

Community Colleges Set for Boost From the Government's American Graduation Initiative

The Obama administration is putting funding, including \$500 million for an Online Skills Laboratory through the American Graduation Initiative, towards higher education.

by William Tiernan
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Community colleges across the country are attracting the attention of students, universities, and the government. In a nationally broadcasted speech, President Obama characterized community colleges as "an essential part of recovery in the present, and our prosperity in the future."

In July 2009, the president unveiled the **American Graduation Initiative**. The AGI is the first major federally funded community college project since the 1960s, and it aims to bolster the effectiveness and impact of community colleges, raise graduation rates, modernize facilities, and create new online learning opportunities.

Proponents argue it could have an impact as great as the GI Bill did in helping Americans earn a college degree. The AGI calls for an additional five million community college graduates, who are better prepared to contribute to the global economy, by 2020.

The initiative carries an eye-popping \$ 12 billion price tag. But the cost may be justified: community colleges make up the largest part of the U.S. higher education system – due mainly to affordable tuition, flexible class schedules, convenient locations, and their established relationships with local businesses – but they spend only a fraction of what is spent on four-year college students.

More than 90 percent of two-year colleges offer online programs. It's no surprise then that the AGI includes a virtual component: a multi-million dollar online skills laboratory. The proposed lab would consist of 20-25 courses developed by teams of experts in content knowledge, pedagogy, and technology. Courses would be made available for free through either community colleges or the Defense Department's distributed learning network.

Offering free online college courses – at an estimated cost of \$500 million – is **troubling to Rick Hess**, Director of Education Policy Studies at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, D.C. Hess offers this analogy: "If the government started offering free iPhones, such a practice would curtail Apple's interest in current and future development. The same is true for online education.... It's hard to understand what the administration is trying to accomplish. They are putting together courses and materials that already exist and are being widely consumed."

Another concern is that the federal government shouldn't be in the business of writing curriculum, that a series of test classes might signal the beginning of a U.S. Department of Education-sponsored national curriculum. But David Baime, Vice President of Government Relations for the American Association of Community Colleges, is quick to point out that the proposed courses included in the House version of the bill are limited in scope to high school, technical, and entry level college material, and thus aren't tantamount to the launching of a comprehensive program of instruction.

"Distance education is at the forefront of what community colleges do," Baime says. "We are hopeful that the curriculum and courses created will be a boost to the community colleges that are able to offer them and the students they serve."

Legislation including the AGI is expected to be confirmed by the Senate in early 2010.



Key Components

5 million additional community college graduates by 2020

Creation of community college challenge grants

New strategies to promote retention and graduation

Modernize facilities

Online skills laboratory

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