

From the issue dated March 19, 2004

Community Colleges Expect Loss in Job-Training Funds Despite Bush's Promises

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Washington

During his State of the Union address in January, President Bush announced a new job-training proposal that would give \$250-million in federal funds to community colleges. It garnered him one of the few standing ovations from both Republicans and Democrats in the House of Representatives' chamber.

And the cheers didn't stop that night. In the following days, two-year college officials enjoyed basking in all the attention from the executive nod.

The American Association of Community Colleges released a statement the next day in which its president, George R. Boggs, said, "We hope that this initiative marks the beginning of a new federal commitment to community colleges and their role in promoting economic growth and individual prosperity."

But now, more than a month after the speech and in the wake of the president's 2005 budget proposal, some community-college and work-force-development officials are wondering whether the president is engaging in some fuzzy math.

At the same time that President Bush requested \$250-million for a new job-training program, he proposed slashing funds for existing programs that benefit community colleges, including \$300-million from the Carl D. Perkins program, which gives money to community colleges for training low-income students for jobs, and \$64-million from the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), which funds training for displaced workers.

Along with cuts in other job-training programs, community colleges are likely to see a net loss in the federal funds they get for training workers. "Essentially, the president is robbing Peter to pay Paul," says Jason Walsh, director of field operations for the Workforce Alliance, a Washington-based advocacy group. "It's a shell game. The money that

work-force-training programs."

Gay Gilbert, director of the business-relations group in the Department of Labor, says the shift in funds is an attempt "to get the biggest bang for the buck." She says that community-college and work-force-development officials will be consulted as the program is put together.

Cuts in State Funds As Well

The day after his State of the Union address, President Bush visited Owens Community College in Toledo, Ohio, to tout his new job-training program. Just days before, Owens had given pink slips to half a dozen employees in its work-force-development department, part of the college's efforts to downsize in the face of cuts in its state appropriation.

Indeed, state budget reductions, combined with the cuts in current federal-training programs, have left community and technical colleges so strapped for cash that many are struggling to create programs needed to educate laid-off workers.

Bush administration officials have vaguely promised that some of the funds for the president's new program, Jobs for the 21st Century, would go toward helping community colleges hire more faculty members and create more classroom space. But for the most part, Ms. Gilbert of the Labor Department says the federal dollars will go toward helping two-year institutions foster relationships with industry, which the institutions will be expected to work with to determine which types of training programs are necessary and to design curriculums.

Despite what President Bush has called a "comprehensive plan," community-college leaders say many details of Jobs for the 21st Century are not yet clear.

Administration officials say that its new job-training program will build on the High Growth Job Training Initiative, a Department of Labor program that doles out grants of \$1-million to \$3-million to training providers with strong ties to businesses and local work-force-investment boards. That program focuses on 12 specific industries, including health care, information technology, manufacturing, and biotechnology.

Under the new program, only community colleges would be eligible for the federal grants. Yet to be determined is whether the dollar amount of the grants will be the same or if the same 12 industries will be the focus. In addition, the administration has not yet indicated

whether the \$250-million would be a one-time appropriation or the beginning of a continuing program.

Top of the Agenda

But within that uncertainty lies the program's advantages, say some of the plan's supporters.

Julian L. Alssid, executive director of the Workforce Strategy Center, points out that the proposal is an opportunity for community colleges to help shape the national agenda on work-force development and to educate the administration about their needs.

"Rather than simply dismissing this as an empty promise, community-college officials should take advantage of the fact that job training, and community colleges' role in job training, is suddenly at the top of the agenda," he says. "It appears as though there's room for community colleges and work-force advocates to help shape this."

Mr. Alssid adds that existing worker-training programs aren't perfect either, arguing that there has not been enough emphasis on including industry leaders, and that community-college officials are sometimes too guarded about the idea of employers' driving academic decisions.

What's more, he notes that the traditional setup of continuing-education programs at community colleges -- which generally administer worker-training programs -- does not always serve workers best. For instance, credit courses for full-time students may suit displaced workers better than what's offered in continuing-education programs, but often the workers do not know about those offerings.

"If you really look under the hood, most college [training programs] can be focused more effectively" on specific work-force needs, Mr. Alssid says.

Steve Ovel, executive director of government relations at Kirkwood Community College in Cedar Rapids, disagrees. "There are hundreds of wonderful examples across the country where community colleges develop customized training programs working hand in hand with local industry," he says.

The Bush administration says that its new efforts will help community colleges to better focus on training. The president's proposal will "raise the bar" on the types of community-college programs that are financed by the federal government since they will be awarded through competitive grants and graded on their performance, Ms. Gilbert of the

Labor Department says.

Administration officials have criticized some current government programs, like Perkins, for lacking accountability.

Mr. Ovel, a lifelong Republican, says he's disheartened by "the bigger problem -- the cuts to Perkins and WIA" along with federal financial-aid programs that were not designed with nontraditional students, like the unemployed, in mind.

"It amounts to less than a zero-sum game," he says.

For example, dislocated workers in rural areas who are not close to a college campus often turn to distance-education courses to complete some of their training. But those courses do not count toward eligibility for Pell Grants.

"There are so many sides to the equation that just add other problems," Mr. Ovel says.

Kimberly Freeman, executive director of work-force development at Mt. Hood Community College in Gresham, Ore., adds that unemployment benefits for laid-off workers often don't last long enough for them to complete training programs.

"Does this new proposal address that problem?" she asks. "That's not what I've been hearing so far. I'm hearing \$250-million, and divide that by about 1,200 community colleges, and then subtract the hits to some of the other programs. It doesn't leave us with a proposal to be too excited about right now."

The Big Stage

Others beg to differ.

At the American Association of Community Colleges, the main voice for two-year colleges here in Washington, leaders are still optimistic.

"Particularly because this is a new initiative and it targets assistance that's such a crying need for our colleges," says David Baime, the association's top lobbyist, "we are inclined to be very positive about this and look at it more in isolation," instead of analyzing it in the context of cuts to other job-training programs.

What's more, Mr. Baime says, it's the first time in recent memory that a United States president has tipped his hat to community colleges on

such a big stage.

"You can argue the merits of his proposal and also look at the bigger picture in terms of some of the other cuts," says Mr. Alssid of the Workforce Strategy Center. "But the very mention, on such a prominent platform, that community colleges are fundamental to the strategy is really important."

MOVING MONEY AROUND		
In his budget proposal for 2005, President Bush called for a new \$250-million job-training program that would award grants to community and technical colleges that form partnerships with local high schools and businesses. But he also proposed cuts or very minor increases in several existing job-training programs in the Labor and Education Departments through which two-year colleges also receive federal funds. Those programs include:		
	Fiscal 2004 (in thousands)	Fiscal-2005 proposed (in thousands)
Workforce Investment Act	\$3,356,000	\$3,292,000
Trade Adjustment Act training	\$259,200	\$259,300
H1B Visa Training	\$100,000	0
Other Labor Department job-training programs	\$2,578,000	\$2,319,000
Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Program	\$1,335,000	\$1,012,000
Other Education Department job-training programs	\$590,200	\$590,200
Source: Proposed 2005 federal budget		

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Section: Government & Politics
Volume 50, Issue 28, Page A23