

## Flat, Frozen or Facing Extinction

The buzz had been bad, and the final product provided few surprises — or at least few good ones.

In its 2007 budget released Monday, the Bush administration called for holding spending for most financial aid and other college programs at their 2006 levels ( the outlook for science programs was slightly more positive, but also mixed). The budget would hold the maximum Pell Grant at \$4,050 for the fifth year in a row and keep spending flat on the Work Study and Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grants Programs, among others.

A handful of programs would come out well, receiving increases, including the newly created Academic Competitiveness Grants, which provides aid to low-income students with a bunch of merit-based strings attached, and new foreign language efforts in the Education and State Departments.

And a double handful of programs would fare far worse, facing outright elimination. These include both of higher education's Perkins programs — the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act and the Perkins Loan Program for low-income students – and several efforts designed to increase access to college, including two of the TRIO programs for needy students and the Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Program, or Gear Up.

The White House targeted all of those programs in its 2006 budget proposal, prompting Becky Timmons, director of federal relations for the American Council on Education to characterize Monday's plan as a "Groundhog Day" budget, after the popular movie in which the same scene repeats itself over and over.

Coming in the wake of Congressional budget cutting legislation and a 2006 appropriations measure that, taken as a whole, reined in rather than expanded the funds available for students and colleges, some college officials adopted a tone of resignation or, in the case of Timmons's reference to the movie, gallows humor in discussing the 2007 Bush budget.

But that doesn't mean that she and other higher education partisans aren't deeply troubled by what they see as the slippery slope that policy makers seem to have begun pushing higher education down.

"My biggest quibble [with the administration] is that they believe that by holding the line on student aid programs they're maintaining a commitment to need-based aid," said Timmons. "But higher education's been on hold — at least the Pell has — for five years, and other programs are sliding backwards slightly. The only growth this year is in merit-based aid, and for me that signals a pretty ominous trend that is significant, and different."

Administration officials say that the budget focuses appropriately on the country's most pressing education needs, especially on elementary and secondary education and on bolstering students' skills in scientific disciplines to buttress the country's economic competitiveness and national security, on which President Bush focused in his State of the Union address.

"This budget request soundly targets resources where they are needed most and working best," said Secretary Margaret Spellings. "It will enable us to continue to deliver results for all children under No Child Left Behind, and it tackles our vital priority to improve our global competitiveness by targeting achievement in math and science. The President made all of this possible in a post-Katrina environment while upholding his commitment to reduce the deficit."

Even so, administration officials rejected the idea that the budget would shun college students or higher education. They emphasize that the budget calls for spending \$850 million in 2007 on the Academic Competitiveness Grants program, up from the \$790 million that Congress appropriated for the new program as part of the budget reconciliation measure approved last week.

The Education Department's 2007 budget also would provide \$24 million for a new program through which colleges would form partnerships with school districts to improve the learning of foreign languages, part of the Bush administration's larger National Security Language Initiative, which it unveiled last month. Funds for that effort are also sprinkled through the budget proposals for the Department of State and Defense and the Central Intelligence Agency. The Department of Labor would also provide \$150 million for the Community-Based Job Training Grants (up from \$125 million in 2006), a new program important to community colleges.

White House officials also noted that the purposes of some of the education programs slated for elimination under the administration's budget — especially the Perkins job training programs and the Gear Up and TRIO programs designed to help middle- and high-school students prepare to attend college — would be fulfilled by the Education Department's proposal \$1.5 billion to extend No Child Left Behind to high schools. But Congress soundly rejected the No Child Left Behind expansion as it drafted the 2006 budget, choosing instead to restore funds for virtually all of the programs the administration had sought to kill.

One of the lawmakers who fought the Bush cuts last year, Rep. George Miller of California, the top Democrat on the House education committee, said he found it ironic that the president followed his State of the Union speech urging the country to do more to prepare the next generation of scientists and workers with an Education Department budget filled with cuts — the smallest budget for the department since 2003.

"The President's budget cuts funding for educational services from the pre-school years right up through college," said Miller. "This budget is a wasteland littered with the President's broken IOUs to America's schoolchildren and college students. The President had a lot to say last week about competitiveness. Soaring rhetoric sounds nice, but it doesn't educate our children or keep our economy strong."

**In an ever-tightening budget environment, college leaders know they can't necessarily count on Congress to protect their programs again, so advocates for the various programs with targets on their backs are already preparing to fight the administration's proposals. The Council of Higher Education Assistance Organizations lobbies on behalf of the Perkins Loan Program, which provides low-cost loans to needy students, many of which are then canceled when the students enter public-service or other fields.**

**As it did last year, the administration has proposed not only wiping out the \$65 million the government provided in 2006 to reimburse colleges for canceled loans, but also forcing colleges to return to the U.S. treasury \$664 million in "revolving" funds that the institutions use to continue to make new loans. Those actions, together, would effectively end the Perkins program, which the administration says is "ineffective and duplicative" of the two main federal student loan programs.**

Among the other programs in the cross hairs in the 2007 Bush budget are:

- the Gear Up, Upward Bound and Talent Search programs (the latter two part of TRIO) that help low-income middle- and high-school students prepare for colleges of all kinds.
- the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Education program, which provides nearly \$500 million a year to career programs at community colleges.
- Tech-Prep, which links high schools and colleges in job training efforts.
- the Leveraging Educational Assistance Partnership Program, which provides federal matching funds to states that offer need-based aid.