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January 16, 2020

The Honorable Cristina Garcia
State Capitol
P.O. Box 942849
Sacramento, CA 94249-0058

Subject: AB 968 (Garcia, as of 01/06/2020) Naturalist Pathway Pilot Program
Position: Oppose as Written

Dear Assemblymember Garcia:

The Academic Senate for California Community Colleges (ASCCC) is writing to express its reluctant opposition to AB 968 (Garcia, as of 01/06/2020) as written. AB 968 would require the Chancellor of the California Community Colleges 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. The bill would require the chancellor to submit a report on the pilot program to the legislature on or before July 1, 2024 and would repeal the pilot program on July 1, 2025.

The ASCCC recognizes that California leads the nation in community college education in career technical education and that pathways to potential careers are one means by which to allow students the opportunity to seek out opportunities for employment.

However, the ASCCC has previously expressed its concern that mandating the development of this program in law, given that program creation is a component of curricular design, demonstrates an intrusion into local processes and should inherently be driven by faculty and labor market demand in the community. We are concerned that by writing elements of curriculum into statute as mandated by AB 968, the ability of colleges to adapt to industry expectations and the needs of individual communities or regions will be hindered. The ASCCC and all faculty teaching in systems of higher education emphatically maintain that curricular design is, and should be, the responsibility and purview of faculty who are experts in their specific disciplines.

With the most recent changes to AB 968 (as of 01/06/2020), additional concerns have arisen. First, while the bill seeks monies to cover the costs for the creation of the program, it is unclear where those monies would come from and whether or not they would be sufficient. Second, the bill includes more language around the development of the curriculum, including giving the ASCCC the power to “approve, modify, or reject the final contents of the naturalist workforce model curriculum”; the ASCCC does not possess the authority to change curriculum developed by colleges. If the bill were to grant such authority, exercising it could be perceived by the colleges as a considerable overreach and would be a dramatic departure from the manner in which the ASCCC and community college system operates, setting a potentially damaging precedent of intrusion on the autonomy of the colleges. In addition, the bill suggests that the persons charged with the development of the curriculum should include a variety of non-faculty from a diversity of fields. While faculty value input from stakeholders from the community and industry, the responsibility of curriculum development rests primarily with the faculty, as is noted in California Education Code sections 70901.

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For career technical programs, such as the one indicated in the bill, the curriculum processes in statute and regulation require the review and updating of curriculum every two years to ensure that programs remain relevant to industry standards and current in the use of technology required for employability. Should a demonstrated need for the program exist, local colleges will develop curriculum that will meet local interests and needs.

Finally, any bill that includes a sunset date inherently causes concern, as sunset dates can limit buy-in from both the college itself and the local community.

The Academic Senate for California Community Colleges would welcome the opportunity to engage in dialogue with the author regarding the language of AB 968 in order to enable us to remove our opposition to the bill as it is currently written. Should you have any questions, please feel free to contact us.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "J Stankas". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized initial "J".

John Stankas, President