THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION
Government

January 11, 2015

Obama's Free-College Plan Evokes Spirit of Historic Higher-Ed Acts

By Jack Stripling

With a proposal that would send millions of students to community colleges free, President Obama joins a line of national leaders who have asked taxpayers to foot other people's tuition bills for the greater public good.

The president's plan, still short on details, has been described by higher-education experts as a clarion call in the spirit of the original GI Bill, which became law in 1944, or the Pell Grant program, which was created by Congress in 1972. The GI Bill sent almost eight million veterans of World War II to college, and the Pell Grant program assists millions of low-income students each year.

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Given the polarized political environment, there is considerable skepticism that President Obama's proposal has any realistic chance of passing through the Republican-controlled Congress. Nevertheless, the president has spawned a national conversation about whether the cost burden for community-college tuition ought to be shifted from individuals to taxpayers.

Christopher P. Loss, an associate professor of public policy and higher education at Vanderbilt University, said the Obama plan reaffirmed the federal government's role in postsecondary education. The proposal has already been attacked by critics as another example of Washington overreach, but Mr. Loss said that it was a logical extension of what the government already does through Pell Grants, among other student-aid programs.

"You could easily position this within that grand narrative of educational access, of the federal government taking pretty significant steps to adapt the educational system to the realities of a changing world," said Mr. Loss, author of *Between Citizens and the State: The Politics of American Higher Education in the 20th Century* (Princeton University Press, 2012). "At one point it was enough to have universal K-12 education, but we're now in a different era."

For much of the public, that may not be persuasive. Joni E. Finney, director of the University of Pennsylvania's Institute for Research on Higher Education, expressed doubts that the president's use of the bully pulpit would change the fact that many taxpayers see college as a private benefit for individuals rather than a broader public good.

"I'm only cautiously optimistic about the proposal," she said. "I still think people believe in the private benefit so much. They are willing to tolerate these costs' being pushed more and more to students."

As described by White House officials, the plan would cost the federal government about $60-billion over 10 years. That would

cover three-quarters of the anticipated cost, saddling participating states with the rest of the tab.

Lessons of the GI Bill

Any president pushing a major federal higher-education program would naturally look to the passage of the GI Bill as an example. But the postwar political environment was far different from that of today. And Mr. Obama's proposal is likely to be a more difficult sell because it would extend a benefit well beyond a distinct set of individuals to whom the nation felt indebted.

Glenn C. Altschuler, co-author of *The GI Bill: The New Deal for Veterans* (Oxford University Press, 2009), said the landmark 1940s legislation was palatable to the American public because it was perceived as something akin to compensation for veterans. That is distinctly different, he said, from subsidizing the cost of college for all citizens.

"The GIs were seen as having earned this benefit, and therefore it had a different meaning to say they were going to college for free," said Mr. Altschuler, a professor of American studies at Cornell University. "They were perceived as having put their lives on the line to preserve democracy and freedom in the United States. The debate we're now having is whether or not community college should be an entitlement."

The passage of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, as the GI Bill was officially named, was not without controversy. Some lawmakers, for example, questioned whether the benefit should cover only those who served in combat. But President Obama faces obstacles in Congress that President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who signed the GI Bill into law, did not, Mr. Altschuler said.

"The traditions of bipartisanship in the 1940s were simply much more robust than they are today," he said. "Having folks in both parties come together on legislation, even if it meant a larger role for the federal government, was just much more likely than it is these days, when collaboration across the aisle seems well-nigh impossible."

Even so, the very existence of President Obama's proposal has

inspired hope among some community-college officials.

"There's a concern of how is this going to be funded and will it gain support in Congress and the states," said Lenore P. Rodicio, provost of academic and student affairs at Miami Dade College, whose 165,000 students make it one of the nation's largest community colleges. "But the idea of even having this conversation at a level that has never occurred before has brought a lot of optimism."

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