

Date of Hearing: August 20, 2025

# ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

Buffy Wicks, Chair

SB 550 (Cortese) – As Amended July 9, 2025

Policy Committee:	Higher Education	Vote:	7 - 3
	Judiciary		8 - 2

Urgency: No      State Mandated Local Program: No      Reimbursable: No

## SUMMARY:

This bill establishes a six-year legal education pilot program offering both a juris doctor degree and undergraduate course of study at the California State University, San Jose, in partnership with a Committee of Bar Examiners (CBE) of the State Bar of California accredited law school that has operated continuously as an independent nonprofit institution.

The bill also requires the Legislative Analyst's Office (LAO) to conduct an interim and final evaluation of the pilot program.

## FISCAL EFFECT:

- 1) Ongoing General Fund costs potentially in the low tens of millions of dollars annually for the CSU related to infrastructure, faculty and staff, accreditation, and other administrative needs required to implement the pilot program. Additionally, the CSU may incur costs of an unknown amount, but possibly in the hundreds of thousands of dollars, associated with offering the program at a cost that is below or equal to the cost of SJSU's graduate programs.
- 2) While the bill doesn't create additional state operations costs for the LAO to conduct the interim and final evaluations of the program, it would impact the LAO's ability to perform its core missions—analysis of the state budget and ballot initiatives—and otherwise provide analytical support to the Legislature.

## COMMENTS:

- 1) **Purpose.** According to the author:

Santa Clara County is home to nearly 2 million residents, but has no public law school. In a region where over 65% of the population identifies as Asian or Latino, both groups remain severely underrepresented among licensed attorneys statewide. Meanwhile, the average law school debt now exceeds \$130,000, and 67% of young lawyers report financial stress, deterring many from pursuing legal careers in public service.

SB 550 authorizes a pilot program allowing San José State University (SJSU) and a state-accredited nonprofit law school to partner in jointly awarding Juris Doctor (JD) degrees and undergraduate legal education certificates. This transformative step will enhance educational

opportunity, promote equity in the legal profession, and fill a major gap in California's public higher education infrastructure.

- 2) **Background. Accessibility of Law School.** By placing a new law school at the CSU San Jose, the bill may create a new and more affordable public pathway into legal professions for underrepresented student groups. The pilot program would be authorized to offer both a juris doctor degree as well as undergraduate coursework and certificates in areas of study such as legal writing and analysis, skills which may help ensure student success at law school and prepare them for careers as lawyers, court reporters, or other professionals within the legal profession.

**Possible Duplication of Roles.** Historically, pursuant to the state's master plan for higher education, the University of California (UC), and not the CSU, has been responsible for offering graduate and professional legal education as well as medicine, dentistry, veterinary medicine, and doctoral degrees. However, there is precedent of the Legislature authorizing the CSU to offer applied doctoral degrees if not duplicative of those offered by the UC. To avoid a potential conflict between the bill and the master plan, the bill was recently amended to authorize the pilot program to offer a variety of legal education programs to undergraduates and not solely operate as a program offering juris doctor degrees.

**Lincoln Law School.** While the bill does not explicitly name Lincoln Law School as the entity with which CSU San Jose would partner to offer the pilot program, as the only law school in San Jose meeting criteria specified in previous iterations of the bill, previous committee analyses have assumed Lincoln to be school in question. At the time this analysis was prepared, the committee was unaware of the feasibility of CSU San Jose to facilitate the pilot program with another law school meeting the criteria of the bill.

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