

Date of Hearing: April 21, 2026

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON HIGHER EDUCATION

Mike Fong, Chair

AB 1858 (Lowenthal) – As Amended April 14, 2026

SUBJECT: California State University: Joint Associate's Degree Pilot Program

SUMMARY: Requires, upon appropriation of the Legislature, the Chancellor of the California State University (CSU) to establish a pilot program to offer an associate degree in general education studies that is jointly conferred by a CSU campus and a community college or independent institution of higher education that awards associate degrees to former CSU students who are no longer enrolled at a CSU campus but have successfully completed coursework equivalent to the requirements for an associate degree and not previously earned an associate degree. Specifically, **this bill**:

- 1) Requires, notwithstanding existing law, the Chancellor of the CSU to establish a pilot program to offer an associate degree that is jointly awarded by the California State University and a postsecondary educational institution to former students who meet both of the following requirements:
 - a) The former student successfully completed coursework equivalent to the requirements for an associate degree; and,
 - b) The former student has not previously earned an associate degree from a postsecondary educational institution.
- 2) Specifies that, notwithstanding existing law, the pilot program will include all of the following:
 - a) The establishment of an associate degree in general education studies, which shall be the official name of an associate degree conferred pursuant to this article;
 - b) A process to jointly confer the degree established pursuant to paragraph 1) above between a CSU campus and a postsecondary educational institution;
 - c) A process for identifying eligible former students; and,
 - d) A mechanism for verifying an eligible former student's completion of the requirements for the associate degree.
- 3) Requires CSU Long Beach to participate in the pilot program. The pilot program may include additional CSU campuses, as determined by the Chancellor of the CSU.
- 4) Requires, on or before January 1, 2032, the Chancellor of the CSU to submit a report to the Legislature, as specified, evaluating the effectiveness of the pilot program at the participating CSU campuses. The report must include, but not be limited to, the number of associate degrees awarded pursuant to this article disaggregated by student demographics, outcomes, and legislative recommendations.

- 5) Specifies that implementation of the pilot program will commence on or before July 1, 2027.
- 6) Specifies that these provisions only become operative upon an appropriation by the Legislature for its purposes.
- 7) Specifies that these provisions become inoperative on June 30, 2032, and, sunsets on January 1, 2033.
- 8) Declares that provisions will be known, and may be cited, as the California State University: Joint Associate's Degree Pilot Program.
- 9) As used in this article, the following definitions apply:
 - a) "Eligible student" means a former student who has met the requirements, as specified.
 - b) "Former student" means a student who is no longer enrolled at a California State University campus.
 - c) "Postsecondary educational institution" means a campus or district of the California Community Colleges or an independent institution of higher education, as specified, that awards associate degrees.

EXISTING LAW:

- 1) Differentiates the missions and functions of public and independent institutions of higher education. Under these provisions:
 - a) The primary mission of the CSU is to offer undergraduate and graduate instruction through the master's degree in the liberal arts and sciences and professional education including teacher education. The CSU is authorized to establish two-year programs only when mutually agreed upon by the Trustees and the CCC Board of Governors (BOG). The CSU is also authorized to jointly award the doctoral degree with the University of California (UC) and with one or more independent institutions of higher education.
 - b) The UC is authorized to provide undergraduate and graduate instruction and has exclusive jurisdiction in public higher education over graduate instruction in the professions of law, medicine, dentistry and veterinary medicine. The UC is also the primary state-supported academic agency for research.
 - c) The independent institutions of higher education are required to provide undergraduate and graduate instruction and research in accordance with their respective missions.
 - d) The mission and function of the CCC is the offering of academic and vocational instruction at the lower division level, and the CCC are authorized to grant the Associate in Arts and the Associate in Science degrees. The community colleges are also required to offer learning supports to close learning gaps, English as a Second Language instruction, and adult noncredit instruction, and support services which help students succeed at the postsecondary level. (Education Code (EDC) Section 66010.4)

FISCAL EFFECT: Unknown.

