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## Risks and Rewards in Push to Boost Community Colleges

By DAVID WESSEL

Like his predecessors, President Barack Obama has discovered community colleges, the too-often-denigrated institutions that offer a first chance to those who never mastered English or arithmetic and a second chance to those whose skills no longer command a decent wage.

Much more than his predecessors, Mr. Obama is offering money -- \$12 billion over 10 years, pushing private companies out of the student-loan business to raise the money.

Student-loan providers are shrieking. Community colleges are celebrating, though wary of a provision that requires quantitative benchmarks on their progress. But the headline writers have moved on to health care and housing prices; the president has gone from speaking at Michigan's Macomb Community College to sharing a beer at the White House with the Harvard professor and Cambridge, Mass., cop.

Yet details of his American Graduation Initiative offer a window into the Obama approach to government, both its potential to produce the "change" on which he so loudly campaigned and the risks he is running by spending so much with so many promises.

Education is a great example: A big difference between Arne Duncan, the secretary of education, and would-be school reformers who came before him is that he has \$100 billion to spend on K-12.

Mr. Obama offers lofty man-on-the-moon goals: The

U.S. will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by 2020. But even he doesn't have enough money to finance that. So he proposes a competition, as he has for K-12 money. A bill likely to pass the House soon lays out a long list of criteria that the Education and Labor departments are to use in deciding which colleges get four-year grants.

The notion, a hallmark of Mr. Obama's spending, is to use money to spur innovation and to devote taxpayer dollars to the most promising avenues, rather than financing old ways of doing things.

It sounds good. And no doubt community colleges could use the money: Their enrollments are rising; their budgets aren't. They remain among the most important escalators of social mobility. But a lot depends on how the colleges use the money. Taking federal money to do more of the same won't do it.

"Doing training in the absence of jobs isn't very practical," says Macomb's president, James Jacobs. "We need to play a role in job creation, which means new ways of working with the private sector."

There are examples. Mr. Jacobs's college in February launched a joint venture with Talascend LLC, a staffing firm, to teach 45 laid-off auto designers, experienced in design software, to design process piping for refineries and power plants in a six-week intensive course. The key: Talascend saw unfilled jobs in the Southwest and "good experienced people sitting around in Detroit without work," says Richard Spragg, a Talascend vice

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president. "There's very little point in doing training for training's sake," he says.

The good news: The first two of the initial 15 graduates just got jobs. The bad: Demand for piping designers has collapsed with the credit crunch and fall in oil prices, a reminder of the overriding importance of strong economic growth if skilled workers are to prosper.

In Southern California, the U.S. Air Force and Boeing Co. essentially hired Cerritos College to train workers for three local women- and minority-owned parts suppliers so they could continue to compete successfully and keep jobs in California.

Kathy D'Amato, who owns 12-year-old KAP Manufacturing in San Dimas, Calif., with her husband, signed up three years ago and is a happy customer: "They made sure we were not getting training just to put down on a piece of paper," she says. "A small company like ours never could have understood what kind of training is out there without Cerritos."

In the past three years, the machining company has gone from 13 employees to 30 and moved from a 6,000-square-foot building to a 22,000-square-foot facility.

So there's promise in Mr. Obama's initiative. The opportunity is the colleges' to seize or squander. But not all will use the money well, and therein lies political risk.

Many Americans are skeptical of Mr. Obama's promises. A poll conducted earlier this month for National Journal and Allstate Insurance Co. found that 40% of Americans believe Mr. Obama's actions "will increase opportunity for people like you to get ahead," but 30% say they won't and 23% say they won't make any difference. And when offered a choice between bigger government (investment in education and training and the like) and smaller government (tax cuts, less regulation), the poll respondents were evenly divided.

With the hundreds of billions of dollars Mr. Obama is spending, some will be wasted. Scandal and easily ridiculed abuse of taxpayer money are inevitable. Conservatives point that out daily. The president has yet to figure out a way to prepare the public for tomorrow's embarrassing headlines, which could discredit his ambitious initiatives.

It took the Pentagon a long time to recover from the 1985 \$600-toilet-seat story.

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