

# Initiative Reinforces Manufacturing 'Skills' For Young Workers

Eric Gorski, AP Education Writer

As the White House stages a first-of-its-kind community college summit Tuesday, the Obama administration is proposing that stronger partnerships between two-year public colleges and big-name U.S. employers such as McDonald's and The Gap will help better match workers with jobs during the economic recovery and beyond.

Community college officials welcomed the new initiative, "Skills for America's Future."

But it's unclear whether the project will help meet Obama's education goals. Community colleges are short of cash, jammed with laid-off workers and students who in better times would attend four-year schools and spending heavily on remedial education for students ill-prepared for college.

For years, community colleges have worked with local employers to identify employment needs and train for them. But most efforts have stayed local, or been limited to pilot programs.

"These employers are well known and very important employers and this is being done at a national level," said Thomas Bailey, director of the Community College Research Center at Columbia University's Teachers College. "It's not at the local, local level where people don't see it every much."

Rosalie Safier considers herself the beneficiary of a public-private work force development partnership that worked.

Her family's business, National Van Equipment of Long Island City, N.Y., started in 1922 and mostly manufactures blankets for the moving industry using textile remnants, including stuffing made of old blue jeans.

In a pilot program for small businesses at LaGuardia Community College supported with money from investment bank Goldman Sachs, Safier said she learned the art of negotiation in an accounting class, mastered Microsoft Excel, met regularly with counselors and fellow business owners and presented a growth plan before graduating.

As a result, Safier said she expanded her distribution area and diversified her product line to include custom quilted covers and sound-absorption blankets that muffle things like loud band practices. She said the company has added five employees to grow to 23 employees and has experienced big sales growth.

"At a lot of small businesses, you wear a lot of different hats," she said. "Each of us,

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even ones with two or three employees, feel like CEOs."

Community colleges "do need investments in their capacity," said Dina Habib Powell, president of the Goldman Sachs Foundation. What is equally needed, she said, "is those relationships with the private sector, those connections."

Tuesday's community college summit is considered a consolation prize for community colleges, which had been slated to receive \$10 billion in federal money for job training, building projects and initiatives to graduate more students.

But by the time an overhaul of the federal student loan program had made its way through Congress, all that remained for community colleges was \$2 billion over four years for job training.

Obama has set a goal of 5 million more community college graduates and certificate-holders by 2020, part of broader push for the U.S. to again lead the world in number of college graduates.

The White House on Monday described "Skills for America's Future" as an industry-led initiative to "dramatically improve" work force training partnerships with community colleges, paid for mostly by the participating companies.

The Gap Inc., for example, said it would expand community college partnerships in seven metro areas, including in-store job shadowing, interview and leadership training, and scholarships. The San Francisco-based company said it expects to hire up to 1,200 community college students in 2011, or five percent of its annual hiring.

Other participating employers are Accenture, McDonald's, United Technologies and P.G.&E.

Maureen Conway, executive director of the economic opportunities program at the Aspen Institute, a Washington-based nonprofit that will run the program, said navigating the system for matching training to jobs can be difficult for both students and small employers, and some larger companies have not worked with colleges.

"What's wrong is, students come in and are falling through the cracks a bit and it's not always clear what the right path is," she said. "Courses aren't always clearly connected to what's going on in the local labor market."

George Boggs, outgoing president of the American Association of Community Colleges, said Monday he welcomes the attention, but warned that colleges are under pressure on many fronts.

"It's a very difficult time for them and hard to focus on things such as reaching out to local business and industry," Boggs said.

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