COMMENTS: *Purpose.* According to the author, “the path to educational success is often not linear. Working students, veterans, parents, and first-generation college students often leave college due to financial hardship, mental health challenges, or other barriers. Many complete enough coursework to earn an associate degree, but existing law provides no mechanism to award that credential at the CSU level, leaving students without recognition for the work they’ve already done. AB 1858 closes that gap.”

The author believes that a joint associates degree program would “...create flexible pathways, reduce lost credits, and address the national ‘Some College, No Degree’ issue. This joint associate degree could be more than a piece of paper to display, it may be just what they need to jumpstart their job search, secure a better paying career, and improve their families’ lives. We need to ensure students earn meaningful credentials that improve their marketability and earning potential.”

Some College, No Credential. In the United States, there are 43.1 million people who stopped out of college without earning a credential — a population often referred to as the "some college, no credential" (SCNC) population. According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center's 2025 SCNC report, 37.6 million of these individuals are working-age adults under 65, a 2.2 percent increase from the prior academic year and all fifty states and the District of Columbia saw increases in their SCNC populations between the 2022-23 and 2023-24 academic years.

California carries a disproportionate share of this national population. An analysis by the Texas A&M University System's Data Science team, drawing on the Clearinghouse data, found that California is home to approximately 5.94 million SCNC adults ages 18-64, accounting for 15.8 percent of the nationwide SCNC total — a figure 31 percent higher than the state's expected share based on its adult population alone. California has the largest SCNC population of any state, with more than double the count of second-ranked Texas. Put simply, roughly 6 million Californians have already begun postsecondary coursework — many substantially — without receiving a credential.

The scale of this population carries significant implications for California's workforce and economy. The Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce projects that more than two-thirds of the roughly 2.2 million job openings expected annually in California between 2021 and 2031 will require some form of postsecondary education or training. At the same time, Lumina Foundation's *A Stronger Nation* report shows California's 56 percent postsecondary attainment rate fell short of the Foundations nation goal that 60% of the population aged 25-64 possess a college degree by 2025 – a goal that has since been revised to 75% attainment by 2040.

Within the broader SCNC population, the Clearinghouse identifies two subgroups with especially strong potential for re-engagement: “Recent Stopouts” (those last enrolled four to five academic terms prior to the start of the current academic year) and “Potential Completers” (those with at least two years of full-time-equivalent enrollment in the prior decade). Recent Stopouts are much more likely to re-enroll than students who have been stopped out longer, while Potential Completers have very strong advantages in both re-enrollment and earning credentials.

Arguments in support. The CSU Chancellor's Office wrote in support, noting "As part of a California State University-led pilot program, AB 1858 would pioneer a new approach to serving these former students by allowing Cal State Long Beach to partner with an accredited postsecondary educational institution that offers associate degrees in order to award a retroactive, joint associate degree to students who have left the university in the past ten years but have completed at least 60 units and all general education requirements. As the CSU system is not authorized to offer associate degrees, this partnership is vital to empowering students who chose to enroll at the CSU as freshmen but for a variety of reasons – the COVID-19 pandemic, family responsibilities, or the need to work full-time – were unable to complete their bachelor's degree."

The CSU Chancellor's Office continued, noting that nationally "...more than 37 million Americans have attended some college without ultimately earning a degree or credential, and six million Californians face this reality. Cal State Long Beach is pioneering efforts to re-engage with their former students and develop innovative strategies to meet them where they are. Cal State Long Beach estimates that 1,000 former students who left within the past decade would be eligible for this retroactive jointly conferred associate degree and could immediately benefit from this proof of their educational attainment."

