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National Alliance of Business, Labor, Educators Respond to Administration's Anticipated Community College Announcement

Plan Could Be Crucial Step in Helping America's Workers Prepare for Economic Growth, Answer President's One-Year Training Challenge

WASHINGTON, D.C. – A national alliance of employers, unions, education and training providers, and public workforce officials is responding to an announcement anticipated by President Obama tomorrow to expand the capacity of community colleges to respond to rising demand for job training.

The Workforce Alliance calls the proposal a crucial step toward implementing the vision first posed by President Obama to a joint session of Congress in February. Since then, he has repeated his challenge to every American to obtain at least one year of training past high school, “be it at a community college or a four-year school, vocational training or an apprenticeship,” so that every person can be part of the nation’s immediate recovery and long-term economic growth.

“Today, President Obama took another step toward reviving our economy by investing in our nation’s most vital resource – its people,” said Andy Van Kleunen, The Workforce Alliance’s Executive Director. “No nation can compete in today’s global economy when less than half of its workforce has a postsecondary credential. Today’s announcement is a crucial step toward making 21st century skills available to every working American and changing how we think about ‘public education’ in this country.”

For months, the President has been previewing today’s announcement as a key initiative of his Administration, to complement previous efforts to expand access to traditional college degrees. The announcement will come on the heels of the Administration’s efforts to make Pell grants more widely available to unemployed workers as well as significant investments in the nation’s workforce training system under the Recovery Act.

Based on early media reports, the Administration’s plan will likely include \$9 billion in competitive grants to community colleges and states over ten years; a \$10 billion loan fund to expand community college facilities; and \$50 million to expand online learning options.

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“With near double-digit unemployment and a lull in business activity, now is the time to get workers re-skilled so they are ready to hit the ground running once the recovery is underway, particularly in industries targeted by the President’s stimulus investments,” said Van Kleunen. “Most of these jobs will require some kind of technical training past high school, but not necessarily a four-year degree. Community colleges are a logical place to begin to address that middle-skill workforce demand. They are a tremendously undervalued resource.”

Van Kleunen noted, however, that the scale of the skills gaps facing many U.S. industries, particularly once the economy gets back on track, will ultimately require the Obama Administration to look beyond community colleges—to other partners in the business, labor and training communities.

“Today’s announced initiatives will address some community college capacity issues, but more resources will likely be needed,” he said. “We will also have to look to ways that community based training organizations, industry training partnerships, union and apprenticeship programs can play an expanded role in this effort to get more Americans a job credential. They often are key partners with community colleges, and need to be seen as part of the solution.”

Federal programs like the Workforce Investment Act, higher education tax credits, the transportation bill, and welfare reform are policy vehicles awaiting action in Washington over the next year that could further contribute to addressing this workforce skills challenge.

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TWA’s mission is to advocate for public policies that invest in the skills of America’s workers, so they can better support their families and help American businesses better compete in today’s economy. TWA is a coalition of community-based training organizations, community colleges, unions, business leaders, local officials, and leading technical assistance and research organizations from the field of workforce development. This alliance of stakeholders, who have not previously come together, ensures that our efforts are not in the self interest of a particular group, but are instead in the broader public interest of the nation. For more information, visit www.workforcealliance.org.