President Obama’s American Graduation Initiative;

A Historic Effort to Revitalize America’s Community Colleges

Peter W. Hafner

Michigan State University

EAD 882

Higher Education Policy

Dr. Jussi Kivistö

Dr. James Fairweather

11 November 2009
Introduction

This paper looks at U.S. President Barack Obama’s recently announced American Graduation Initiative (AGI), a proposal to revitalize America’s community colleges and help the U.S. “once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world” (Obama, 2009, n.a.). The AGI, if fully approved, would invest $12 billion in the nation’s community colleges and increase the number of community college graduates by five million over the next ten years (Obama, 2009; Office of the, 2009; Hebel, 2009; Schoeff, 2009; Shear & de Vise, 2009). This would be achieved though improvements made to courses, programs, and facilities (Butcher, 2009). Making the announcement this past July at Macomb Community College, just north-east of Detroit, an area particularly hard hit by the current recession (Obama Proposes Historic, 2009), the President said:

Not since the passage of the original GI Bill and the work of President Truman's Commission on Higher Education -- which helped to double the number of community colleges and increase by seven-fold enrollment in those colleges -- have we taken such a historic step on behalf of community colleges in America. (Obama, 2009, n.a.)

George Boggs, President of the American Association of Community Colleges calls the AGI the largest federal investment in community college history (as cited in Shear & de Vise, 2009). Gail Mellow, President of LaGuardia Community College and co-author of Minding the Dream; The Process and Practice of the American Community College, writes that the AGI is highly significant historically in both its scope and scale. She further points out that in addition to recommending multilevel institutional improvements, it would also provide the first major federal funding to be directed specifically at construction projects for community college since the Johnson Administration (Mellow, 2009).
Although many have praised the President’s plan (Goldstein, 2009; Loebsack, 2009; Granholm, 2009; Hinojosa, 2009; Kildee, 2009; Dad, 2009; Mellow, 2009; ACTE Commends President, 2009) some have also been quick to criticize the AGI (Dad, 2009; Shear & de Vise, 2009; Parry & Fischer, 2009, Martin, 2009). Community colleges, although often overlooked and even ignored, are a critical component in the U.S. system of higher education (Hebel, 2009). The praise and the criticism, as well as the excitement and the disappointment surrounding the AGI justify a further more critical examination and a deeper understanding of this important federal effort to generate potential reforms and innovations at Americas’ community colleges.

**The Significance of Community Colleges on the American Higher Education Landscape, Past and Present**

Community colleges are a uniquely American phenomenon dating back to the earliest part of the 20th Century when they were known as *junior colleges*. Between 1900 and 1940 approximately 275 community colleges were founded in the United States and its territories (Pedersen, 2002). Today there are 1,195 community colleges of which 987 are public institutions. They enroll 11.5 million students each year, 59% of which are part-time. The average student age is 29, with 58% of the students over the age of 22. Within community colleges 39% of all students are first generation college students. Community college students constitute 46% of all undergraduates in the U.S. and around 39% of all international undergraduates in the U.S. Annually community colleges award 555,000 associate degrees and 295,000 certificates. Community colleges graduate 59% of all new nurses and the majority of all other new health-care workers. In addition, close to 80% of all firefighters, law enforcement officers, and emergency medical technicians receive their credentials from community colleges. Finally, a community college graduate can expect to earn an average of $1.6 million during
their lifetime, approximately $0.4 million more than for someone with only a high school diploma (American Association of, 2009).

