

Obama proposes more cash for community colleges

By Paul Fain, Inside Higher Education

President Obama may have strong words for colleges about tuition prices, but he continues to push for more federal funding for community colleges.

In a major speech Tuesday on job creation Obama repackaged a February budget proposal for an \$8 billion "Community College to Career Fund." The address follows the president's vow six days ago to "shake up" higher education to ensure better value for middle-class students and their families.

Both speeches were grounded in the economy and middle-income jobs. And the event Tuesday, which Obama held at an Amazon.com warehouse in Tennessee, was aimed at bringing Congressional Republicans to the table.

The president included a suggestion to slash corporate tax rates, a move Republicans support. The overhaul of business taxes would also generate revenue through a fee on the foreign earnings of U.S. companies, The Washington Post reported, which would help pay for the community college plan and other proposals.

Another idea the administration unveiled Tuesday that involves higher education is the creation of 45 manufacturing innovation institutes, which link companies, colleges and government. That proposal builds on a pilot program in Youngstown, Ohio, as well as three new manufacturing institutes that are slated for creation later this year.

"We're getting businesses, universities, communities all to work together to develop centers of high-tech industries all throughout the United States that allow us to be at the

forefront of the next revolution of manufacturing," Obama said, according to a written transcript of his speech.

The president dubbed his plan a "grand bargain." But the GOP doesn't appear to be buying. Congressional Republicans quickly signaled that they opposed the jobs deal, according to news media reports.

Obama's proposed community college fund would support job-training programs in growing and high-demand fields, according to a written statement from the White House. The accompanying fact sheet did not include a price tag, but Obama asked Congress for \$8 billion for the program in February.

A more detailed description of that proposal, which the administration released when it was announced, described a "blueprint to train two million workers." The plan included money for apprenticeships and other on-the-job training for community college students, like internships that would lead to college credit for work-based learning.

The fund would also include performance-based incentives. For example, states might set aside money for job-training programs at colleges that successfully place graduates in good-paying jobs.

The American Association of Community Colleges backs the job-training fund, not surprisingly. David Baime, the association's senior vice president for government relations and research, said campus officials strongly support the proposal.

"If enacted, it would dramatically bolster the work that our colleges are already doing to help address the skills gap and to provide economic opportunity for the many people still struggling in today's economy," he said in a written statement.

But advocates for community colleges are realistic about the

slim odds of multibillion-dollar plans going anywhere while federal lawmakers on both sides of the aisle are pushing budget austerity.

However, the White House keeps trying to find more money for the two-year sector. And it has succeeded before, even if at levels smaller than those first sought.

Obama in 2009 announced a \$12 billion proposal directed at community colleges. The American Graduation Initiative failed, but morphed into \$2 billion in U.S. Department of Labor funding for workforce development at two-year institutions.

That program, which has a name that is too long to include here, appears to be having a substantial impact. Community college officials have said that the money has led to lasting, ambitious changes on their campuses, particularly around career services.