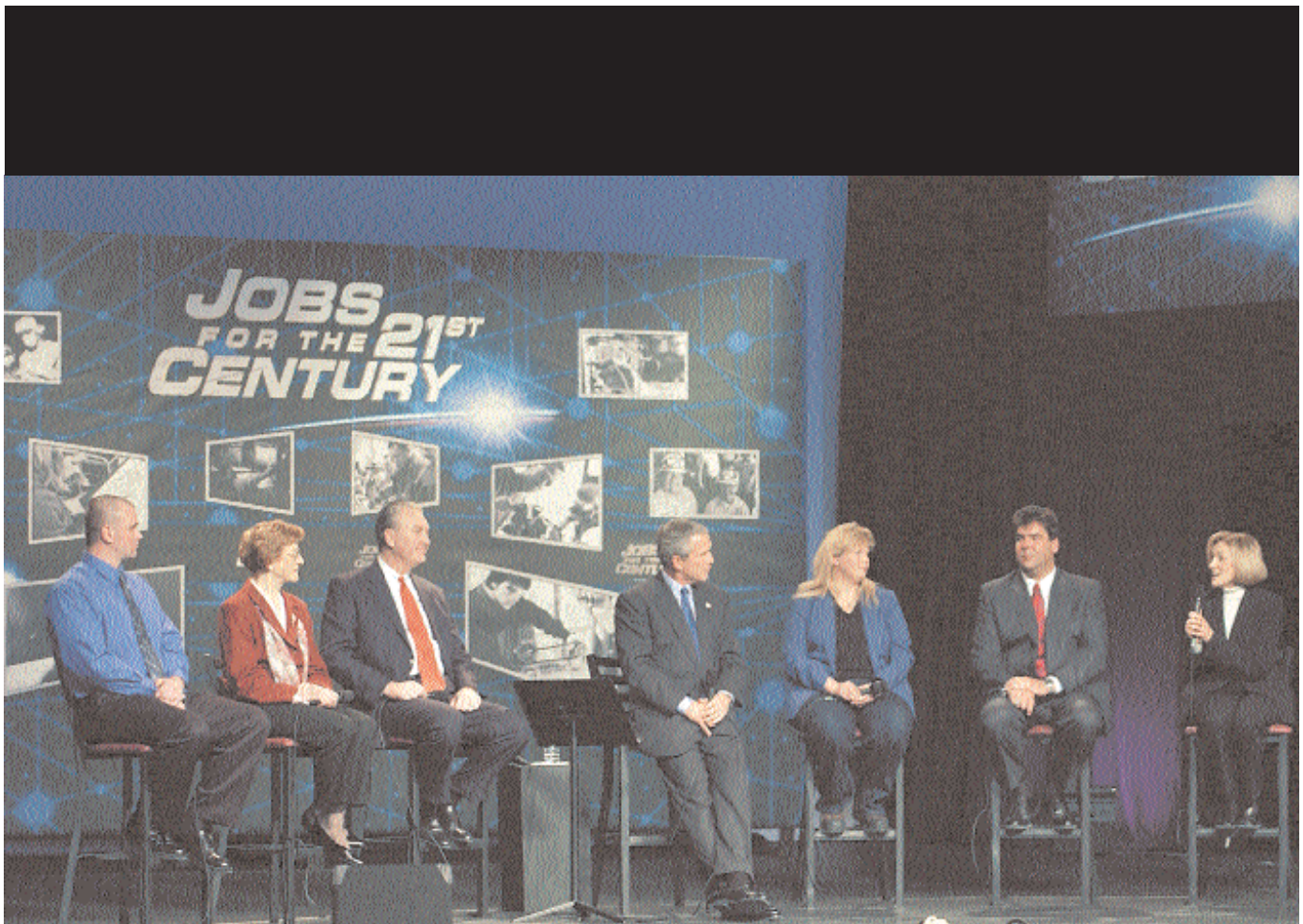


An Honorable Mention or Political Posturing?

While some educators are warmly embracing the president's \$250 million work-force training initiative, others are giving it the cold shoulder.

BY KRISTINA LANE



President Bush, students and officials at Owens Community College in Toledo, Ohio, discussed work-force training Jan. 21. From left: Owens graduate Mike Potter; Director of Wood County Department of Jobs and Family Services Ruth Larabee; Dr.

Paul Unger, Owens provost; President Bush; Owens student Becky Albritton; Skilled Trades Coordinator Jim Gilmore; and Dr. Christa Adams, Owens President.

