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AB-537 Community colleges: California College Promise. (2025-2026)

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AMENDED IN SENATE JUNE 30, 2025

AMENDED IN ASSEMBLY MAY 23, 2025

CALIFORNIA LEGISLATURE— 2025–2026 REGULAR SESSION

ASSEMBLY BILL

NO. 537

Introduced by Assembly Member Ahrens

February 11, 2025

An act to amend Sections 76396.2 and 76396.3 of the Education Code, relating to community colleges.

LEGISLATIVE COUNSEL'S DIGEST

AB 537, as amended, Ahrens. Community colleges: California College Promise.

Existing law establishes the California College Promise, under the administration of the Chancellor of the California Community Colleges, to provide funding, upon appropriation by the Legislature, to each community college meeting prescribed requirements. Existing law authorizes a community college to use that funding to waive some or all of the fees for 2 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” by a staff person in the disabled student services program, as specified, and who complete and submit either a Free Application for Federal Student Aid or a California Dream Act application, except as provided.

This bill would instead require, for purposes of eligibility for the California College Promise, that students be enrolled in 9 or more, rather than 12 or more, semester units or the equivalent, or less for a student certified as eligible, based on a commitment by the student that is analogous to the 9 semester unit or equivalent workload, by a staff person in the disabled student services program. The bill would additionally require, as a condition of participating in, and receiving funding for, the California College Promise, community colleges and community college districts to refrain from referring to any other student financial aid funding or program as the California College ~~Promise~~. *Promise, and require community colleges to provide a written notification to initial recipients of the California College Promise that includes specified information related to the 2 academic years of eligibility for the California College Promise.*

Vote: majority Appropriation: no Fiscal Committee: yes Local Program: no

THE PEOPLE OF THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA DO ENACT AS FOLLOWS:

SECTION 1. Section 76396.2 of the Education Code is amended to read:

76396.2. As a condition of participating in, and receiving funding for, the California College Promise, community colleges and community college districts shall advance the goals outlined in Section 76396.1. These conditions shall include all of the following:

- (a) Partnering with one or more local educational agencies to establish an Early Commitment to College Program that is consistent with the intent of former Article 6.3 (commencing with Section 54710) of Chapter 9 of Part 29 of Division 4 of Title 2 to provide K–12 students and families assistance that includes, but is not limited to, learning about college opportunities, visiting campuses, taking and completing college preparatory courses, and applying for college and financial aid.
- (b) Partnering with one or more local educational agencies to support and improve high school student preparation for college and reduce postsecondary remediation through practices that may include, but shall not be limited to, small learning communities, concurrent enrollment, and other evidence-based practices.
- (c) Using evidence-based assessment and placement practices at the community college that comply with Section 78213 and include multiple measures of student performance, which shall include, among other measures, overall grade point averages, including grades in high school courses, and using evidence-based practices to improve outcomes for underprepared students.
- (d) Participating in the California Community College Guided Pathways Grant Program established pursuant to Part 54.81 (commencing with Section 88920) in order to clarify the academic path for students, help students enter a pathway, help students stay on an academic path, and ensure that students are learning.
- (e) Maximizing student access to need-based financial aid by leveraging the Board of Governors fee waiver established under Section 76300, commonly known as the California Promise Grant, ensuring that students complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, Cal Grant application, or California Dream Act application, and participating in a federal loan program authorized under Title IV of the federal Higher Education Act of 1965, as amended (20 U.S.C. Sec. 1070 et seq.). On or before January 1, 2018, a community college that does not participate in the federal loan program shall be provisionally eligible to participate in the California College Promise for one calendar year. The community college shall comply with the federal loan participation requirements in order to participate in the California College Promise on or after January 1, 2019.
- (f) Maximizing available resources to address student basic needs, through the provision of basic needs services and resources, as defined in Section 66023.5. This condition may be met, at a minimum, by establishing a formal program to partner with county human services agencies, including with the staff liaison to institutions of higher education designated pursuant to Section 10006 of the Welfare and Institutions Code. This partnership may occur through the Basic Needs Center established pursuant to Section 66023.5.
- (g) Refraining from referring to any other student financial aid funding or program as the California College Promise.