The Campaign for College Opportunity also wrote in support, noting that "especially for those students who stopped out in a hurry, they may have accumulated enough credits that would have earned them a degree or certificate, but did not have the time to meet with a counselor at their community college to initiate the process of receiving that award, costing students \$5,000-\$10,000 annually in lost potential wages. AB 1858 will help equip California students who have already earned the credits to obtain an associate degree with the support they need to acquire this degree, and, in the process, can help incentivize these students to pursue further higher education that could place them on a transfer pathway or other opportunities that will help them upskill and translate to increased economic mobility."

The Campaign for College Opportunity also writes that "AB 1858 helps move California closer to our workforce demands and statewide goals. According to a report by the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce (CEW), by 2031, approximately 72 percent of all jobs will require workers to have at least some postsecondary credential or training beyond high school and 42 percent will require a bachelor's degree or higher. Governor Newsom has set an attainment goal for California aligned with this demand, aiming to reach 70 percent postsecondary attainment across the state and recently released the Master Plan for Career Education which includes a goal to increase access to and affordability of education and workforce training. AB 1858 would support both these efforts by increasing the number of Californians who have earned a degree or certificate, moving us closer to that 70 percent."

Committee comments. This bill targets former CSU students who finished enough coursework for an associate degree but left the CSU without one. Awarding a degree for work they have already done sidesteps the biggest reasons students stopout in the first place — cost, time, and emotional stress — because it doesn't require them to re-enroll. The more complicated question is scale. AB 1858 bill only requires CSU Long Beach to participate, leaving any expansion to the CSU Chancellor's discretion. With roughly six million Californians in the SCNC population, including an estimated 340,000 recent stopouts, a single-campus pilot will reach only a small slice of those who could benefit.

The Committee may wish to consider if the bill should require a minimum number of campuses, set a rollout timeline, or establish enrollment goals to better match the size of the problem.

The most notable feature of this bill is how the degree gets awarded: jointly, by CSU and a partner institution - either a CCC or an independent college that offers associate degrees. This is a departure from current practice. Under California's 1960 Master Plan for Higher Education, community colleges are the segment responsible for awarding associate degrees, and CSU has not traditionally issued them. AB 1858 (Lowenthal) addresses this by making it a shared credential rather than a CSU-only one: the partner institution sets the academic standards for the associate degree, and CSU contributes its records showing what coursework the former student completed.

Something similar already happens on a smaller scale through "reverse transfer" agreements, where community colleges award associate degrees to students who transferred to CSU before finishing one. This bill builds on that idea but goes further, establishing a new role in statute and opening the door to independent college partners as well. As noted in the analysis of AB 2572 (Fong), *jointly-offered degrees create opportunities for institutions to collaborate and identify opportunities to best serve their student body.*

Committee Staff notes that the mechanism this bill creates has a close analog in how research universities already handle graduate education. At UC campuses, doctoral students routinely earn a master's degree "en route" to the Ph.D., receiving the master's once they have completed the coursework and milestones that would qualify for it — even though the Ph.D. remains their ultimate goal. The practice is widespread in the UC and at other research institutions, and across disciplines from mathematics to physics to history. It recognizes a simple principle: if a student has done the work for a credential, they should have the credential, regardless of whether they continue toward a higher one. AB 1858 (Lowenthal) applies this same principle at the undergraduate level. While the bill's explicit purpose is to reach students who have stopped out, the model it establishes could, in time, support a broader policy outcome — one in which CSU students earn an associate degree en route to their bachelor's, recognizing the substantial coursework they have already completed and ensuring they carry a credential even if their path changes. That is not what this bill does — but it is a door that AB 1858 bill opens.

Committee staff notes that AB 1858 (Lowenthal) is associated with a \$5 million one-time General Fund appropriation, and that the provisions of this legislation are contingent upon funding.

Committee amendments. The committee recommends, and the author has agreed, to amendments specifying that the jointly conferred associate degree would be awarded at no cost to the former students.

REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:

Support

American Association of University Women - California
California State University, Office of the Chancellor
Campaign for College Opportunity
Long Beach Area Chamber of Commerce

Los Angeles Unified School District

Opposition

None on file

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