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Obama proposes \$12 billion for community colleges

By John Pulley, Published July 14, 2009

President Barack Obama, speaking today at Macomb Community College, outside Detroit, proposed pumping \$12 billion into the country's community colleges over the next decade, a bold stroke by a president known for such. The plan, known as the American Graduation Initiative, essentially seeks to turbocharge one of the country's main economic engines.

"My job is to get this economy back on its feet," said Obama. "I welcome the job."

To that end, the president proposed a multipart initiative for promoting innovation and the adoption of proven reforms by states and community colleges. Specific goals include raising completion rates, strengthening partnerships between businesses and community colleges, shoring up developmental education, and better aligning the missions of high schools, community colleges and four-year institutions.

"The hard truth is that some of the jobs that have been lost in the auto industry and elsewhere won't be coming back," Obama said. "They are casualties of a changing economy. And that only underscores the importance of generating new businesses and industries to replace the ones we've lost, and of preparing our workers to fill the jobs they create."

The president's plan also provides funds for modernizing community-college facilities and for creating a virtual educational infrastructure described by the president as "a new on-line, open-source clearing house of courses."

At a time when most new jobs will require some post-secondary education, the president's proposal aims to create five million new community college graduates by

2020, the date by which "this nation will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world," said the president, repeating a goal he first announced in February, during his first address to Congress.

"This is President Obama's equivalent of a moon shot in higher education," said Jamie P. Merisotis, president and chief executive officer of the Lumina Foundation, which promotes higher-education access. "It's a significant infusion of resources for a very specific, targeted purpose--the dramatic improvement in community college success ... so that we can get to the president's goal of being the best in the world in higher education."

Congress must approve the president's plan, unveiled at a time of severe budget cuts for community colleges, some of which have moved to cap enrollments. The president proposed paying for the initiative with savings that would accrue from the elimination of federal subsidies paid to banks and private lenders of student loans.

If implemented, the president's plan would sharply raise federal financial support of two-year institutions, which the Brookings Institution estimates to be about \$2 billion annually in direct support, reported the Wall Street Journal. Looked at another way, the

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primarily in direct support, reported the Wall Street Journal. Looked at another way, the president's plan would provide, on average, \$1 million annually, for the next decade, to each of the country's 1,200 two-year institutions.

The president's vision was embraced by community college leaders.

"The new investment announced today by the Obama administration is a historic vote of confidence in America's community colleges," said George R. Boggs, president of the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC). "It underscores the central role of these institutions to ensure an educated U.S. citizenry and a competitive workforce. We are deeply grateful for the added capacity this support will provide to meet the challenge of economic recovery today and to expand opportunity for the future."

Boggs added that "the financial strain that our colleges are experiencing cannot be overemphasized. New federal assistance will help our colleges weather the current financial storm but, just as importantly, position community colleges to help sustain the nation's long-term prosperity."

The president's plan has several parts:

Community College Challenge Fund

The initiative calls for using competitive grants to spur innovation and scale up known solutions for providing workers with the skills they need to compete in a fast-changing global economy. Areas of interest include stronger links between curricula and job requirements, between companies and colleges.

A New Research Center

Taking a results-based approach, Obama called for a center that would develop the means for measuring community colleges' success. Such a benchmark would let businesses know "what a degree is worth," the president said.

Facilities Renovation Fund

Community colleges built during the great expansion of the 1960s and 1970s suffer from inadequate facilities and equipment. A \$2.5 billion fund would spur up to \$10 billion in new investment needed to adequately meet rising demand.

Virtual Infrastructure

Obama called on the Departments of Defense, Education and Labor to collaborate on the development and delivery of online educational software and interactive applications that could streamline students' acquisition of skills demanded by employers.

College Access and Completion Fund

At present, about half of students who enter community colleges with the goal of earning a degree or transferring to a four-year institution fail to attain the goal within six years. This fund would promote new and existing methods for improving degree attainment.

"The investment in community colleges will be welcome by business leaders," said Mary Gershwin, president of the National Center for Business Champions, which seeks to influence public policy so that more Americans earn post-secondary degrees and credentials with economic value.

Employers surveyed by the group reported that 81 percent of community college graduates are ready for entry level jobs, twice the percentage reported for high school graduates. Graduates of four-year institutions were prepared for work 87 percent of the time, Gershwin said.

Shirley Reed, the president of South Texas College, applauded the president's announcement. She wishes it had come sooner.

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“Recognizing and appreciating the contributions of community colleges to our national economy is painfully long overdue,” Reed said. “We truly are a part of the solution to the economic challenges and the recovery for this nation. We have always been on the forefront. We have just not been funded appropriately at a local, state and federal level.”

“Can community colleges save the US economy?” she asked “We damn sure can.”

The president expressed optimism, as well, albeit in his signature no-drama style.

“The road to recovery, the road to prosperity, is going to be hard,” he said. “Time and again, when we have placed our bet on the future on education, we have prospered.”

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American Association of Community Colleges
One Dupont Circle, NW | Suite 410 | Washington, DC 20036
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