Plan would pump $8B into community colleges

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APTOS — Most people view community colleges as stepping stones to four-year universities, but for a growing number in this recession-gripped economy, they offer direct pathways into careers that require specific skills.

In 2010-11 school year, 1,052 Cabrillo students who completed at least 12 units transferred to a four-year university, according to figures provided by the school. But just about the same number, 983, graduated with associate degrees or certificates, according to Rock Pfenhauer, Cabrillo’s dean of instruction, career education and economic development.

President Barack Obama has proposed an $8 billion “Community College to Career Fund,” with the goal of training 2 million students for jobs in areas such as health care, information technology and clean energy.

In general, the money would be used to forge partnerships between community colleges and area businesses. The fund would also provide more resources to community colleges, better training to students, and help create apprenticeships and internships.

That sounds like a good plan to the California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office, which is urging congressional approval.

However, this is not the first time a proposal to provide more funding to the nation’s 1,600 community colleges has been floated. In 2009, Obama requested $10 billion for the “American Graduation Initiative,” which was aimed at increasing graduation rates.

But only $2 billion was approved, and none of those funds came to Cabrillo. Cabrillo offers roughly two dozen career technical education programs — essentially vocational programs — with nursing, dental hygiene and radiologic technology among the most popular.

“Any additional funds would be helpful to us,” Pfenhauer said, adding that college administrators are “paying close attention to labor market information, trying to find where the job opportunities are for our students and how best to prepare them for those opportunities.”

Partnerships with health care employers have already been in place for more than a decade, with the 2001 formation of the Santa Cruz County Health Careers Partnership, Cabrillo’s medical assistant program, for instance, already has links with 14 area businesses, according to data provided by Pfenhauer.

About 100 students combined graduate from the nursing, dental hygiene and radiologic technology programs each year, he said, but that’s far more than there are jobs available. But, he added, “studies show that’s going to change fairly quickly and dramatically” with the growing elderly population, and especially with the health care overhaul passed in 2010.

Upcoming changes as a result of the law “will bring many more people into health care, and health care employers are telling us they expect to be serving many more patients and will need to expand their workforces,” he said.

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SOURCE: Cabrillo College