WASHINGTON — When President Bush tipped his hat to community colleges during his State of the Union address Jan. 20, the packed House Chamber was stirred to a standing ovation.

“I propose increasing our support for America’s fine community colleges, so they can ... train workers for industries that are creating the most new jobs. By all these actions, we’ll help more and more Americans to join in the growing prosperity of our country. Job training is important, and so is job creation,” Bush said.

The day after his speech, the president touted his plan at two colleges — Owens Community College in Toledo, Ohio, and Mesa Community College in Phoenix. The plan would funnel \$250 million from the U.S. Department of Labor to community colleges, which would use the money to support and grow job-training liaisons with local businesses and work-force training boards.

The flurry of activity has educators asking why, after three years of focusing on K-12 education and proposing to cut funds from programs that benefit community colleges, did Bush extend an olive branch to two-year schools in such a prominent speech? Some say it’s because the president has finally realized how vital the colleges

are to reviving the sluggish economy — and they applaud him for doing so. Others have said it’s nothing more than an election-year ploy. He’ll campaign on it as he crisscrosses the country, they say, but do little to make it happen.

And while reactions run the gamut, most educators and policy-makers say it’s too soon to tell how the chips will fall but they agree that \$250 million could only help the colleges.

Money Talks

Based on Bush’s budget proposal released Feb. 2, the \$250 million would be distributed through a competitive grant program called Community-Based Job Training Grants. The grants would be given to partnerships between community colleges, business/industry and local work-force training boards.

U.S. Secretary of Labor Elaine Chao said the program would focus on training individuals for jobs in industries where there is high demand for workers with advanced skill sets, including health services, information technology, automotive services, biotechnology, hospitality, retail, high-tech construction and manufacturing, and geospatial technology.

“They are good-paying jobs. They are not bad-paying jobs at all,” Chao said at a Labor Department briefing on Bush’s budget.

Emily Stover DeRocco, assistant secretary of labor for employment and training at the Labor Department, said that while the department considers the \$250 million to be entirely new money, some parts of the budget were cut to reduce duplicate spending.

Funding would eventually be split between actual job training and beefing up community colleges’ capacities in terms of faculty and curriculum, DeRocco said, but it’s still unclear as to how much money would be spent on each. She said the grant amounts have yet to be determined, but they could be similar to those given under the High Growth Training Initiative, which are between \$1 million and \$3 million apiece.

But how soon could the colleges expect to see the money?

It depends, DeRocco said, on negotiations between Congress and the Bush administration about “what kinds of authority will be required for the money to be made available upon passage of the 2005 budget.” She said the money could be channeled in a number of ways, either through the appropriations process or the reauthorization of the Workforce Reinvestment Act.

However it shakes out, DeRocco said, the Bush administration believes there is broad bipartisan support in Congress for the initiative.

Prime Time

While details of the plan are still scant, educators say there are a number of reasons why Bush might be sharpening his focus on community colleges.

Chris Simmons, assistant director for government relations at the American Council on Education, said he thinks the plan was spurred by a combination of political motives and genuine interest.

“I think that he (Bush) has truly realized that the community-college system is pretty amazing and does an incredible job of training people at a low cost, and he realizes it’s a great resource and it can be an even better economic engine and resource for the country,” Simmons said. “It will give him something to talk about on the campaign trail. K-12 has really been his focus, and from a political standpoint it makes sense for him to talk about K-12 and higher education. But I don’t think political reasons are the only reason he’s doing it.”

Dr. James Jacobs, director of the Center for Workforce Development and Policy at Macomb Community College in Warren, Mich., agreed that Bush’s motivation was partly political.

“But it’s also a recognition that in the United States at this point there’s no national job-training and education system that is equal to the 1,200 community colleges that

“My problem with this is that his record doesn’t reflect any serious interest in community colleges or education in general. I am concerned — we saw with No Child Left Behind — they came up with a program and proposals that weren’t funded.”

— LAWRENCE GOLD, HIGHER EDUCATION DIRECTOR AT THE AMERICAN FEDERATION OF TEACHERS



Stacey Leedom, a student at Mesa Community College in Phoenix, chats with President Bush. Leedom, a single mother, explained how she left a job as a graphic designer to learn skills that landed her a higher-paying job in the information-technology industry.

exist. So it's a recognition that, in an age of diminishing government roles in education, health and employment, we are the system of choice in the future," Jacobs said.

But others say the forces driving Bush are purely political.

