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President Seeks a Huge Increase for a Vocational-Education Program

BY JOEL HARDI

WASHINGTON
COMMUNITY-COLLEGE leaders are endorsing President Clinton's proposal to nearly triple funds for Tech-Prep, a vocational-education program that piggybacks two years of technical training at a community college onto two years of training in high school. But they aren't happy about his plan to raid other federal vocational programs to pay for it.

The proposed budget for the 2001 fiscal year cites Tech-Prep as a successful effort to prepare students for college and careers. The president wants to increase funds for it by \$200-million, to \$306-million. The money would come from Perkins block grants, which go to states and are popular among community colleges. The budget for the block grants would fall by \$200-million, to \$856-million. Overall spending on vocational education would decline by \$9-million, to just under \$1.2-billion.

David S. Baime, government-relations director of the American Associa-

tion of Community Colleges, said many two-year institutions are "up in arms" over the proposed cut to the block grants, which they strongly support as a source of federal funds with fewer strings attached than Tech-Prep.

"People are basically going to be unhappy with the proposal," he said. "You can devote the block-grant money to Tech-Prep, but you can't do the reverse."

'A SERIOUS ERROR'

Edward Chin, director of Wisconsin's technical-college system, said that while his campuses "certainly would support the increase in Tech-Prep funds, we think it would be a serious error to essentially transfer the money from block grants."

Officials at the Education Department, which oversees vocational-education funds, said last week that they would have preferred that the White House recommend increases for Tech-Prep and the block grants. "It would have been better to get more of both," said Ronald Castaldi, director of voca-

tional-technical education. "We certainly don't want to send the message that that is the old vocational education, and this is the new vocational education."

Tech-Prep, he said, has the advantage of providing students a rigorous technical education at the high-school level, and giving them the chance to take more-advanced technical courses in college. And because the high schools and colleges collaborate to create a seamless, four-year curriculum, students take up in college exactly where they left off in high school.

Research has shown that "getting kids prepared and anchored in an occupation is a very good way of opening them up to both academics and occupational skills," Mr. Castaldi said.

And Tech-Prep sends high-school students the message that they won't be done with education when they graduate from secondary school, he added. The most successful Tech-Prep programs are those with the closest ties between the secondary and post-secondary levels, and with the stron-

gest emphasis on continual learning, he said.

In Wisconsin, state law requires that every high school establish a Tech-Prep partnership with a nearby technical college. Mr. Chin said the program is ideal for 16-year-olds who know that they want to prepare for a career in a trade.

SHORTAGE OF SKILLED WORKERS

With a growing shortage of skilled workers nationwide, and community and technical colleges increasingly responsible for training new workers, there is a need for more money for all vocational-education programs, Mr. Chin said.

One reason the administration may have decided to favor Tech-Prep over block grants, he said, is that, with the current popular focus on accountability in elementary and secondary schools, Tech-Prep gives government leaders a set of career-bound high-school graduates to show off, not just graduates with a few vocational courses under their belts. "With Tech-Prep, it's a lot easier to identify a final product," he said.