
SENATE COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION

Senator Sasha Renée Pérez, Chair

2025 - 2026 Regular

Bill No:	AB 1858	Hearing Date:	July 1, 2026
Author:	Lowenthal		
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Urgency:	No	Fiscal:	Yes
Consultant:	Olgalilia Ramirez		

Subject: California State University: Joint Associate's Degree Pilot Program.

SUMMARY

This bill requires, by July 1, 2027, and upon appropriation, the California State University (CSU) to establish a pilot program to offer an associate degree that is jointly awarded by the CSU and a California Community College (CCC) or a California non-profit independent institution of higher education to former CSU students.

BACKGROUND

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 CCCs 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) § 66010.4)

ANALYSIS

This bill:

- 1) Requires the CSU Chancellor, by July 1, 2027, to establish a pilot program to offer an associate degree that is jointly awarded by the CSU and a CCC campus, CCC district, or California nonprofit independent institution of higher education to former CSU students who meet both of the following requirements:
 - a) The former student successfully completed coursework equivalent to the requirements for an associate degree.
 - b) The former student has not previously earned an associate degree from a postsecondary educational institution.
- 2) Requires that the program include the following:
 - a) An associate degree in general education studies, which shall be the official name of an associate degree conferred.
 - b) A process to jointly confer the associate degree in general education studies from a community college or independent institution of higher education that awards associate degrees.
 - c) A process for identifying eligible former students.
 - d) A mechanism for verifying an eligible former student's completion of the requirements for the associate degree in general education studies.
- 3) Requires that the associate degree in general education studies be awarded at no cost to the former student.
- 4) Requires participation in the pilot program from CSU, Long Beach. The CSU Chancellor is authorized to include additional campuses, as determined by the CSU Chancellor.
- 5) Requires, by January 2032, the CSU Chancellor to submit a report with the specified information to the Legislature evaluating the effectiveness of the pilot program at the participating CSU campuses.
- 6) Sunsets the bill's provisions on January 1, 2033.
- 7) Declares that provisions are to be known as the California State University: Joint Associates Degree Pilot Program.

STAFF COMMENTS

- 1) **Need for the bill.** 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. This is a thoughtful approach to close this gap.”
- 2) **Differentiation of missions and existing joint degree authority.** The state has four segments of higher education: three public and one private. Each plays a vital and unique role for the state and its students. Their mission statements are outlined in state statute. The CCCs are to have an open admission policy and bear the most extensive responsibility for lower-division undergraduate instruction. Its primary area of mission includes academic and vocational instruction leading to associate degrees and university transfer, career technical education, and remedial education. The primary mission of the CSU is undergraduate and graduate instruction through the master’s degree. The UC was granted the sole authority to offer doctoral degree programs and is the state’s primary research institution. Existing law recognizes collaboration among segments. Under current law, CSU may establish a two-year program jointly with the CCCs when mutually agreed upon by the CSU Trustees and the CCCs BOG, and current law authorizes CSU to jointly confer doctoral degrees with the UC and independent institutions. This bill would authorize a pilot program under which CSU and a community college or independent institution may confer a joint associate degree to eligible former CSU students. This bill does not authorize CSU to independently award associate degrees.
- 3) **Some college, no degree.** This bill seeks to recognize former CSU students who completed coursework equivalent to an associate degree but left CSU before earning a degree. Rather than requiring students to return and complete additional coursework, this bill would authorize participating institutions to jointly award an associate degree based on coursework already completed. The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center has identified a growing trend in efforts to serve students with “some college, no credential.” While re-enrollment remains the primary strategy for increasing postsecondary attainment, the Clearinghouse notes that approximately one-quarter of former students who ultimately earn a credential do so without re-enrolling. According to the report, these credentials may result from institutions removing administrative barriers to graduation, accommodating delayed completion of academic requirements, or adopting policies that award credentials to students who have already completed the required coursework. Examples include reverse transfer programs that award associate degrees after students complete sufficient coursework at a four-year institution and newer initiatives, such as Colorado’s Colorado Re-Engaged (CORE) Initiative, that authorize four-year institution to award associate degrees to students who stopped out before completing a bachelor’s degree but accumulated sufficient credits. The report concludes that these approaches recognize that re-engagement does not always begin with re-enrollment and may represent a promising strategy for increasing educational attainment. This bill reflects that emerging effort by creating a mechanism to recognize academic achievement that has already occurred.