Although most community colleges have historically had an open door policy many across the county have recently had to, for the first time ever, close their doors to students because of dramatic enrollment increases and a lack of financial resources to cope with those increases (Mellow, 2009). Between the academic years of 2001-2002 and 2005-2006, almost 2.3 million new students enrolled at community colleges, representing “the greatest enrollment booms since the 1960s, when many of the institutions were founded” (Parry & Fischer, 2009, n.a.). In fact, almost all of the 300,000 new postsecondary students in 2008 were at two-year institutions (Martin, 2009). While exact enrollment numbers for fall 2009 are not yet available, the American Association of Community Colleges estimates that on average enrollments at community colleges are up by at least 10% over 2008 and that some institutions are expect to report increases of 25% to 30% (as cited in Martin, 2009). These increases have been “fueled by high school graduates seeking a lower cost entry into college and adult learners needing new skills to gain employment or keep their jobs” (Obama Proposes Historic, 2009, n.a.). Frank Mensel, Senior Fellow at the Education Policy Center at the University of Alabama, in the recently released report *Funding and Access Issues in Public Education: A Community College Perspective*, commented on the challenges currently facing many community colleges and the potential consequences of failing to meet these challenges:

Community colleges are being asked to do more with less, and, in many states, our community colleges are bursting at the seams and in desperate need of funds for new and renovated facilities. If you short-change the community colleges due to inadequate
funding as compared to their mission, you are undermining the economic future of our nation. (Katsinas & Tollefson, 2009, p. 40)

Mensel’s comments have echoed those of many community college administrators and faculty (see Stuart, 2009; Dad, 2009; Parry & Fischer, 2009; McClure, 2009; Hebel, 2009; Raber, 2009; Mellow, 2009).

Further stressing the importance of community colleges, the Association of Career and Technical Education states that, “one-third of the fastest growing occupations will require an associate’s degree or a postsecondary vocational certificate” (as cited in ACTE Commends President, 2009, n.a.). Even though employers and students have for some time understood this, as well as the importance that community colleges play in meeting these needs, governments from the local to the federal level have unfortunately for many years ignored the financial needs of these institutions and discounted, directly and indirectly, their contributions to the American economy as well as their ability to positively change lives.

The President in his announcement of the AGI said, “Community colleges are an undervalued asset in our country. Not only is that not right, it’s not smart” (Obama, 2009, n.a.). He went onto to say, “Community colleges are an essential part of our recovery in the present – and our prosperity in the future. [Community colleges] can make the future better, not just for these individuals but for America” (Obama, 2009, n.a). He also pointed out that jobs requiring at least an associate degree are expected to grow twice as quickly as those requiring no college experience (Obama, 2009). In addition he said, “We will not fill those jobs – or even keep those jobs here in America – without the training offered by community colleges” (Obama, 2009, n.a.). The President’s comments in conjunction with the proposed AGI denote a fundamental shift in
federal policy towards community colleges and recognition of their importance to the nation, its economy, its businesses, and its citizens.

**The Specifics of the American Graduation Initiative**

Most importantly it must be understood that the President’s “proposal is just that, a proposal, and how it takes shape as it moves through the legislative process will very likely determine its efficacy” (Parry & Fischer, 2009, n.a.). Specifically the AGI proposes building on the existing strengths of community colleges while at the same time introducing new innovations and reforms necessary to the needs of the 21st Century global economy. This is to be achieved through five individual initiatives:

1. Increase by 2020 community college graduates by five million, including not only those who earn associate degrees, but also those who earn certificates or who continue on to four-year colleges and universities where they eventually graduate. This will support the President’s goal that he made in February to have the U.S. once again be the world leader in college degree attainment in the next decade (Office of the, 2009).

2. Establish the **Community College Challenge Fund** to improve instruction, create ties with industry, and adopt further reforms. These new competitive grants would allow community colleges and state governments to innovate and expand upon proven reforms (Office of the, 2009). “These efforts will be evaluated carefully, and the approaches that demonstrate improved educational and employment outcomes will receive continued federal support and become models for widespread adoption” (Office of the, 2009, n.a.).

3. Create the **College Access and Completion Fund** to “finance the innovation, evaluation, and expansion of efforts to increase college graduation rates and close achievement gaps, including those at community colleges” (Office of the, 2009, n.a.). Part of this initiative
would also be directed at improving the efforts of states to track students’ progress and completion towards degrees as well as their success in the workplace (Office of the, 2009).

