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Quinn fights for college grants he helped cut

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CHAMPAIGN, Ill.

To hear Gov. Pat Quinn tell it, the General Assembly failed tens of thousands of would-be college students by slashing funding for a financial aid program.

For more than a month, Quinn has crisscrossed Illinois, promising to push lawmakers to find \$200 million for the Monetary Award Program and chastising them for leaving 137,000 students wondering if they'll be able to pay tuition next spring -- even though he helped create the problem.

In July, the governor signed the budget that provided only about half of the money needed to get the \$440 million MAP program through the school year. And he didn't use \$1.2 billion in discretionary funding the budget provided him for the program, choosing instead to spend that money on state social service agencies.

Even so, with the Legislature convening Wednesday, Quinn has continued to deliver speeches around the state calling on lawmakers to deliver money for MAP.

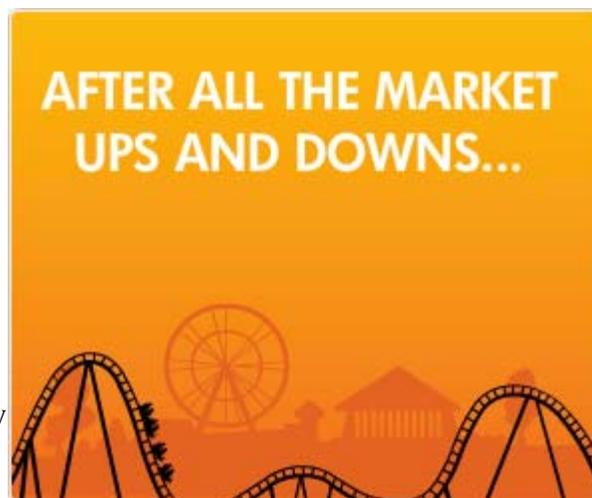
"When it comes to this important education funding issue, we will not accept a grade of incomplete from the Legislature," Quinn said.

Critics say Quinn is trying to depict himself as a hero to gloss over his role in the dilemma.

"It's not fair at all," said Kent Redfield, an emeritus political science professor at the University Illinois-Springfield. "It's the governor's budget, he signed off on it. There was clearly enough discretionary spending in what the governor signed off on to cover this."

Last week, during a visit to the University of Illinois in Urbana that had the look and feel of a campaign stop, the governor said he signed the budget that left MAP short "to stabilize things."

At the time, he said, state government faced an \$11.6 billion budget deficit and, with no spending plan in place, state-dependent social services agencies and others around the state weren't being paid. And he said discretionary funds, "quickly went away because we had to invest in things that provide



fundamental health and safety for the state of Illinois."

A spokeswoman for Senate President John Cullerton, D-Chicago, said Quinn could solve the MAP-funding problem with the money lawmakers gave him to hand out as needed.

"While he's touring the state at rallies, the truth is it can all be solved tomorrow ... the solution is basically staring the governor in the face," said Rikeesha Phelon.

State Comptroller Dan Hynes, who is challenging Quinn in the February Democratic primary, agrees.

"He was actually given flexibility within that budget to fully fund MAP grants and chose not to," Hynes said in an interview. "When the outrage and outcry rose to a noticeable level for him, he decided he was going to play the hero and fix a problem that he created."

Quinn and Hynes both say they'd like to raise the cigarette tax to pay for MAP grants.

The governor also says he wants lawmakers to end a number of what he calls loopholes in state law -- a tax break, for instance, for offshore oil drillers -- he says could generate more money.

Republicans in the House have their own idea: a tax amnesty program under which people and companies could pay delinquent taxes with no penalty early next year. The state Commission on Government Forecasting and Accountability estimates the program would generate up to \$104.9 million.

Some university leaders say they're willing to cut Quinn slack for agreeing to a budget that didn't pay for spring MAP obligations.

"I think there's been such difficult budgetary problems," Western Illinois University President Al Goldfarb said. "I think it's understandable."

Even so, colleges and universities are in a bind.

They're already on the hook this year for the Illinois Veterans Grant program, which promises military vets a free college education at a public university. The state budget provided no money for that program.

That means there's no money left to give students spring grants through the MAP program.

At Illinois State University, for example, officials had to find \$3 million for the veteran's program and would need another \$7 million to cover what MAP, if fully funded, would provide to 3,500 students.

"I can't come anywhere close to that kind of money," university President Al Bowman said. "We just don't have that level of flexibility in our budget."

Associated Press Writer Christopher Wills contributed to this report from Springfield.

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