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## COMMUNITY COLLEGES LONG SEEN BY PRESIDENTS AS KEY TO EDUCATION, WORKFORCE

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Presidents love community colleges.

As far back as President Ronald Reagan, presidents from both parties have praised the nation's system of two-year post-secondary schools as a cure for lingering problems in both higher education and job training.

Sitting at the intersection of vocational and academic education, community colleges have been seen by successive presidential administrations as a way to increase college access and expand the skill set of the American workforce.

And with far cheaper tuition and easier admission than traditional four-year colleges and universities, they offer a lower-cost approach in a time where Congress has balked at massive spending increases.

"Community colleges are available. They are affordable. They are flexible," said President George W. Bush in 2005 at Maryland's Anne Arundel Community College, summing up the bipartisan affection for the two-year associate degree-granting institutions.

President Barack Obama is set offer his own community college proposal on Friday, and he is expected to mention it prominently in his State of the Union address later this month.

The proposal – which is unlikely to be taken up any time soon by the new Republican Congress – would make two years of community college free for part-time students who maintain a 2.5 GPA and are actively working toward graduation.

The White House said the plan would cost \$60 billion over 10 years, with the states expected to kick in addition money.

Mr. Obama follows Mr. Bush and former President Bill Clinton in seeking to expand community college access.

In his 2004 State of the Union address, Mr. Bush called for increased funding for community colleges, "so they can train workers for industries that are creating the most new jobs."

"By all these actions, we will help more and more Americans to join in the growing prosperity of our country," he said.

As part of his campaign to sell his plan, he visited colleges in Arkansas, New Hampshire, North Carolina and West Virginia, and spoke to the 2004 American Association of Community Colleges annual convention.

In 2007, he signed a bill expanding Pell Grants for students at both two-year and four-year colleges.

Mr. Clinton's plan, which did not become law, was more in line with the Obama administration's current proposal.

In 1996, he called for making at least two years of college as universal as a high school degree and proposed a \$1,500 refundable tax credit to cover full-time tuition. Under Mr. Clinton's plan, students needed to stay away from drugs and maintain a B average during their first year to receive a second tax credit the next year.

"Most Americans live near a community college. The roads that take them there can be paths to a better future," Mr. Clinton said in his 1997 State of the Union speech.

Earlier presidential administrations also heaped praise on community colleges.

George H.W. Bush was the first president to speak to the American Association of Community College, thanking them for "all that you are doing" and adding "you are earning the gratitude of a nation."

And before him, President Ronald Reagan reportedly called them "a priceless treasure close to our homes and work, providing open doors for millions of our fellow citizens – the original higher education melting pot."