

Date of Hearing: April 23, 2019

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON HIGHER EDUCATION

Jose Medina, Chair

AB 968 (Cristina Garcia) – As Amended April 9, 2019

SUBJECT: Naturalist Pathway Pilot Program

SUMMARY: Requires the Chancellor of the California Community Colleges (CCC) to develop and implement a pilot program, at a voluntarily participating community college located in a disadvantaged community that provides a pathway for participating students to become naturalists and achieve careers providing public access to, or preserving, restoring, or enhancing outdoor areas. Specifically, **this bill:**

- 1) Requires the Chancellor of the CCC, in coordination with a nonprofit organization or public park agency that employs naturalist educators and has a demonstrated commitment to, and expertise in, the knowledge, skills, and abilities required to be an interpretive naturalist, to develop and implement a Naturalist Pathway Pilot Program on or before the start of the 2020–21 academic year.
- 2) Requires that the program be located at a community college located in a disadvantaged community of the state, and that the program provide a pathway for participating students to become naturalists and achieve careers providing public access to, or preserving, restoring, or enhancing outdoor areas.
- 3) Establishes that participation of the college in the pilot program shall be voluntary.
- 4) Requires the Chancellor of the CCC to submit a report on the pilot, as specified. Requires the report to include, but not be limited to:
 - a) Completion rates for program participants; and,
 - b) The percentage of participants who pursued careers providing public access to, or preserving, restoring, or enhancing, outdoor areas after completing the program, to the extent that data is available.
- 5) Establishes the following definitions for the purpose of this bill:
 - a) “Disadvantaged community” means a community in the state with an annual median household income that is less than 80 percent of the statewide annual median household income;
 - b) “Interpretive naturalist” means an expert in the natural and cultural history of public parks and open space who communicates to visitors of public parks through formal and informal education and interpretive programming;
 - c) “Outdoor areas” include, but are not limited to, any park, beach, or recreational area; and,
 - d) “Pilot program” or “program” means the Naturalist Pathway Pilot Program established as specified.

- 6) Specifies that the article will remain in effect only until July 1, 2025, and as of that date will be repealed, unless a later enacted statute that is enacted before July 1, 2025, deletes or extends that date.

EXISTING LAW:

- 1) 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 degree. The community colleges are also required to offer remedial instruction, 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: *Background.* A naturalist is a type of biologist who studies the impacts of living species on each other and the environments in which they live. An Interpretive Naturalist, as defined in this bill, is an expert in the natural and cultural history of public parks and open space who communicates to visitors of public parks through formal and informal education and interpretive programming.

According to 2015 data, the largest employer of naturalists and all biological sciences was state government with 33 percent. They work for state parks and in areas such as conservation, monitoring and public health. They may also work in public outreach and with local environmental groups funded or employed by state government. Similarly, the federal government employed 21 percent of all biological scientists including naturalists. They work for federal agencies such as the National Park Service and the Environmental Protection Agency.

Naturalists must begin their careers with a strong foundational knowledge of biology, ecology, chemistry, math, and geography. For a naturalist at the beginning of his or her career, the job description may include the following:

- 1) Observe plants and animals in their natural habitats, assessing effects of environment and industry on living matter, recording findings in field notes and by taking photographs;
- 2) Inventory or estimate plant and wildlife populations;
- 3) Organize and conduct experimental studies in natural surroundings;
- 4) Collect data and communicate findings by writing reports and scientific papers or journal articles, and by making presentations for schools, clubs, interest groups and park interpretive programs; and,
- 5) Prepare collections of preserved specimens or microscopic slides for scientific study.

Need for the bill. According to the author, "California is known for its beautiful natural resources and prides itself on conservation of those resources. However, there are kids who grow up in communities that do not have access to natural history, parks, or coastline. These children become adults who are not only ignorant of natural history, but who do not care about nature and view it as disposable and unimportant. In order to maintain California's precious resources and

conserve/protect our environment, we must support our future workforce of naturalists and conservationists – especially in our disadvantaged communities where environmental inequities are ubiquitous. CCCs could help support this new workforce and create more access to naturalist career pathways in our disadvantaged communities.”

“There are naturalists programs, certification, and workforce training opportunities offered in some community colleges – however, some campuses do not offer the same opportunities to pursue naturalist career pathways. AB 968 would implement a pilot program that would establish direction and standards for a naturalist career pathway in our community colleges.”

The Community Nature Connection (CNC) wrote in support of this bill, noting that “...At CNC, our programs are designed to address the barriers to accessing the outdoors faced by historically underrepresented communities. We hire staff members that reflects the communities we serve and work in partnership with communities to offer programming that is culturally relevant. For these reasons, CNC respectfully supports AB 968.”

Committee considerations. Interpretive naturalists, also known as interpretive rangers, play an important role in both scientific and educational work - especially in our federal and state public park systems. AB 968 seeks to create a pilot program, to be administered on one campus in a disadvantaged community, which would require a unique career pathway to be established and curriculum developed to administer that pathway. *The Committee may wish to consider the following questions when evaluating the need for AB 968:*

Single program pilot? AB 968 specifically designates this pilot as a naturalist pilot program. *The Committee may wish to consider* if specifying a sole academic discipline in the pilot could lead to a concerning precedent. Where past CCC pilot programs, like SB 850 (Block, Chapter 747, Statutes of 2014) established a strict test for prospective CCC Districts to go through in order to prove the necessity of their program – a program created locally to meet local needs – that also included consultation with a wide variety of stakeholders. AB 968 instead requires a participating district to offer a specific program developed by the Chancellor’s office. Does this model restrict the academic freedom of districts to create academic programs that meet their local needs? Does this model set a precedent for subject-specific programs to be established by the Legislature?

Strong Workforce Program overlap? In 2016 the Legislature established the Strong Workforce Program for the purpose of expanding the availability of quality community college career technical education (CTE) and workforce development courses, and to develop career pathways, workforce data, curriculum, CTE faculty, and regional coordination. This data-driven approach makes colleges more responsive to regional labor market conditions. Local and regional funding allocations require stakeholders to collaborate, including industry and local workforce development boards.

As much as possible, this program builds upon existing regional partnerships formed in conjunction with the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, state Adult Education Block Grant and public school CTE programs. The Strong Workforce Program funding split requires local stakeholders to collaborate, including industry and local workforce development boards. The Strong Workforce Program received \$248 million of funding in the 2018-2019 budget.

The Committee may wish to consider if the Legislature should mandate and require the development of career pathways outside of the Legislatively-mandated Strong Workforce model, which is designed to meet the needs of local regions.

Existing programs prepare students? According to conversations with the CCC Sector Navigator for Agriculture, Water, and Environmental Technologies, existing natural resources and environmental science programs provide education and training for students to become interpretive rangers. Furthermore, programs currently exist to that can provide pathway development in natural resources and currently serve disadvantaged communities, to include the U.S. Youth Conservation Corps, the California Conservation Corps, and many community nonprofit organizations throughout the state. *The Committee may wish to consider* if it is necessary to create a pilot program when academic and job preparation programs currently exist. Would the development of a naturalist pathway unintentionally narrow the employment prospects for students graduating with broader training in natural resources or environmental sciences?

REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:

Support

Community Nature Connection

Opposition

None on file.

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