

Obama announces pro-business community college plan

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Last week President Barack Obama outlined his latest higher education proposal, dubbed “America’s College Promise,” which he declared “will make two years of community college free to responsible students who are willing to work for it.”

In announcing the program, Obama declared, “In the coming years, jobs requiring at least an associate degree are projected to grow twice as fast as jobs requiring no college experience. We will not fill those jobs—or keep those jobs on our shores—without the training offered by community colleges.”

The White House has released few details about the proposal, but certain things are clear. First, the program begins not from the enlightened principle of defending and expanding public education, but rather, as the above quote makes clear, to provide American business with skilled, low-cost labor.

The White House wrote in a fact sheet that the focus of the proposal would be to connect “high-potential, low-wage workers” with “jobs that local employers are trying to fill such as energy, IT, and advanced manufacturing.”

Moreover, the scale of the program is a pittance. According to Obama, the proposal would cost just \$8 billion per year, less than one-sixth the yearly cost of the F-35 fighter jet program.

In addition, the proposal is structured in a way that would accelerate the undermining of traditional four-year colleges and the replacement of full-time faculty with adjunct professors paid poverty wages.

“As sketched out by the White House so far, the plan calls for the federal government to pick up the tab for about three-quarters of qualifying students’ tuition costs, with participating states kicking in the rest,” writes the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. “It does not call for any overall increase in how much money

community colleges receive per student, however.”

In other words, by paying only tuition, and without increasing per-student funding levels, the program would only exacerbate the budget problems facing community colleges throughout the country. The plan to incentivize enrollment in community colleges on a national scale, without any increase in funding for the institutions themselves, will place immense financial pressures on these colleges to cut labor costs.

In recent decades, there has been a systematic shift toward hiring adjunct professors at lower wages and with reduced, if any, benefits, both at community colleges and traditional four-year universities. Today, roughly seventy percent of all community college faculty members are part-time instructors.

According to the College Board, tuitions account for just 21 percent of the total cost of attending community college.

Since the 2008 financial crisis, state governments have cut higher education funding by nearly one third, according to a 2013 analysis by the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities.

The program will only cover tuition at community colleges whose programs either offer fully-transferable credits to four-year institutions or vocational training programs with high completion rates that lead to “in-demand” degrees required by corporations. Obama emphasized that there are “no free rides in America [...] This isn’t a blank check. It’s not a free lunch,” as students will only have their tuition covered if they “attend at least half-time, maintain a 2.5 GPA while in college, and make steady progress toward completing their program.”

Despite the program’s pro-business character, it has received early pushback from Republicans, and is likely to be modified or blocked by the Republican-controlled

Congress. Tennessee's Republican Senator Bob Corker deemed the plan "a whole new bureaucratic federal program."

Obama's plan was lobbied for by the nonprofit Complete College America (CCA), which is one of the primary and most influential beneficiaries of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Lumina Foundation. According to *The Chronicle for Higher Education*, the group "calls for streamlining or eliminating remedial classes, providing more academic support in credit-bearing courses, and providing colleges with financial incentives to graduate more students." In other words, pressuring colleges to cut costs and eliminate liberal arts courses.

The Chronicle notes that CCA has directly influenced the decision of "32 states, plus the District of Columbia, to join an alliance whose members pledge to "develop and implement aggressive state and campus-level action plans" to meet college-completion goals. And more than a dozen states have adopted performance-based financing, tying appropriations to colleges' graduation rates."

CCA has also influenced Obama's new college ratings scheme, which seeks to make federal and state funding dependent on colleges' performance in the expansion of No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top to the domain of higher education.



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