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News

The Mini-AGI

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WASHINGTON -- The [collapse last winter](#) of the American Graduation Initiative -- which was, at \$12 billion, to have been [the grandest federal investment ever in community colleges](#) -- greatly disappointed two-year institutions and policy makers who had hoped the government could use the money to [propel the colleges to change and improve](#). The [consolation prize](#) contained within the Student Aid and Fiscal Responsibility Act -- \$2 billion to be delivered through a trade adjustment program within the Department of Labor -- was viewed by community college officials as better than nothing, and by would-be reformers as unlikely to bring about much change at all.

On Thursday, though, the Departments of Labor and Education jointly [unveiled the guidelines](#) for the new program, and while it is a far cry from the potentially transformative American Graduation Initiative, it appears designed to accomplish many of the same goals tied to President Obama's "college completion agenda" -- if, by necessity, on a narrower scale.

During a telephone news conference at which he and Labor Secretary Hilda Solis announced the guidelines for the new program, Education Secretary Arne Duncan called it "the largest investment in two-year institutions since the G.I. Bill."

The initiative, known not-so-snappily as the Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training Grants Program, was created (but not funded) by the 2009 economic stimulus legislation to retrain workers who had lost their jobs because of international trade. When the Obama administration and Congress seized on the program in last year's SAFRA bill as the vehicle through which to make some money available to community colleges, administration officials sought to rework it as much as they could while remaining faithful to the program's original, Congressionally mandated intent.

The iteration that was unveiled Thursday would make available \$2 billion over four years (or \$500 million a year) to colleges (nonprofit or for-profit) that offer academic programs of two years or less in duration. The money would be made available in grants of between \$2.5 million to \$5 million for individual institutions and \$2.5 million to \$20 million for consortiums of colleges (the consortiums can include four-year institutions, but the lead partner must be a college that offers degrees or certificates of two years or less). The grants can be used for many purposes that will help retrain trade-displaced workers in their states, with a probable focus on hiring instructors or staff and purchasing equipment to develop new curriculums. Among the few things the money can't be used for are facilities and student tuition.

Grants can exceed \$20 million for two reasons: if they "replicate ... strategies that have been shown by prior research to have strong or moderate evidence" of success, or "develop and implement online and technology-enabled courses and learning projects ... over a large geographic area."

Several elements of the program's requirements bear the stamp of the original American Graduation Initiative and the Obama administration's efforts to prod colleges and universities to pay more attention to student outcomes and "research-based innovative programs," as in the K-12 [Investing in Innovation Fund](#) that is part of the Education Department's Race to the Top program.

"The [Labor] Department expects that successful applicants will propose projects that expand and improve their ability to deliver education and training programs and achieve improved education and employment outcomes, rather than simply offering their existing courses to more workers and other students," the announcement of the guidelines states.

For instance, under the published criteria, the department says it will favor applications that can cite existing evidence to show that the strategies they are seeking to put in place -- for, say, improving student retention, meeting industry needs, or strengthening technology-enabled learning -- have already proved successful. ("The Department recognizes there is limited research in the field of higher education and workforce development, so many of these strategies are only supported by preliminary evidence, or moderate evidence that shows mixed results.")

And program applicants will be ranked in part on showing that they are "committed to using data to continuously assess the effectiveness of their strategies in order to improve their programming, and structuring programs to facilitate evaluation that can build evidence about effective practices." Applicants will be required to identify upfront some "progress measures" (such as the number and percentage of students who complete remedial courses and a college-level course in the same subject, or the percentage of credit hours completed versus those attempted in a given year) that they will track and use to refine their programs, as well as outcome measures that they will report over time: "entered employment rate, employment retention rate, average earnings, attainment of credits toward degree(s), attainment of industry-recognized certificates (less than one year), attainment of industry-recognized certificates (more than one year), and graduation number and rate for degree programs."

"There really is an extraordinary emphasis on program outcomes," said David S. Baime, senior vice president of government relations and research at the American Association of Community Colleges. "In terms of persistence and completion, and entry into and staying in the jobs, they're really asking institutions to make absolutely certain that they're providing something that's going to stick."

Some of those outcomes, Baime said, are "things that many colleges are not currently monitoring as a routine matter," especially as students move out of the institutions and back into the work force.

The other major imprint of the American Graduation Initiative that can be seen in the new trade assistance program is **the original's aim** to spur the creation of high-quality, freely available courses and learning materials -- a pet project of Under Secretary of Education Martha J. Kanter. The AGI legislation would have set aside \$500 million for that purpose; this program, like everything about it, aims smaller, as the creation of learning materials is just one of the many uses for the funds over all.

But intellectual property provisions embedded in the guidelines seek to ensure that any courses or course materials that colleges or consortiums create in their programs will make their way into the public domain.

"[T]o further the goal of career training and education and encourage innovation in the development of new learning materials, ... the Grantee will be required to license to the public (not including the Federal Government) all work created with the support of the grant ... under a Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 License.... This License allows subsequent users to copy, distribute, transmit and adapt the copyrighted work and requires such users to attribute the work in the manner specified by the Grantee." In addition, grant recipients will give the government license to "reproduce, publish, or otherwise use, and to authorize others to use for Federal purposes ... the copyright in all products developed under the grant," and any copyright rights that recipients purchase using a grant.

That means that if grant recipients use the federal money to create courseware or buy copyrights in existing educational resources to establish or expand their academic programs, they will have to make those materials freely available -- which could prove a deterrent to certain would-be grantees, especially for-profit colleges or companies that wish to retain ownership in materials they create.

While such a provision could dissuade some for-profit colleges from participating in the new grant program, Secretary Duncan made clear Thursday that despite the "community college" in the program's name -- and the tougher regulatory stance his department has been taking against the institutions -- the new funds are available to for-profit colleges.

"We welcome [their] applications," he said.

— **Doug Lederman**