

Date of Hearing: April 7, 2026

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON HIGHER EDUCATION

Mike Fong, Chair

AB 1920 (Mark González and Ahrens) – As Introduced February 12, 2026

SUBJECT: Community colleges: California College Promise: fee waiver eligibility.

SUMMARY: Clarifies eligibility for California College Promise fee waivers by ensuring that certain certificates earned along the pathway to an associate degree do not disqualify students. Specifically, **this bill**:

- 1) Provides that a certificate awarded as part of a course sequence leading to an associate degree does not make a student ineligible for a California College Promise fee waiver.
- 2) Maintains existing eligibility requirements, including full-time enrollment and submission of a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) or California Dream Act Application (CADAA).
- 3) Preserves the two-year fee waiver limit and other program conditions.

EXISTING LAW:

- 1) Establishes the mission and function of the California Community Colleges (CCC), which, in part is to: 1) offer academic and vocational instruction at the lower division level for both younger and older students, including those persons returning to school; 2) authorizes the CCC to grant the associate in arts and the associate in science degrees; 3) requires the CCC to offer English as a Second Language instruction, adult noncredit instruction, and support services which help students succeed at the postsecondary level; and, 4) advance California's economic growth and global competitiveness through education, training, and services that contribute to continuous work force improvement (Education Code (EC) Section 66010.4).
- 2) Establishes a \$46 per unit fee for students at the CCC. Provides for a fee waiver for certain types of students, including those who meet minimum academic and progress standards adopted by the CCC Board of Governors (BOG) and have household incomes below certain thresholds established by the BOG or have demonstrated financial need pursuant to federal law (EC Section 76300).
- 3) Establishes the California College Promise, under the administration of the CCC Chancellor, to provide funding, upon appropriation by the Legislature, to each community college meeting prescribed requirements. Additionally, existing law:
 - a) Authorizes a community college to use that funding to waive some or all of the fees for two academic years for first-time community college students and returning community college students, as defined, who are enrolled in 12 or more semester units or the equivalent, or less for students certified as "full time," as specified, and who complete and submit either a FAFSA or a CADAA, except as provided;
 - b) Requires the CCC Chancellor to establish a funding formula that advances the goals of the program;

- c) Requires the funding formula to include, for funding appropriated for the program in excess of the funding needed to waive all student fees, the number of full-time equivalent students at a community college and the number of students at a community college who satisfy the requirements to receive federal Pell Grants and the requirements to receive a specified exemption from paying nonresident tuition; and,
- d) Requires the CCC Chancellor to submit a report to the Legislature by July 1, 2024, evaluating the use of funding for the California College Promise to waive student fees (EC Sections 76396-76396.4).

FISCAL EFFECT: Unknown

COMMENTS: *Need for the measure.* According to the author, “current law states that a student can receive free tuition for up to 2 years if they are a first-time college student and do not have a previous degree. The existing law includes certificates as a part of the disqualifying factors.”

As noted by the author, “community college programs are intentionally designed with stackable or nested credentials, allowing students to earn certificates along the pathway to an associate degree. These interim awards provide workforce value and recognize academic milestones. So, if a student achieved their certificate while on the path to achieve an AA degree, they may be deemed ineligible.”

Lastly, the author states that, “AB 1920 is a simple fix to an unintended reading of historic legislation championed by this legislature. This small clarification will ensure bureaucratic barriers are broken down, and students have access to free tuition waivers if they are first-time students.”

This measure seeks to clarify that students may earn certificates while completing a degree without losing access to the Community College Promise fee waiver. This clarification, according to the Solano Community College, “removes unnecessary bureaucratic barriers and ensures that California’s first-generation and low-income students—who rely heavily on predictable financial support—can continue advancing toward their education and career goals.”

Fees and fee waivers at the CCC. Enrollment fees at CCCs are the lowest in the country (\$46 per unit), and are waived for almost half of all CCC students (this amounts to over one million students). For decades, this waiver was known as the BOG fee waiver and has existed since enrollment fees were established (1984) at the CCC and waives the per unit enrollment fee for any CCC student who demonstrates financial need.

The BOG fee waiver has been renamed as the California College Promise Grant (not to be confused with the separate California College Promise Program). Additionally, current law requires fees to be waived for surviving dependents of certain military service members and first responders.

California College Promise Program. In addition to the fee waivers in current law, (as noted in the *Fees and fee waivers at the CCC* section of this analysis), AB 19 (Santiago), Chapter 735, Statutes of 2017, established the California College Promise Program, which authorizes, *but does not require*, CCCs to waive fees for two years of college for first-time or returning full-time

students regardless of financial need. To be eligible for these waivers, students must have no prior postsecondary coursework or have taken one or more semesters off from college coursework, enroll in 12 or more units per semester (which is considered full-time), and submit an FAFSA or CADAA. Under the Program, colleges may also use their college program funds for a variety of other purposes, such as providing students with supplemental services.

The California College Promise Program was funded beginning in 2018-19 for \$46 million. Not all colleges receiving Promise funds are waiving enrollment fees; many believe their California Promise funding is better used for other purposes, such as strengthening student support services to boost outcomes, or providing grants to help students cover the costs of child care, transportation, books or other expenses. Under the provisions of the Promise Program, colleges receiving California Promise funds must engage in several outlined activities.