4. Provide a $2.5 billion fund to assist community colleges in meeting the needs of students and employers by modernizing facilities and equipment required to provide the most current and relevant training to students, especially in technical and other growth fields (Office of the, 2009).

5. Launch a new *Online Skills Laboratory* through a cooperative effort with the Departments of Defense, Education, and Labor. Working together these organizations would make courses freely available, investigate possibilities to award academic credits based not upon class hours but instead upon achievement, and thoroughly evaluate the consequences and outcomes (Office of the, 2009).

Even though many of these initiatives may seem idealized or even extreme it must be remembered that this is still only a proposal and that it must still pass several significant hurdles before it can take effect. Also, it is too early to predict what the final version of this initiative might look like, if does finally receive approval. However, that is not to disregard the historical significance of this effort or its potential for higher education reform and innovation at community colleges, the likes of which have not been seen perhaps since the end of World War II.

**Improvements Yes, Perfection No; Criticism of the American Graduation Initiative**

Although many have praised the efforts of the President and see the AGI as a significant and historical step in the right direction (Goldstein, 2009; Loeb sack, 2009; Granholm, 2009; Hinojosa, 2009; Kildee, 2009; Dad, 2009; Mellow, 2009; ACTE Commends President, 2009), others have been quick to criticize and point to what they feel are some of the shortcomings of proposal (Dad, 2009;
Shear & de Vise, 2009; Parry & Fischer, 2009, Martin, 2009). Marc Parry and Karin Fischer, write in The Chronicle of Higher Education, “While many observers called the $12-billion proposal an unprecedented investment by the federal government in community colleges, they cautioned that money alone won’t solve the problems Mr. Obama has described” (2009, n.a.). The blogger known only as “Dean Dad” and writing under the heading, “Confessions of a Community College Dean,” on the Insider Higher Ed web site shortly after the President announced the AGI, was slightly less “diplomatic” with his or her criticism. They raise some very valid questions, in particular concerning the possible establishment of a national Online Skills Laboratory:

How will national courses work with regional accreditation? Doesn’t a national repository of standard courses presuppose a set of standard national curricula? How eager do we expect local faculties to be to outsource their livelihoods to course-o-matics? The collective bargaining implications alone are staggering. Who would have oversight over the national curriculum? What could students do if national courses were rejected locally for transfer? Who would do the grading? On what standards? What if a given college’s students consistently did worse than another college’s? This could quickly turn into a higher ed version of No Child Left Behind, complete with local incentives to game the system, rewards going to the already-affluent, and political interference in content. (Dad, 2009, n.a.)

The author goes onto to point out that the $2.5 billion to be directed at facilities improvements would work out to about $2 million per community college if divided evenly, representing only a small fraction of the necessary funding needed for construction of even a modestly-sized new classroom building (Dad, 2009).

The author, summarizing what they believe to be the most critical issues currently facing community colleges and highlighting perhaps the most significant potential failures of the AGI writes:
The major funding crunch at cc’s [community colleges] is in the operating budgets, which covers salaries and ongoing expenses. Amazingly, none of the $12 billion headline number is aimed at shoring up the very operating budgets that are being gutted by the states. None. Not one dollar. This, while announcing the aim of nearly doubling the number of graduates produced. How we’re supposed to double the number of students who make it all the way through without any additional operating funding isn’t addressed. (2009, n.a.)

The complete failure of the AGI to address operating budgets, and in particular faculty salaries, was repeated by other authors as well (Shear & de Vise, 2009; June, 2009; Raber, 2009).

It appears that faculty salaries at community colleges are still being ignored by the President and by the proposed AGI. According to the most recent figures available from the National Center for Education Statistics, while 70.55% of faculty at public four-year institutions are full-time, only 33.30% of faculty at community colleges are (Cataldi, Fahimi, & Bradburn, 2005). How does the President realistically expect to close the gap between community colleges and four-year institutions when such disparities exist? A recent survey conducted by The Chronicle of Higher Education revealed that most part-time faculty at community colleges earn $20,000 or less per year (June, 2009). According to the U.S. Department of Health & Humans Services 2009 Poverty Guidelines, this figure falls under the poverty line for a family of four (U.S. Department of, 2009).

