

# Skills gap focus of college plan

Proposal would offer free higher education.

Springfield's Clark State moving ahead with other training ideas.

By Chris Stewart and Randy Tucker  
Staff Writers

Tennessee, like Ohio, sits on a low educational rung when compared to the rest of the country, and to raise that standing it began offering free community college tuition to high school seniors.

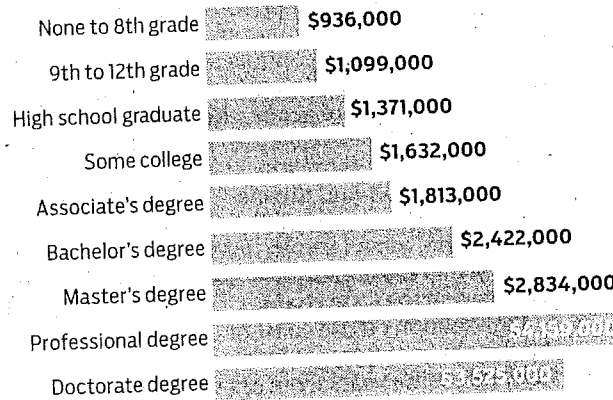
Nearly 60,000 of those students - double the number expected - signed up in the program's first year, prompting President Barack Obama to laud the so-called Tennessee Promise as a model for his proposal to provide free community college tuition nationwide.

He even gave his program a similar name: America's College Promise. But while Obama's program is not likely to get through a Congress controlled by Republicans who have already taken aim at the price tag, said to be as high as \$6 billion annually, the realities of an undereducated workforce won't disappear.

In his State of the Union address, Obama said two of three job openings by the end of the decade will require some higher education. In Ohio, just a third of working-age adults have at least a two-year associate's degree, a gap that illustrates the problem of employers not getting the skilled workers they need.

## Education has dramatic impact on lifetime earnings

The difference in earnings for a full-time worker with a high school diploma versus a doctorate degree over a 40-year work life can exceed \$3 million.



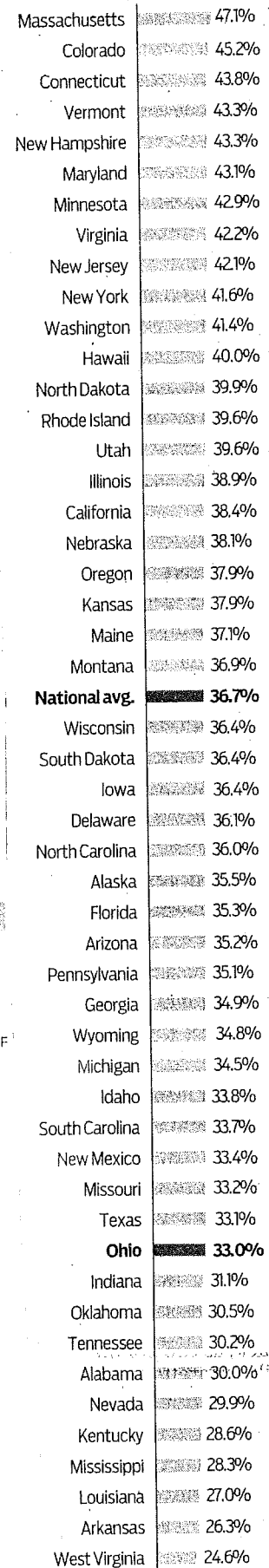
Note: Earnings figures represent expected earnings over a 40-year period for the U.S. population age 25-64 who maintain full-time, year-round employment.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

STEVE LOPEZ/STAFF

## Percent of population 25 and older with associate's degrees and higher

Five-year average 2009-2013



Source: United States Census, American FactFinder

LINDA SCOTT / STAFF

In an evolving global economy, states like Ohio and Tennessee, along with a whole bunch of others, are falling behind an international field that is better preparing young people for today's competitive workplace.

America still ranks fifth globally among 25-64-year-olds with post-secondary educations. But more countries have educated younger generations at a faster pace in recent years. The U.S. now ranks just 14th in the percentage of 25-34 year olds with some higher education, according to an Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development 2012 report.

While the White House believes its plan would save an estimated nine million students an average \$3,800 a year, the overarching reason for getting more Americans into higher education is to prepare them for 21st century jobs – some of which are going unfilled now.

"Education is really the driver of a local, state and national economy. So absolutely we need to increase educational attainment," said Kathleen Cleary, associate provost for student completion at Sinclair Community College.

Cleary said Obama's proposal is an idea that may not come to fruition, but the president's statements acknowledge the importance community colleges can play in closing the country's educational gap.

"Sinclair has been around long enough to know that there's a long journey between the idea and a bill that gets passed," she said. "Regardless what happens with the proposal, the fact that people are talking about the value of community college and its importance to driving workforce development is a good thing."

