COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Obama’s plan offers hope to students

Cabrillo will likely pursue money from proposal to pair local businesses, schools

By JESSICA PHILIPPS
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WASHINGTON — California, home to a quarter of the nation’s community college students, could reap huge benefits from President Barack Obama’s $8 billion plan to pair local businesses and schools.

Cabrillo College in Aptos is among the hundreds of community colleges expected to compete for the money aimed at teaching students the skills they need to fill job opportunities in their community.

“The initiative is definitely competitive,”-price.

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which does mean that California will get a large portion of the funds,” said David Bazemore, senior vice president for government relations and research at the American Community College Association.

The proposal comes as the state’s community colleges face a $149 million deficit which is forcing difficult cuts in a system that serves 2.9 million Californians on more than 100 campuses.

“One of the contributing factors to the recession is that work is becoming higher-skilled in large part due to the application of computer technology,” said Rock Pfotenhammer, Cabrillo’s dean of Career Education and Economic Development. “The funds will be very helpful for the programs to adjust.”

Obama introduced the initiative during last month’s State of the Union Address, calling on “a national commitment to train two million Americans with skills that will lead directly to a job.”

The $8 billion “Community College to Career Fund” is aimed at training workers in high-growth areas such as health care, transportation and advanced manufacturing.

The initiative includes proposals for low-income students to attain specialized certifications in high-skilled fields in order to secure permanent jobs. It also provides funding incentives for employers who seek to increase partnerships with schools.

For Cabrillo College that could mean building upon its relationship with major health care employers, who already employ many of the school’s graduates.

“One of the things we’ve been working on is forming networks with colleges to partner with a business, which has proved to be very productive,” Pfotenhammer said. “Part of the intent is to ensure the medical pathway remains open to students who come in with low skills. We get them through instruction early in the programs, which are necessary.”

The California Community College system, the world’s largest higher education program, has been a pathway for millions of residents to four-year universities and the workforce.

“There are unlimited opportunities to improve the skills of Californians to meet the needs of the rebounding economy,” said Scott Lay, president of the Community College League of California.

“What’s clear is California’s economic rebound is dependent on providing Californians who can attract jobs,” Lay said.

The prospect of the initiative passing Congress in an era of deep deficits is unclear. Republicans have been resistant to agree to any large spending programs that are not accompanied by equalized reductions.

The Republican National Committee attacked the plan as a recycled idea aimed at generating attention training that will be distributed over four years.

Lay said California’s previous achievements gave Washington an inside look at how successful the state’s programs could be.

“It signals to the administration that there is a lot of capacity here in California that has potential,” Lay said. “Initially, the federal government gave money to states to maintain education around budget cuts, but now there is this shift in the mindset. The government is saying let’s have a federal program that encourages colleges to work together.”

California community colleges are burdened by a $149 million shortfall due to a dip in property taxes and the California Finance Department’s overestimation of student fees. Gov. Jerry Brown’s most recent budget invests $218 million to fill the gap, but only if his tax initiative is approved by voters.

“We are seeing our system shrink, we are in higher demand than ever and students can’t get into classes. If this money comes in and we can train workers, it’s going to help,” said Van Ton-Quinlivan, vice chancellor for Workforce and Economic Development for the California Community College Chancellor’s office.

“We are the central institution to closing the skill gap to what employers need and what workers should have,” Ton-Quinlivan said.

This is the central theme of the Obama administration’s goals,” Ton-Quinlivan said.

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