The AGI expects community colleges to increase the number of graduates by 40% to 50% annually over the next ten years (Shear & de Vise, 2009). Unfortunately it does not fully address how that is to be achieved. Michael Hansen, president of the Michigan Community College Association, said “It a little bit of a bittersweet pill. It’s great that people are coming back to community colleges to get trained, but a student only brings about a third of the cost of their tuition” (as
cited in Martin, 2009, n.a.). He goes on to express his concern that it may be very difficult for many community colleges to meet the new demand without more funding (as cited in Martin, 2009).

**Conclusion**

Even though the AGI represents a major historical step in the right direction and even though it certainly has several significant strengths it unfortunately fails to address some of the most critical challenges that almost all community colleges are currently facing. Most noticeably these are the immediate and acute need to stabilize operating budgets and bring ratios between part-time and full-time faculty and thus faculty salaries more into line with those found at four-year colleges and universities. If the AGI can be revised to address these areas as well as the concerns and criticisms raised by some, it will then have the possibility of reforming and innovating community colleges at a truly historic and potentially unprecedented level. Therefore allowing community colleges to fulfill their rightful and key role in propelling the American economy as well as American businesses and American citizens strongly into the new 21st Century global economy.
References

ACTE Commends President Obama’s American Graduation Initiative for Community Colleges. (2009, 14 July). *U.S. Newswire*. Retrieved from http://rppproxy.iii.com:9797/MuseSessionID=939de51b9fb21a48bc8124921c744f7b/MuseHost=find.galegroup.com/MusePath/gtx/retrieve.do?contentSet=IAC-Documents&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&qrySerId=Locale%28en%2C%2C%2C%29AFQE%3D%28ke%2CNone%2C30%29American+graduation+initiative%24&sgHitCountType=None&inPS=true&sort=DateDescend&searchType=AdvancedSearchForm&tabID=T004&prodId=EAIM&searchId=R2&currentPosition=2&userGroupName=msu_main&docId=A203567483&docType=IAC


Retrieved from
http://rpproxy.iii.com:9797/MuseSessionID=b837757e74fe8dbfcdc162514c2debc0/MuseHost=proquest.umi.com/MusePath/pqdweb?index=7&did=1793266631&SrchMode=2&sid=1&Fmt=3&VInst=PROD&VType=PQD&RQT=309&VName=PQD&TS=1257615815&clientId=3552

http://rpproxy.iii.com:9797/MuseSessionID=91ff50b298e7829c30288e4a1e557/MuseHost=proquest.umi.com/MusePath/pqdweb?index=4&did=1829983521&SrchMode=2&sid=1&Fmt=3&VInst=PROD&VType=PQD&RQT=309&VName=PQD&TS=1257615815&clientId=3552

http://chronicle.com/article/Obama-to-Propose-Graduation/47375

http://rpproxy.iii.com:9797/MuseSessionID=b9d7572989c483f7618452a9721e7818/MuseHost=proquest.umi.com/MusePath/pqdweb?index=8&did=1789311731&SrchMode=2&sid=1&Fmt=3&VInst=PROD&VType=PQD&RQT=309&VName=PQD&TS=1257615815&clientId=3552


Obama Proposes Historic Investment to Build Community College Capacity. (2009, 14 July). *U.S. Newswire*. Retrieved from http://rpproxy.iii.com:9797/MuseSessionID=a3f817c8496e8ce75d5b6dc307c2a44/MuseHost=find.galegroup.com/MusePath/gtx/retrieve.do?contentSet=IAC-Documents&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&qrySerId=Locale%28en%2C%2C%29American+graduation+initiative%24&sgHitCountType=None&inPS=true&sort=DateDescend&searchType=AdvancedSearchForm&tableD=T004&prodId=EAIM&searchId=R2&currentPosition=1&userGroupName=msu_main&docId=A203565521&docType=IAC