Lawrence Gold, higher education director at the American Federation of Teachers, said Bush is tapping into the fact that higher education — and particularly community colleges — are hot issues right now.

"My problem with this is that his record doesn't reflect any serious interest in community colleges or education in general. I am concerned — we saw with No Child Left Behind — they came up with a program and proposals that weren't funded," Gold said. "At the same time he's putting this forward, he's cut job-training money over the years very substantially. He hasn't done anything to increase Pell Grants which students at community colleges are particularly reliant on. ... Even if he fulfilled his commitment, it seems to me this commitment doesn't

begin to fill the need for educational access and opportunity that the country needs and that industry needs and that students need in particular."

Just Desserts

Whatever the impetus behind the plan, many in higher education say it's well deserved — and long overdue.

Dr. Jess Carreon, chancellor of the Dallas County Community College District in Texas, said he is thrilled that the president recognized community colleges in a forum as significant as the State of the Union.

"It was heartwarming to see the recognition that senators and congressmen and (congress) women have for community colleges. I think the message it sends is that community colleges are an important part of America's economic future. We're pretty bottom line," Carreon said. "As the details unfold, I think it will be real clear that we will continue to step up to the plate. Getting

people into the work force and keeping them in the work force is crucial."

Carreon said Bush was wise to turn to community colleges in an hour of fiscal need.

"We are crucial to training dislocated workers. ... We aren't Johnny-come-latelies — we know exactly what to do. What better thing to do than go to 1,200 schools that already have structures in place? Frankly, I think it was a smart move on his part," he said.

Dr. Larry Christiansen, president of Mesa Community College, said he thinks the president's acknowledgment will go a long way toward raising national awareness about two-year schools.

"Part of the difficulty that community colleges have had over time is that we have carried a lot of the weight of higher education both in areas such as work-force and occupational education as well as transfer programs. And many times we have been under the radar screen when it comes to funding, recognition and awareness. This is an indicator that we have moved from

below to be on the radar screen," Christiansen said.

Dr. Christa Adams, president of Owens Community College, said she is particularly encouraged by the president's interest in fostering relationships between businesses and community colleges.

"The partnerships between community colleges and business and industry are a really good foundation for specific training — industry tells us what we need and we take our rapid response time and turn it around. So we're pleased with the idea of partnerships," Adams said.

Barking Up the Wrong Tree?

While many community-college leaders are lauding the plan, some critics have said job training is barking up the wrong tree: Bush should be creating jobs instead of training workers for jobs that might not exist.

"The problem is not that we don't have

“Part of the difficulty that community colleges have had over time is that we have carried a lot of the weight of higher education both in areas such as work-force and occupational education as well as transfer programs. And many times we have been under the radar screen when it comes to funding, recognition and awareness. This is an indicator that we have moved from below to be on the radar screen.”

— DR. LARRY CHRISTIANSEN, PRESIDENT OF MESA COMMUNITY COLLEGE



Mesa Community College President Larry Christiansen greets President Bush.

High Hurdles

What are the main challenges community colleges grapple with when it comes to responding to the work-force training needs of employers and workers? Below is a summary of the responses by 40 states that answered to this question, posed in a survey by the Education Commission of the States.

Challenge	Responses	States
Lack of funding	30	Alaska, Ala., Ark., Calif., Colo., Conn., Del., Iowa, Ind., Ky., La., Maine, Mass., Neb., N.M., Nev., N.Y., Ohio, Okla., Pa., R.I., S.C., Texas, Utah, Va., Wash., Wis., W.Va.
Lack of funding for training in high-demand, high-cost fields	12	Ala., Ariz., Colo., Del., Ill., Ind., Ky., N.M., Ohio, Pa., Texas, Va.
Need for better coordination among work-force agencies	8	Ark., Calif., Del., Minn., N.Y., Pa., R.I., Vt.
Community colleges not recognized for their role in work-force and economic development	6	Ill., Kansas, Mass., N.J., N.M., N.Y.
Need to improve responsiveness of community colleges to changing labor market needs	6	Ariz., Ill., Minn., Mo., Pa., W.Va.
Recruiting qualified faculty for high-demand fields	5	Ala., Del., N.C., N.M., Texas
Need for coordination among education agencies	4	Fla., Ind., Miss., Okla.
Lack of state funding for noncredit work-force training	4	Mass., Pa., Va., W.Va.
Serving rural areas where good jobs are scarce	3	Iowa, N.M., N.Y.
Improving preparation and flow of recent high-school graduates into postsecondary career education	2	Ga., Wis.
Increasing burden for funding of work-force training on student-supported tuition	2	Colo., Iowa
Lack of financial aid for part-time, working students	1	Ark.

