

# White House budget attacks higher education for working class students

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In July of 2009, newly elected President Obama spoke in Jackson, Michigan, and declared, “Education is the way forward.”

Apparently, he did not mean for everyone to enjoy this way forward. His administration’s proposed federal budget for fiscal year 2012 will limit access to higher education for countless working class students, while bringing the failed “Race to the Top” model used in K-12 to colleges and universities.

The administration proposes to ax \$100 billion from federal higher education funding by restricting access to Pell Grants, government scholarships distributed to low-income students on a need basis. The White House, which has trumpeted the fact that it will maintain the maximum grant award at \$5,500, is proposing to change the scholarship rules such that students can receive only one grant a year, as opposed to two.

Pell Grants, which do not have to be repaid, are available to students with family incomes up to \$60,000 a year. However, most Pell Grants go to students with family incomes below \$30,000 a year.

In its proposed budget, the Obama administration claims that the “second [Pell Grant] payment has cost 10 times more than anticipated and failed to demonstrate a meaningful impact on students’ academic progress.”

This is absurd on its face. Over 9 million needy students—27 percent of higher education enrollees—take advantage of the Pell Grant program every year. At the community college level, where many working class people go to receive a degree, 70 percent of students receive Pell Grants. The argument that their educational prospects will be unaffected by the loss of thousands of dollars of grant money every year is false.

For many working class youth, hopes of earning a

post-secondary education will become a thing of the past. Those who are able to somehow cobble together the funds to attend college will increasingly be forced to find as many hours of paid work as they can while trying to complete their studies.

Furthermore, if the Obama administration’s proposed budget passes, working class students able to afford a post-secondary education will find many colleges to be little more than training centers tailored to corporate needs. The White House proposes to introduce the “Race to the Top” (RTTT) competitive funding model, which has been imposed on the country’s kindergarten through high school education system, into colleges and universities.

Initiated in 2009, the RTTT education model grants access to federal funding to those states and institutions that implement right-wing education policies. These policies include standardized testing, merit pay for teachers, and firing teachers whose students do not achieve adequate scores on the tests. Schools that don’t meet these criteria may be closed or turned into privately owned charter schools.

The proposed federal budget’s strategy for forcing this model into higher education is entitled, “A ‘First in the World’ Competition Among Colleges and Universities.” As with the 2009 initiative for kindergarten through high school, the Obama administration’s strategy for “improving” higher education will hasten the process of denying and/or lessening the quality of higher education for working class students.

Chief among the proposed measures is the investment of “\$150 million in a new initiative to increase college access and completion and improve educational productivity.” A second effort will “provide \$50 million in 2012 and a total of \$1.3 billion over five

years in performance-based funding to institutions that have demonstrable success in enrolling and graduating more high-need students and enabling them to enter successful employment.”

What underlies both of these initiatives is a shift in federal funding formulas. Historically, money has been disbursed to higher education institutions on the basis of how many students they enroll. Now, the White House proposes to finance colleges and universities on the basis of how many students complete their degrees.

What are the implications of this? First, this will lead to a reduction in the number of lower-level and remedial courses offered at universities and colleges, as these tend to attract many students—in particular, working class layers—who either struggle to improve their skills quickly enough or are unable to finish their education because of socioeconomic pressures. In other words, the number of these students on campuses leads to higher enrollment levels, but not necessarily higher graduation rates.

In forcing colleges and universities to divert funding away from large lower-level and remedial courses towards more advanced classes, the federal government will make it harder for working class students with a weak high school education to get a college degree. There will not be enough slots in lower-level classes, and many will simply not have the skills to take on more advanced coursework. Those who are unable to succeed in the new environment will be labeled as failures and the public schools will be further blamed for not producing “college-ready” students.

Underneath the endless rhetoric from the White House about “improving outcomes” and “rewarding performance” on the country’s college and university campuses is an effort to create an ever-more nakedly class-based system in higher education. A post-high-school degree will increasingly become the purview of the wealthy and those with access to special resources, while the vast majority of working class youth will be shunted into low-wage jobs, having been deemed ill-equipped for higher-level learning.



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