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Incentives Offered to Raise College Graduation Rates

By **TAMAR LEWIN**

In what amounts to a “Race to the Top” for higher education, the Obama administration is offering competitive grants and a new “tool kit” to help states increase their college completion rates.

During a news briefing Monday, Secretary of Education [Arne Duncan](#) said the program, to be formally announced Tuesday by Vice President [Joseph R. Biden Jr.](#), would include only incentives — no “sticks” — for reforms aimed at helping the administration meet its goal of adding eight million college graduates by 2020.

According to Mr. Duncan, the campaign will include a new \$20 million Comprehensive Grant Program for states that carry out plans intended to increase their graduation rates.

In addition, as part of its 2012 budget, the administration has proposed the \$123 million “First in the World” initiative for programs that hold down tuition, increase completion rates and move students through college faster. Last, the \$50 million College Completion Incentive Grants would reward states and schools for reforms that produce more college graduates.

“We all know that the best jobs and fastest-growing firms will gravitate to countries, communities and states with a highly qualified work force,” Mr. Duncan said.

The administration will calculate each state’s expected share of the eight-million-graduate increase, taking into account their current college graduation rates. Currently, only 28 percent of young adults in Arkansas, Nevada and New Mexico have college degrees, compared with more than half in the District of Columbia, Massachusetts and North Dakota.

The administration is also releasing what it calls a tool kit of strategies to help governors meet those goals, like stabilizing tuition increases, singling out adults with some college experience but no degree and making it easier for students to transfer college credits.

Although three-quarters of today’s young adults pursue some form of postsecondary education, fewer than half earn a certificate or degree within six years of enrolling.

The administration goal is for every American to get at least a year of post-high-school education, and for the United States' college graduation percentage to rank first in the world by 2020.

The United States lags behind several nations, with 42 percent of adults ages 25 to 34 earning college degrees.