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Dr. Keith Miller: Helping Americans compete for jobs of the future

By Keith Miller

On Tuesday, President Barack Obama announced a proposal that will help get this country back on its feet by helping Americans train for the kinds of careers that will emerge in the next decade, training that will take place in large measure at community colleges. The American Graduation Initiative makes a tie between an educated and trained workforce and a strengthened economy.

The goal is to improve this country's college graduation rate so that by 2020, we lead the world in college completion. And since jobs requiring an associate degree are projected to be the way of the future, growing twice as fast as those requiring no college degree, community colleges are essential in helping America create jobs and rebuild the economy while taking a leadership role in education.

As the president pointed out, a college education must lead somewhere. It's not enough to walk across a stage, receive a piece of paper, and find that opportunities don't follow or that the education you received today isn't geared toward jobs of tomorrow. Community colleges have always worked to link jobs with education, and with this proposal, the connection will be stronger and more future-focused than ever before.

President Obama's plan calls for challenge grants aimed at encouraging colleges to find innovative ways to link training programs and jobs, a research center to measure what works and what doesn't, funding for new strategies to improve the 50 percent dropout rate now seen at many community colleges, funds to renovate buildings and classrooms, and money to create a new online open source clearinghouse of courses so that even rural colleges can offer training anyone can access.

This is encouraging news for the nation's two-year colleges, which have been struggling to educate increasing numbers of displaced workers even as resources and support have repeatedly been threatened and cut. And it's exciting to hear President Obama acknowledge what we have always known: By creating skilled workers, community colleges have a tremendous economic impact.

What will this initiative mean for Greenville Technical College? Suppose there's an equipment-intensive program needed by the local business community. Unfortunately, our budget is now so stretched that we can't afford to invest half a million dollars or more in what's needed to get this program going. President Obama's plan will give us the resources to start the program, giving business the opportunity to grow in a new direction.

This applies to new offerings and high-demand, existing programs such as welding. We're at enrollment capacity using the welding facilities that we have, but we're still not turning out enough skilled workers to meet industry demand. Right now, we can't afford to outfit additional facilities to meet that demand. The American Graduation Initiative the president describes would allow us to renovate additional space and supply highly trained workers.

The online component of President Obama's plan is critical, too. At Greenville Tech, enrollment in online courses is increasing rapidly because students are busy and education doesn't get any more convenient or accessible than online offerings. We'd like to offer more online courses and we need to offer more online courses, but the infrastructure isn't in place for us to do so. We need dollars to bring our infrastructure up to speed and to train more faculty members in online instruction. We need a 24-hour help desk so that students who are taking online classes at 2 in the morning have help available should they encounter a glitch. This new plan would give us the resources we need to increase online instruction, giving more of our area's busiest students the opportunity to get ahead.

We're heartened by the president's plan to improve graduation rates. The fact that so many students begin, but do not finish, programs has been of great concern to us, leading Greenville Technical College recently to join Achieving the Dream, an initiative aimed at using data to find and remove barriers to student success. With the combined strength of these efforts — the president's new plan, Achieving the Dream, and a Title III grant that will give us the resources to improve the developmental education that so many students need as a foundation for college-level work — we will move our students, this community, local businesses, and the state's economy forward.

As President Obama has said, no matter how well we train people, jobs may not exist in the field they've chosen. So it's important that we teach people to create their own companies, which will mean they, in turn, provide opportunities for skilled workers. It is our hope through this initiative to grow entrepreneurship in our area.

The president called the announcement of this proposal a transformative moment, and I believe he is right. Our economy has been in trouble for quite some time, and we don't need to return it to where it was. We need something better.

President Obama's plan will give Americans the skills to compete for the jobs of the future. It will give businesses the tools to grow from a stronger foundation. And this will be accomplished by giving the nation's best tools of economic recovery — its two-year colleges — the help they need to lead the way in revitalizing America.

Additional Facts

Dr. Keith Miller is president of Greenville Technical College, past chairman of the board of the American Association of Community Colleges, and a member of the board of directors of the American Council of Education.