Source: “State Policies On Community College Workforce Development: Findings From A National Survey,” by The Education Commission of the States, September 2002.

enough people with skills, it's that we don't have enough good jobs at the moment, so the real problem is getting expansion in jobs and then facilitating people being trained for those jobs. He's skipping a step — for every good job there are hundreds of applicants,” said Dr. Thomas Wolanin, a senior associate at the Institute for Higher Education Policy. “There's been a significant net job loss in the last three years of 2 million.”

Jacobs agreed with Wolanin. “I think ... in an age where the American economy has not produced enough jobs for employment over the last three years ... training is not a substitute for an employment policy. Without an employment policy, the training will be marginal. There are shortages in certain kinds of occupations and misalignment of people, but that's relatively at the margins,” he said.

Gold of the AFT said history hasn't always proven kind when it comes to job-training programs.

“As a matter of public policy, job-training programs can be effective, but there's also an awfully long record of job-training programs for jobs that wind up disappearing. (There's a) danger of it being narrow in terms of a person's career goals. We've all heard a hundred times that people will change careers. I think that shouldn't get lost here,” he said.

But others say it's not an either-or dynamic — a robust economy depends on both job creation and job training, they say.

Carreon of the Dallas County Community College District said job training and job creation are equally critical, and community colleges can help on both fronts.

Industries such as health care, information technology, manufacturing and technology are all in need of workers, he said.

Dr. Marshall Gartenlaub, statewide director for the applied competitive technologies initiative at the California Community Colleges, agreed that job training and job creation are both necessary for a healthy economy. But he said he is concerned that the kinds of jobs being created are service-oriented and don't pay very well. The fact that many high-tech jobs have been exported to other countries has proven detrimental, he said.

Maybe Too Soon to Tell, But ...

No matter what educators and policy-makers think of Bush's plan, most agree that it's still too soon to tell exactly what will become of it. And given all that the president has on his plate — the War in Iraq, homeland security, Medicare and his reelection campaign, to name a few issues — the job-training proposal could fall by the way side, they say.

Still, some offered their take on what might happen in the year ahead.

“I think it's hard to know if (it) is meant to be election-year, feel-good symbolism or a concrete proposal, but I think there will be benchmarks along the way that you can look at,” said Wolanin of the Institute for Higher Education Policy.

Now that the \$250 million has been included in the budget proposal, the next

step to look for is a legislative proposal, he said.

Simmons of ACE said a lot is riding on the boldness of Bush's support.

“My guess is when he comes out with the details, some people may say we need to tweak this here and there and will work with the administration and Congress to do that, but I think it's too early to say ‘yay’ or ‘nay’ — we still have a long way to go,” he said.

But Simmons said he expects the president to lobby hard for the plan and that it will ultimately lead to good things.

Jacobs said it's especially important to look at the plan's specifics, to see if the money is new or simply being redistributed, and to determine the kinds of jobs for which individuals will be training. If the government is shuffling funds from other departments, he said, that could put community colleges in competition with the other programs.

He also said the money should be targeted at training workers for high-wage, high-skills jobs.

“One would think that by focusing these dollars that would demonstrate that the federal government is helping target the clusters of occupations that earn the highest wages and best benefits for people,” Jacobs said. “If it's used to train for low-income jobs, then it basically just lowers the cost of low-wage workers. It won't be of much

social benefit or utilize the community colleges to their best (potential).”

Gartenlaub echoed Jacobs' concern about the money being taken from other programs.

“We certainly don't want to be hurting others to train these folks,” he said.

The Bush administration's plans to cut funds from the Perkins Loan program also troubles Gartenlaub, who said such a move would hurt the vocational programs colleges have with high schools.

And while Gartenlaub said \$250 million is a good start, much more needs to be done. Ideally, he said, the federal government would continue to offer financial support — with an emphasis on educating from kindergarten through adulthood, not just through college.

“We don't have a mindset of supporting education K-adult. Think of it. Our society has agreed to the model that we must support kids through high schools, then a whole system of young adults in college, but we don't have anything in our system to support adults once they are in our system working,” he said.

“Why shouldn't we have a mechanism to support learning as our society advances? Were we to do that, community colleges would be the natural educational component to make that happen.” ▲