Among those activities: operating programs with local high school districts that support pathways to college; implementing the Guided Pathways framework; and helping students access need-based financial aid such as Pell Grants and Cal Grants.

Student success and completion pathways. Career pathways have a wide range of features intended to enable individuals to develop industry-related skills and achieve their career goals. Stackable credentials, which lay out a sequence of career education awards that allow students to build qualifications over time, are an important component of successful pathway programs. According to the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC), many career education credentials in the community college system are designed to be earned relatively quickly—in particular, short-term certificates require as few as 6 units. Stackable short-term credentials offer students the clearest opportunities to return to the community college system for additional training and advance along a career pathway.

Additionally, stackable credentials also hold a key component with current initiatives in the community college system that focus on helping students connect their educational plans to careers. Stackable credentials are creating clear curricular pathways to employment and further education.

Under existing law, such certificates may inadvertently disqualify students from fee waivers. This measure appears to remove an unintended barrier in the California College Promise Program by ensuring that students who earn interim certificates on the path to an associate degree are not penalized or excluded from fee waiver eligibility; by preserving eligibility for students pursuing structured pathways, this measure supports continued enrollment and degree completion, particularly for students from low-income or nontraditional backgrounds who rely on fee waivers.

Committee comments. It is unclear whether a distinction exists between stackable credentials and certificates that are a part of a pathway to earning an associate degree, and those that are standalone credentials. The CCC Chancellor's Office (CCCCO) may wish to explore if a minor administrative clarification to distinguish between the two is necessary.

Arguments in support. According to the CCC Chancellor's Office (CCCCO), sponsors of the measure, this measure seeks to strengthen the implementation of the California College Promise by, "ensuring that students are not penalized for earning a certificate as part of their educational journey."

The CCCCCO contends that, “by clarifying that receipt of a certificate does not disadvantage a student’s continued access to Promise benefits or future educational opportunities, the bill protects student progress, promotes equitable access, and supports continued advancement toward higher credentials and career goals.”

Further, the CCCCCO notes that, “this measure directly advances the goals of Vision 2030, the California Community Colleges’ strategic roadmap centered on Equity in Access, Equity in Success, and Equity in Support. Vision 2030 calls on our system to meet learners where they are, remove systemic barriers, and expand opportunities for underserved and working learners so they can earn credentials that lead to economic mobility. AB 1920 reinforces these priorities by ensuring students are recognized for the learning they complete and can more effectively progress toward certificates, degrees, and career advancement.”

Lastly, the CCCCCO states that, “AB 1920 also aligns with the broader intent of the California College Promise to expand opportunity, reduce financial and institutional barriers, and support student persistence and completion. Strengthening pathways to recognized credentials ensures students — particularly first-generation, low-income, and historically underserved learners — can fully participate in higher education and move toward family-sustaining careers.”

Prior legislation. AB 537 (Ahrens) of 2025, which was held on the Suspense File in the Senate Committee on Appropriations, in part, reduces the minimum unit requirement for CCC students to qualify for a California College Promise fee waiver from full-time (12 or more units) to 9 units.

AB 1035 (Mark González) of 2025, which was held on the Suspense File in the Assembly Committee on Appropriations, in part, authorizes the expansion of the community college enrollment fee waiver that students are eligible for under the California College Promise by an additional two years of full-time attendance for a student enrolled in a community college baccalaureate degree program for a total of four years of eligibility.

AB 1342 (Megan Dahle), Chapter 102, Statutes of 2023, deems a student as a first-time CCC student for purposes of qualifying for a California College Promise Program fee waiver, even if that student had been enrolled in a CCC through a dual enrollment program in high school.

AB 2 (Santiago, et al.), Chapter 509, Statutes of 2019, expands the California Promise Program, allowing a student enrolled in fewer than 12 units, and part of the Disabled Students Programs and Services (DSPS), to be considered a full-time student for purposes of eligibility for the California College Promise Program.

SB 77 (Committee on Budget and Fiscal Review) Chapter 53, Statutes of 2019, which is the higher education budget trailer bill, includes the statutory changes necessary to expand the California College Promise Program for a second academic year.

AB 19 (Santiago), Chapter 735, Statutes of 2017, establishes the California College Promise Program, to be administered by the CCCCCO which must distribute funding, upon appropriation by the Legislature, to each community college meeting the specified requirements to be used to accomplish certain goals and waive the \$46 per unit fee for one academic year for first-time students.

AB 1741 (Freddie Rodriguez and O'Donnell), Chapter 434, Statutes of 2016, in part, until January 1, 2021, establishes the California College Promise Innovation Grant Program to be administered by the CCC Chancellor's Office. The Program would support the CCC in establishing or expanding regional programs to address college preparedness, attendance, and graduation in partnership with school districts and public postsecondary universities in California.

REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:**Support**

California Community Colleges, Chancellor's Office (Sponsor)
Barstow Community College District
Chief Executive Officers of the California Community Colleges Board
Faculty Association of California Community Colleges
MiraCosta Community College District
Rio Hondo College
Riverside Community College District
Santa Clarita Community College District - College of the Canyons
Solano Community College
Student Senate for California Community Colleges
Victor Valley Community College District

Opposition

None on file.

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