

Community-college funding well-spent

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BY JESSICA A. JOHNSON

President Barack Obama has linked health-care reform to our other significant economic challenges of job creation and deficit reduction, and the progress on health care is one of the reasons he gives himself a B-plus evaluation on his accomplishments this year.



Although the president's plunging approval ratings do not reflect his stance on health-care reform or his assessment of his performance thus far, I think Obama does deserve an above-average grade regarding his efforts to make higher education more accessible, particularly his increase of funding to community colleges. With our changing job market, community colleges will play a vital role in meeting the skill demands for emerging industries.

Obama launched the \$12 billion American Graduation Initiative in July to help millions of students acquire associate degrees and certificates over the next decade. Of this funding, \$3 billion will be divided among the nation's 1,200 community colleges, and the remaining \$9 billion will be set aside for competitive grants to strengthen academic programs and capital projects. The initiative also includes provisions for online and remedial education, in addition to outcome tracking.

College attendance is at an all-time high despite the recession, and the downturn has been partially credited for the surge in student enrollment at community colleges. U.S. Census data recently released by the Pew Research Center reported that the increase of 300,000 college students over the prior year came at two-year schools, while attendance at four-year institutions has remained even. This is no surprise, since the average tuition at community colleges is about \$4,600 less than at a public four-year university, and many older white-collar workers who have been laid off are returning to school to upgrade their skills or begin new careers.

Current labor-force trends show that middle-skill jobs, trades that require a high-school diploma and some postsecondary training, are in great demand. These occupations include people who work as electricians, engineering technicians, computer programmers, plumbers, construction craft laborers and health-care professionals. There is also a safety net for students planning careers in these fields, since many of these positions will not be outsourced.

Community colleges have always been vital in preparing students to land middle-skills jobs, and many two-year schools partner with employers who offer apprenticeship programs. Columbus State Community College offers classes to meet the requirements of Corna Kokosing Construction Co.'s apprenticeship program that include Safety and Loss Prevention and Construction Methods. Apprentices who complete Corna Kokosing's program earn up to 15 quarter hours toward a Construction Management Degree. The pay in construction management and other middle-skill occupations can reach as high as \$70,000 annually, rivaling the salaries of those with bachelor's and even Ph.D. degrees.

Even with the enormous layoffs that have occurred due to the recession, employers cannot find enough skilled workers to fill openings. Obama has stressed that we must do a better job of preparing America's workforce for the training required for middle-skill positions, as well as growing industries such as green jobs, or we will continue to lag other nations in an evolving global economy. In terms of public investment in training as a percent of gross domestic

product, the U.S. currently trails eight Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development countries, including Germany, France, Sweden and Canada.

The increased federal funding that Obama is providing for community colleges will certainly strengthen our global competitiveness and help us progress faster on the road to economic recovery.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects that 45 percent of job openings over the next 10 years will be in middle-skill positions, so the American Graduation Initiative was implemented at a crucial time. And the Obama administration recognizes that now is the time to emphasize the value of work-skill credentials that an associate's degree provides.

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