- 4) **Joint degree differs from traditional reverse transfer programs.** Rather than authorizing CSU to independently award associate degrees, this bill requires the participating institutions to mutually agree on the process for awarding a joint degree. To implement the pilot, participating institutions will need to establish processes for identifying eligible former students, evaluating completed coursework against the degree requirements, verifying eligibility, and notifying former students that they have the opportunity to receive a jointly awarded associate degree. The California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office (CCCCO) has suggested expanding existing reverse transfer partnerships as an alternative to the approach proposed in this bill, arguing that students could receive established associate degrees tied to existing disciplines and programs of study rather than a newly created joint degree. In contrast, proponents contend that this bill addresses a different population—former CSU students who are no longer enrolled and have already completed coursework equivalent to an associate degree by creating a mechanism to recognize learning already completed without requiring students to return and enroll in additional coursework. The Committee may wish to consider whether existing reverse transfer pathways adequately address the population targeted by this bill or whether a separate joint degree model is warranted.
- 5) **Associate degree in general education studies.** As drafted, this bill specifies that the degree awarded through the pilot be an "Associate Degree in General Education Studies." The CCCCCO and the CCC Academic Senate have raised concerns that limiting the pilot to a general education studies degree may not accurately reflect a former student's completed coursework or provide the same value to employers, and that an associate degree with an area of emphasis may better communicate a student's academic preparation. Additionally, the community colleges have increasingly moved away from awarding broad general studies degrees. ***For this reason, Committee staff recommends that the bill be amended to authorize participating institutions to award an Associate Degree in General Studies or, where appropriate, another associate degree with an area of emphasis that is consistent with the former students completed coursework.***

This change would preserve the bill's objective of recognizing previously completed coursework while providing participating institutions with greater flexibility to confer a credential that more accurately reflects a former student's completed academic work.

- 6) **Scope of the pilot program.** The bill requires participation by CSU, Long Beach, and authorizes the CSU Chancellor to include additional campuses in the pilot program. While a pilot program is generally intended to test a new policy on a limited scale before broader implementation, the bill does not limit the number of additional campuses that may participate. Although community colleges are not required to participate, concerns have been raised about a large-scale program developing under the proposed authorization, thereby increasing implementation costs for community colleges. As such, ***Committee staff recommends that the bill be amended to limit participation in the pilot program to no more than five CSU campuses, including CSU, Long Beach.*** Establishing a reasonable cap would preserve the pilot nature of the program while providing

some institutional diversity to evaluate whether the model should be expanded statewide.

- 7) **Pilot program evaluation.** This measure requires the CCCO to report to the Legislature on the effectiveness of the pilot by January 1, 2032. In evaluating the pilot, the author may wish to consider whether the report should include additional outcome measures beyond the number of degrees awarded, such as the number of eligible students identified, student acceptance rates, implementation challenges, and whether participating institutions recommend expanding or modifying the program.
- 8) **Arguments in Support.** According to the CSU Chancellor's office, in their letter of support submitted to this Committee in part, "...As the CSU system is not authorized to offer associate degrees, this partnership is vital to empower former 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. Unfortunately, this is a national problem: more than 37 million Americans have attended some college without ultimately earning a degree or credential, including six million Californians. 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, but earned more than 60 units at the university, would be eligible for this retroactive jointly conferred associate degree and could immediately benefit from this proof of their educational attainment. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, associate degree holders earn eighteen percent more than those with only a high school diploma, and they are more likely to have access to benefits such as health insurance and retirement plans..."
- 9) **Arguments in Opposition.** The CCCCOs, argues, in their letter submitted to this Committee, in part, "The California Community Colleges strongly support efforts to grant students recognition for academic work they have completed. We have previously offered amendments to AB 1858 focused on expanding reverse articulation options. Through reverse articulation, community colleges can evaluate coursework completed at a CSU campus and award an associate degree when students have satisfied the requirements of a community college program of study. This approach provides students with a recognized credential tied to established disciplines and academic pathways that provide meaningful opportunities, rather than a newly created general education credential based primarily on the accumulation of lower-division coursework. Awarding a General Education Studies degree runs counter to the direction that California has intentionally pursued for decades. Across our higher education and workforce systems, we have prioritized credentials with clear transfer and workforce value, reflected in initiatives such as the California Career Education Master Plan, the development and expansion of Associate Degrees for Transfer, and the deliberate effort by colleges to phase out many general studies degrees that lack a clear and defined academic or career pathway. This approach is also consistent with the position of the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges, which has consistently affirmed that completion of a general education pattern alone does not constitute completion of an associate degree. Through

multiple statewide resolutions, the ASCCC has opposed general education patterns as the sole basis for an associate degree area of emphasis. These positions reflect a longstanding understanding that an associate degree signifies completion of a coherent and intentional program of study, not merely the completion of a collection of coursework requirements...”

SUPPORT

California State University, Office of the Chancellor (sponsor)
American Association of University Women - California
Campaign for College Opportunity
Long Beach Area Chamber of Commerce
Long Beach Community College District
Los Angeles Unified School District
Southern California College Attainment Network

OPPOSITION

Academic Senate for California Community Colleges
Allan Hancock College
California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office
California Teachers Association
CFT – A Union of Educators & Classified Professionals, AFT, AFL-CIO
Chief Executive Officers of the California Community Colleges Board
San Jose-Evergreen Community College District

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