

Worth the investment

BY EDUARDO J. PADRON

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In its most recent edition, Time Magazine posed the question, "Can community colleges save the economy?"

And right on cue, President Barack Obama lined up on the side of possibility. On Tuesday, he announced a four-pronged initiative that would provide community colleges long overdue support that can help confront the losses from the recession.

The president proposed a \$12 billion infusion that would welcome an additional five million students to community colleges by 2020. He wants to invest \$9 billion in community college challenge grants, offering us the chance to implement all manner of innovative programs for which adequate funding has rarely been available.

New curriculum in green energy jobs, programs to meet the constant evolution in information and design technologies and so much more. Some of those 5 million new students would be from our community, many struggling in dead-end jobs who could train for prosperous jobs in a new economy.

Chances for scholarships

A new access and completion fund will provide students new scholarship opportunities and just as important, support our efforts to ensure that many more students complete their course of study. The president's recognition that community-college students often confront daunting economic, family, work and academic challenges is welcome.

His pledge of \$2.5 billion for new facility construction and renovation answers the obvious question of where we will house these new students. Miami Dade College and community colleges across the country are pushed to the limit in aging facilities. The proposal also offers substantial support for the development of more online courses. MDC's Virtual College has grown exponentially, and the demand for creative online education is on the rise.

There are overwhelming shifts occurring in our economy and communities across the country. And we will not make our way with an outdated map and obsolete toolbox.

The president emphasized that jobs requiring at least an associate degree are

projected to grow twice as fast as jobs requiring no college experience, and previous estimates suggest that 80 percent of new jobs created in the United States today require college-level learning. In other words, if you don't attend and complete a course of college study -- whether that's a short-term entry-level training in an emerging field or an associate or bachelor's degree -- the chance at real prosperity is next to impossible.

The open access institutions of this country have never been more vital to the nation's economic well being. These are perhaps the only educational institutions that will welcome the legions of low-income students, many of whom need developmental support in basic skills, and many others returning to school to retool for a dramatically changed workforce. The success of these students will be the difference between a struggling community and prosperous one.

Confront weaknesses

The president once again insisted that we confront the weaknesses that have plagued our economy for decades and seize this moment to rebuild our economy better than before. Recognizing and supporting the work of community colleges is a key factor in that rebuilding.

Congress should approve this proposal. An educated population is the foundation for a healthy workforce and prosperous community.

The first question business leaders ask when considering Miami for a new venture is: "Do you have an educated workforce?" With the right investment from Congress, we can answer: Yes.

Eduardo Padrón is president of Miami Dade College.