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Obama starts 2nd-term bid as he **Democrats promise to fight Pell Grant cuts** **officially files with FEC** *Unsustainable growth puts program in peril*

By [Ben Wolfgang](#)

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Senate Democrats, led by Sen. Tom Harkin of Iowa, say they will fight any cuts in the federal Pell Grant program, for which spending has ballooned to the point that the Obama administration admits it can't be maintained.

In its 2012 budget proposal for the Department of Education, the administration called the program's growth "rapid and unsustainable," but despite the grim numbers and Republican proposals for big cuts, Mr. Harkin on Monday said Pell Grants must be protected against any reductions.

"Any reduction to the Pell program would come at a much higher cost for our country down the road," Mr. Harkin, chairman of the Health, Education Labor and Pensions Committee, told The Washington Times, adding that while "tough budget decisions" are needed, Congress must raise taxes and cut spending elsewhere while "continuing to make investments in education."

Education Secretary Arne Duncan last month projected the program, designed to help low-income students afford college, could face a \$20 billion shortfall in 2012, another in a recent run of annual deficits that has been been masked in past years.

President Obama's 2009 stimulus plan, for example, funneled \$15.6 billion into Pell Grants. A bill last year to rework the administration's health-care plan dumped in \$13.5 billion, but the program still had a \$8.6 billion shortfall, according to the Congressional Budget Office.

The administration wants \$41.2 billion in the fiscal 2012 budget to keep Pell Grants at a \$5,550 maximum per student. House Republicans voted to slash that to \$4,015 per student as part of House Resolution 1, a 2011 spending plan voted down in the Senate last month.

But Republicans seem ready for a fight. Sen. Michael B. Enzi, Wyoming Republican and HELP Committee member, called for "systemic changes" to the program Monday.

House Republicans also are pushing reform.

"I supported the Pell spending reductions in H.R. 1 ... Doing nothing while spending spirals out of control is not a responsible option," said Rep. Virginia Foxx, North Carolina Republican and chairman of the education subcommittee on higher education and workforce training.

The administration has proposed several changes it hopes can save the program.

First, Mr. Obama and Mr. Duncan want to eliminate interest subsidies for graduate and professional students, saving an estimated \$2.2 billion in 2012 and \$32.9 billion over the next decade. Second, the administration hopes to axe the "two Pells" provision, under which students who attend college year-round could get two grants during the same calendar year.

But outside scholars believe the proposed remedies, particularly the elimination of "two Pells," is window dressing.

"It isn't going to save any money. It's just going to push back graduations," said David M. Canaski, president of Financial Aid Training and Consulting and former director of financial advisement at the State University of New York-Cortland.

Mr. Canaski said the administration's plan, while saving money year to year, could discourage the best students from completing college in fewer than four years since they would have to pay for a third semester with no government help.

The program's pricetag continues to increase largely because the cost of college keeps skyrocketing. Since 1980, Pell Grant funding has gone up 480 percent, but tuition has followed suit, rising 439 percent, according to Lindsey Burke, an education policy analyst with the Heritage Foundation.

"[The Pell program] has done nothing to mitigate the college cost problem," she said.

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