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Obama Plans Cash Infusion for Community Colleges

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President Obama today proposed a \$12 billion investment in the nation's community colleges today, arguing that the money will drive expansions and reforms in the system that are needed to help people get educated in the struggling economy.

Obama unveiled what he called the American Graduation Initiative during a speech at Macomb Community College in Warren, Mich. He then traveled on to St. Louis, where he will throw out the first pitch at baseball's All-Star Game before returning to the White House.

"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 that the ones we've lost."

Obama said in his speech that government must do more to retrain workers for new kinds of careers.

"Time and again, when we have placed our bet for the future on education, we have prospered as a result," he said, adding later, "We will not fill those jobs -- or keep those jobs on our shores -- without the training offered by community colleges."

Michigan has been hit especially hard by the economic crisis, leaving many workers struggling to find work of any kind. The state's unemployment rate is at 14 percent, well above the national rate of 9.5 percent.

Critics of the president's proposal said the new money for community colleges will not translate into millions of new jobs.

"More and more money has been pushed into higher education, both the schools and the students, for decades," said Neal McCluskey, an education scholar at the Cato Institute in Washington. "Most of what that's translated into is waste. So you've seen tuitions skyrocket, you've seen these building arms races on campus."

But Obama promised his proposal would "reform" practices at community colleges around the nation while increasing the number of community college graduates by 5 million over the next 12 years.

To achieve that goal, Obama's new initiative includes \$2.5 billion for construction and renovation at the nation's community colleges, \$500 million to develop new online courses and \$9 billion for "challenge grants" aimed at spurring innovation at the colleges.

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The heart of the program, administration officials say, is the grants, which will require colleges to compete by designing innovative new programs or revamping their existing curriculum. The grants are similar to the "Race to the Top" funding that Education Secretary Arne Duncan has proposed for the K-12 school systems.

"We're going to take a careful look at how well these things work, and only the ones that demonstrate results will receive continued funding," said James Kvaal, a special assistant to the president for economic policy.

Administration officials said the construction money would be used to kick off capital fundraising campaigns at colleges or similar efforts, sparking billions more to repair aging and dilapidated buildings.

"Many community colleges were built decades ago, and they have outdated facilities," Kvaal said. "Many community colleges suffer from a lack of classroom space. It makes it difficult for students to get the classes that they need when they need them."

The money for new online courses would be used to develop Internet-based lessons that could be used by schools all over the country to reach more students. The government would use the money to recruit educators to develop the courses, but would require that the courses be free and in the public domain for anyone to use.

The new college initiative is part of an effort to make good on a promise Obama made during his address to Congress in February. But the proposal now faces a Congress reeling from the burdens of massive additional spending.

Obama aides said the money would be included in the budget bills that Congress considers during the next several months and, if approved, would begin being spent during the first half of 2010.

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