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Community Colleges Are Key to Shoring Up the U.S. Economy, Report Says

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Community-college students need more financial aid, the colleges themselves need more money, and both need to achieve higher standards of success. Meeting those demands is key to improving the competitiveness of the American work force in today's global economy, says a report scheduled to be released by the College Board today.

"We have to win the skills race, and we have to rely on the nation's 1,200 community colleges to do that," said Augustine P. Gallego, one of the report's authors and chancellor emeritus of the San Diego Community College District.

The overarching messages in the report, "Winning the Skills Race and Strengthening America's Middle Class," aren't new, but the document takes an unusually sweeping look at the condition of the nation's community colleges. It concludes that Congress should enact legislation devoted specifically to the needs of that key sector of higher education, which now educates almost half of all undergraduates.

Among the report's proposals for such legislation, which it refers to as "the Community College Competitiveness Act of 2008," are creating a new Department of Labor program that would focus on critical work-force areas, like biotechnology, health, and manufacturing; sharply increasing the maximum Pell Grant for community-college students; allowing students who attend college less than half time to qualify for all federal student-aid programs; and strongly encouraging education through two years of college as the minimum standard for all Americans.

The American Association of Community Colleges has long called for increased Pell Grants and for expanded aid eligibility for students who attend college less than half time. And George R. Boggs, the association's president, said on Wednesday that he also supports the push for universal education through two years of college.

"I'm really thrilled to see groups like the College Board recognizing community colleges," he said.

The College Board, the nonprofit organization that oversees the SAT, developed the report over the course of about a year. The effort was led by Mr. Gallego, who was joined by 10 other college presidents on the College Board's National Commission on Community Colleges.

In addition to increased financial-aid money, the group's report asks for federal and state matching-grant programs to improve high-school and college counseling, and to modernize community-college facilities. It also asks for federal money to expand a student-success project across the country. The project, Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count, focuses on improving retention and graduation rates for community-college students, particularly members of minority groups and those from low-income families.

To meet that goal, colleges that participate are required to closely track student outcomes and to develop data-based programs for improving them (The Chronicle, April 20, 2007). The project is operating at 83 community colleges in 15 states. Although it only began in 2004, it is already showing positive albeit short-term results.

All of the proposals will require legislative buy-in and, of course, money.

It's an investment, Mr. Gallego said, that lawmakers need to make even as and perhaps because many states are experiencing budget shortfalls and the national economy is on shaky ground. "We're throwing out \$150-billion to stimulate the economy" with tax rebates, he said. "That's only a short-term solution. We need to look to long-term solutions like this."