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Obama's education plan draws fire

By **Ed Henry**, CNN Senior White House Correspondent

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- President Obama and Dr. Jill Biden hold a White House summit on community colleges Tuesday
- Obama wants to promote better partnerships between private industry and community colleges
- Obama: Community colleges are a "great pathway for young people" in a shaky job market

Washington (CNN) -- It has gotten very little attention so far, but make no mistake: President Obama is pushing for an absolute paradigm shift in the role that community colleges will play in producing America's highly skilled workers of the future -- and not everyone is happy about it.

Obama and Dr. Jill Biden, the vice president's wife, who teaches at a community college in Northern Virginia, are convening the first ever White House Summit on Community Colleges. It promotes an ambitious goal: getting community colleges to produce an additional 5 million graduates by 2020.

If the number of community college graduates sharply increases over the next 10 years, it could help the U.S. have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world -- an honor that America once held, but lost long ago.

Now Obama is determined to restore America's lost position atop that heap by framing the community college as one of the great economic issues of the 21st century, while the private sector looks to find as many highly skilled workers as possible, whether they have two-year or four-year college degrees.

"The idea here is simple," Obama said Monday at a White House event promoting his "Skills For America's Future" program to develop better partnerships between private industry and community colleges. "We want to make it easier to connect students looking for jobs with businesses looking to hire. We want to help community colleges and employers create programs that match curricula in the classroom with the needs of the boardrooms."

The attraction of this plan to middle-class families still struggling to dig out of the recession is twofold. Since folks are having a hard time saving money for their children's higher education, the notion of paying two years' worth of college bills instead of four is becoming an increasingly attractive option. And with jobs of any kind so scarce, Obama is highlighting the fact that having at least a two-year degree is better than no degree at all.

At a backyard event in Des Moines, Iowa, earlier this month, Obama called community colleges a "great pathway for young people" entering an uncertain job market.

"They may not go to four-year colleges right away, but the community college system can be just a terrific gateway for folks to get skills," said Obama. "Some start at a community college and then go on to four-year colleges. Some just get technical training, get a job and then come back maybe five years later to upgrade their skills or adapt them to a new business."

But not everyone is on board with the effort. Organizations like Kaplan, the University of Phoenix, and various for-profit colleges are lashing out at Obama's plan, charging that community colleges are being showered with too much presidential attention and federal aid at the expense of other institutions.

"They propose sweeping and arbitrary regulations against career colleges while turning a blind eye to the deep and intractable problems among community colleges," according to a written statement by The Coalition for Educational Success, which represents proprietary colleges and claims to serve more than 200,000 students at over 300 campuses in 33 states. "A look at the facts would suggest that the administration is attacking the wrong target and their proposed regulations would hurt the economy, jobs -- and most of all students."

The coalition said that by excluding career colleges, Obama is "unnecessarily shortchanging millions of students and a wide swath of the nation's future workforce."

It also charges that community colleges don't pump out as many graduates as the president is leading the public to believe, citing statistics showing that career colleges graduate 58 percent of their students, while community colleges graduate only 20 percent of their students.

Obama sharply disagrees, and in a time of austerity, he is trying to pump large sums of federal money to back up his talk. The health care legislation signed into law earlier this year included \$2 billion to fund the Community College and Career Training initiative to try to improve graduation rates.

The 2009 stimulus bill also had \$3.5 billion in Pell grants aimed at helping low-income students at hundreds of community colleges, according to White House officials, as well as \$1 billion in workforce training programs at community colleges.

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