and essentially creates a fourth segment of public higher education.

According to the author, "California's Tribal Colleges and Universities deserved to be recognized for their vital role in uplifting Native American students. These institutions serve as centers of identity, resilience, and opportunity that empower a historically underrepresented group to access and thrive in higher education. By including them in the Education Code, we affirm their importance within the state and lay the foundation for long-term planning that acknowledges the essential role these institutions will continue to play in California's higher education landscape."

-- END --