
SENATE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

Senator Sabrina Cervantes, Chair
2025 - 2026 Regular Session

AB 1858 (Lowenthal) - California State University: Joint Associate's Degree Pilot Program

Version: July 6, 2026

Urgency: No

Hearing Date: August 3, 2026

Policy Vote: ED. 6 - 0

Mandate: No

Consultant: Lenin Del Castillo

Bill 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.

Fiscal Impact: The establishment of the pilot program would be contingent upon an appropriation and could lead to one-time General Fund cost pressures of \$5 million. This estimate is based on the budget request that was made by the author's office to fund the five-year pilot.

The Chancellor's Office for the California Community Colleges indicates there could be additional, unknown implementation costs for participating community colleges and the Chancellor's Office to develop a new associate degree framework, curriculum and policy development, transcript evaluation, student outreach, and data sharing.

Background: Under existing law, 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.

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.

The mission and function of the CCCs 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.

Proposed Law: This bill 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: the former student successfully completed coursework equivalent to the requirements for an associate degree; and the former student has not previously earned an associate degree from a postsecondary educational institution.

This bill requires that the program include the following:

1. An associate degree in general education studies, or if applicable, an associate degree with an area of emphasis that is consistent with the former student's completed coursework.
2. A process to jointly confer an associate degree in general education studies from a community college or independent institution of higher education that awards associate degrees.
3. A process for identifying eligible former students.
4. A mechanism for verifying an eligible former student's completion of the requirements for the associate degree in general education studies.

This bill requires that the associate degree in general education studies be awarded at no cost to the former student.

This bill requires participation in the pilot program from CSU, Long Beach but the CSU Chancellor is authorized to include up to four additional campuses.

This bill 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.

The bill's provisions would sunset on January 1, 2033.

Staff Comments: 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. 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."

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