Clark State Community College President Jo Blondin was in the gallery at last week's address by Obama as a guest of House Speaker John Boehner, R-West Chester Twp., who greeted the proposal with the words "there is nothing free in life."

Blondin said: "Whether this proposal moves forward or not, we're moving full speed ahead with a plan to address the current and the looming shortage in manufacturing as well as health care and other workforce areas that are key to our region."

Last fall, Clark State received a nearly \$2.5 million grant from the U.S. Department of Labor and U.S. Department of Education as part of the Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training program.

The grant is allowing the college to retool its entire manufacturing and engineering programs,

Blondin said. The school is similarly focused on health care programs and unmanned aircraft systems, she said.

### 'No quick fix'

Addressing the skills gap was a major focus of a recent Ohio Board of Regents report on the condition of higher education in Ohio that included some sobering statistics:

- By 2020, employers worldwide could face a shortage of 85 million high- and medium-skilled workers.

- More than half of the 50,000 employers surveyed indicated difficulty finding qualified candidates for job openings in 2012.

- In 2013, the U.S. experienced a greater tal-

ent shortage than global peers; 39 percent of U.S. employers were having trouble identifying workers with the right skills.

That employers can't find workers with the necessary skills is evident in the latest data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Nationwide, employers reported 4.97 million job openings in November 2014, up 21 percent from the same month a year earlier, according to the bureau's Job Openings and Labor Turnover report.

That was the highest reading since early 2000 when the index peaked at 5.2 million job openings.

But experts say a dearth of skilled workers has held back employment growth, which typically accelerates when job openings reach peak levels.

"The reality is the skill sets are not there," said Tom Maher, chairman of the Montgomery County Workforce Investment Board. "Nobody is standing still. People are doing things to address the problem. But there is no quick fix."

The same is true in most other industries, according to data from the Ohio Department of Jobs and Family Services, which show 66 percent of the 35 fastest-growing jobs in Ohio over the next decade will require at least an associate's degree. Twenty of those jobs are in health care.

While there are still jobs that require only a high school diploma or less, those jobs pay wages far below the wages earned by those with post-secondary degrees, or by the unskilled factory workers of yesteryear, when landing a job at places like the former GM plant in Moraine meant lifetime security.

"It's amazing to look back and think about the money those people used to make with very little, if any, post-secondary education," Maher said. "But those jobs are never going to come back. Everybody knows that."

### 'It's not fair to them'

The key to boosting wages and accelerating economic growth is education, according to a re-

cent U.S. Census Bureau study, which found educational attainment can mean a difference of more than \$3 million in lifetime earnings over a 40-year career for college graduate versus someone with no post-secondary education.

But for countless students there is a barrier to educational attainment: cost.

In-state tuition at Miami University was \$13,266 for the past academic year.

Undergraduate tuition at the University of Dayton is \$37,230 a year.

Even at community colleges, which pride themselves on affordability, many students receive some form of financial aid. Tuition hovers around \$4,200 a year at Clark State while at Sinclair an academic year runs about \$6,400.

About 36 percent of the 21,500 students who were enrolled in the fall semester at Sinclair received Pell Grants, the popular need-based awards distributed by the U.S. Department of Education. At Clark State, 65 percent of the 5,313 students received the government grants.

All told, about 188,000 students were enrolled during the fall of 2013 at Ohio's 23 community colleges, according to the Ohio Board of Regents.

Obama's proposal is designed to ease the debt burden on families that struggle to keep up with the rising cost of higher education, which can include everything from housing, transportation and child care in addition to tuition and books.

"We still live in a coun-

try where too many bright, striving Americans are priced out of the education they need," Obama said during his State of the Union address. "It's not fair to them, and it's sure not smart for our future."

Both Cleary and Blondin said they would like to hear more specifics about Obama's proposal, which could come when he sends his budget to Congress.

Although it is not free, obtaining an associate's degree can have an immediate payoff, according to a Sinclair survey in 2011-12, which found that graduates saw their pay nearly double within two years, from \$18,185 a year to \$35,487.

"There is a long-term benefit in students attending college over their lifetime," said Clark State's

Blondin. "We encourage students to view their education as an investment."

### 'Almost a necessity'

Troy Malin of Tipp City is like many community college students. He doesn't have his career path charted out.

But the 19-year-old, who is in his second year at Sinclair, knows his future will be far bleaker without furthering his education.

"College is becoming almost a necessity to get a decent job and career," he said. "There are very few career fields that don't require an associate's or bachelor's."

Malin said he has friends who didn't go to college because of the money, and friends in college who are concerned about how they'll eventually pay for it.

He's managed to make it through his second year without racking up debt by relying on a modest nest egg his grandparents put away for his education and working as a restaurant manager and a paid intern in the college's advancement office.

The most economical decision he made, however, was picking Sinclair, said Malin.

"I want to go into a business field, but I'm not sure what I want to do yet, so spending \$20,000 a year at a four-year university was just not logical," he said.

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