SEC. 2. Section 76396.3 of the Education Code is amended to read:

76396.3. (a) A community college that has been certified by the chancellor as meeting the conditions established under Section 76396.2 shall receive funding pursuant to Section 76396.

(b) (1) The community college may use funding appropriated pursuant to this article to waive some or all of the fees for first-time community college students and returning community college students who are enrolled at the college with an eligible workload, and who complete and submit either a Free Application for Federal Student Aid or a California Dream Act application, except that a student who has previously earned a degree or certificate from a postsecondary educational institution is not eligible for this fee waiver. A fee waiver that a first-time community college student or returning community college student receives pursuant to this subdivision shall only be for two academic years, and fees shall only be waived for the summer term and each semester or quarter of an academic year in which the student maintains an eligible workload. A fee waiver provided pursuant to this subdivision shall not be available to a student who is charged a tuition fee pursuant to Section 76140.

(2) Notwithstanding paragraph (1), a student who is a member of the Armed Forces of the United States and is called to duty compelling the student to take a leave of absence pursuant to provisions of Title 10, Title 14, or Title 32 of the United States Code, or to state-funded active duty on order of the Governor, may withdraw from participation in the California College Promise and resume participation in the program upon the student's return from duty without losing eligibility for the fee waiver or any other benefit of the program. The time during which the student was obliged to withdraw because of active duty shall not count toward the limit of the period of that student's eligibility for participation in the California College Promise.

(3) Notwithstanding paragraph (1), a high school pupil who enrolls in community college pursuant to Section 48800, 52620, or 76004 shall be considered a first-time community college student for purposes of paragraph (1) upon the student's enrollment in community college after high school graduation.

(4) As a condition of receiving funding pursuant to Section 76396, a community college shall provide, upon issuing an initial fee waiver pursuant to this subdivision to a student, a written notification to the student that includes all of the following:

(A) A statement informing the student that the period of eligibility for a California College Promise fee waiver is limited to two academic years, as specified in this subdivision.

(B) A description of the number of units a student needs to complete per semester or the quarterly equivalent, or the number of semester or quarterly units the student needs to complete per academic year, to complete an associate degree or certificate program within two academic years.

(C) Information on how to access other financial aid opportunities available to a student who has exceeded their two years of eligibility for a fee waiver pursuant to this subdivision.

(c) For purposes of this section, the following terms have the following meanings:

(1) "Academic year" means the total of the summer term that immediately precedes the first semester or quarter of the fall term, and the two consecutive semesters or three quarters that immediately follow that summer term. Each semester or quarter is approximately the same length.

(2) "Armed Forces of the United States" means the United States Air Force, Army, Coast Guard, Marine Corps, Space Force, and Navy, and the reserve components of each of those forces, and the California National Guard, the California State Guard, and the California Naval Militia.

(3) (A) Except as provided in subparagraph (B), "an eligible workload" means ~~9~~ *nine* or more semester units or the equivalent.

(B) A student enrolled in fewer than ~~9~~ *nine* units may be deemed to have an "eligible workload" at the discretion of the institution if the student has been certified as eligible, based on a commitment by the student that is analogous to an eligible workload, by a staff person in the disabled student services program at the institution who is qualified to make such a determination.

(4) "Returning community college student" means a student who has taken a break of one or more semesters, or the equivalent quarters.

(d) It is the intent of the Legislature that funding provided to support the California College Promise be used by the community college to advance the goals outlined in Section 76396.1.

(e) On or before July 1, 2024, the chancellor's office shall submit a report to the Legislature in compliance with Section 9795 of the Government Code evaluating the use of funding for the California College Promise to waive student fees. The report shall determine whether the goals outlined in Section 76396.1 are being met.

(f) The chancellor's office may require community colleges and community college districts receiving funding pursuant to this article to report on an annual basis the use of these funds consistent with the conditions of Section 76396.2. Funding during the following academic year may only be distributed to those community colleges and community college districts that provided this information, if required by the chancellor's office, in a timely manner during the prior academic year and demonstrated compliance with the requirements of Section 76396.2 and this subdivision.