CONTENTS

CONGRESSIONAL SCHEDULE  NEW

BUDGET & APPROPRIATIONS

House Leaders Expect to Move Health Care Legislation through Reconciliation Next Week  NEW

-- Student Aid Overhaul to be Included in Reconciliation Package

Senate Approves Extenders Bill  NEW

OTHER CONGRESSIONAL ISSUES

Associations Urge Senators to Support Senate Patent Reform Amendment

EXECUTIVE BRANCH

White House Requests Ideas on Addressing Grand Challenges  NEW

CONGRESSIONAL SCHEDULE  NEW

The Senate did not meet today; the House met and approved legislation on algae bloom research (H.R. 3650). Both chambers will reconvene on Monday, March 15.

The House next week will focus on health care legislation, with floor votes as early as Thursday (see item below). CQToday reports that the House next week also may take up the Senate-passed tax-extender bill (H.R. 4213), also discussed below.

The Senate next week is expected to take up a separate, $17.6 billion jobs bill (H.R. 2847), and to continue work on the reauthorization of the Federal Aviation Administration (H.R. 1586).

BUDGET & APPROPRIATIONS

HOUSE LEADERS EXPECT TO MOVE HEALTH CARE LEGISLATION THROUGH RECONCILIATION NEXT WEEK  NEW

House Democratic leaders will begin a final push on health care legislation next week, in which the House would approve the Senate-passed health care bill (H.R. 3590) and a second “corrections” bill negotiated by the Administration and House and Senate Democratic leaders. The second bill would move under budget reconciliation rules, allowing it to be passed by the Senate on a simple majority vote. Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) said today that the reconciliation bill will include the overhaul of the student aid system.
CongressDaily reports that the process will begin on Monday with the House Budget Committee’s mark up of the reconciliation bill. As early as Wednesday, the House Rules Committee will write the rule for debate on the legislation, which the House could take up as early as Thursday. The publication reports that the Rules Committee may draft a rule for debate that would deem the Senate bill passed by the House when the House adopts either the rule or the reconciliation package. This would allow House Democrats to avoid a direct vote on the Senate bill, which a number of them dislike.

Speaker Pelosi said she hoped the House would approve the legislation before President Obama leaves on his Asian trip March 21.

The Senate will take up the reconciliation bill following House action. Although the measure would require just a simple majority to pass rather than the 60 votes needed to avoid a filibuster, CQToday reports that debate could be drawn out by Republicans offering numerous amendments and points of order, which are allowed under the reconciliation process.

--Student Aid Overhaul to be Included in Reconciliation Package

The student aid measure (H.R. 3221), which passed the House but has not been reported out of committee in the Senate pending agreement on health care legislation, would end government subsidies for private student loans and funnel new loans into the direct loan program.

When the House approved its bill last year, the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) calculated it would save $87 billion over 10 years, which the bill directed primarily to bolstering Pell Grants and funding several other higher education and K-12 programs. The most recent CBO score has reduced the 10-year savings by $20 billion, however, so Democrats are developing a revised student loan package.

Among the reported changes in the revised package:

- The maximum Pell Grant award likely would rise to $5,550 in academic year 2010-11 and increase automatically each year with inflation, rather than inflation +1 percent, as in the House bill;
- About $8-9 billion of this year’s Pell Grant shortfall would be covered by the bill;
- The revamped Perkins Loan program would receive no new funding; instead, current law would be extended for one year;
- The Administration’s proposed Access and Completion Initiative would be framed as a national competition, eliminating the role of the states;
- Funding for Minority-Serving Institutions would remain in the bill; and
- Funding would be eliminated for community colleges and K-12 school construction.

SENATE APPROVES EXTENDERS BILL   NEW

The Senate on Wednesday approved legislation (H.R. 4213) to extend economic safety-net policies and expired tax provisions, including three tax provisions of particular interest to colleges and universities. Those provisions: the IRA charitable rollover, the tuition tax deduction, and the R&D tax credit, would be extended through the end of 2010.
The Senate version of the bill also would prevent a cut in the Sustainable Growth Rate, which affects physicians’ Medicare reimbursement rates, and includes temporary Medicaid assistance for states. As noted above, the House may take up the Senate bill next week.

OTHER CONGRESSIONAL ISSUES

ASSOCIATIONS URGE SENATORS TO SUPPORT SENATE PATENT REFORM AMENDMENT

Six higher education associations, including AAU, wrote to all Senators on March 8 urging them to support the Senate Judiciary Committee’s latest amendment to the Patent Reform Act of 2009 (S. 515). The letter expands upon a statement of support the associations issued March 5, the day after the amendment was announced.

In addition to AAU, the statement was issued by the American Council on Education, the Association of American Medical Colleges, the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities, the Association of University Technology Managers, and the Council on Governmental Relations.

The associations’ letter says that the substitute amendment “represents the successful culmination of a thorough, balanced effort to update the nation’s patent reform system to support more effectively the nation’s innovative capacity in the increasingly competitive global environment of the 21st century.” It notes that the substitute amendment has made “significant improvements” to the version of the bill reported last May by the Committee, specifically regarding post-grant review procedures. Changes made in the substitute amendment, says the letter, “will greatly reduce the ability to use post-grant procedures for abusive serial challenges to patents and thereby also reduce the administrative burden on the [U.S. Patent and Trademark Office].”

The letter concludes, “This legislation does not contain everything universities have advocated. But given the heterogeneous nature of the patent community, balanced legislation cannot include every provision that any sector would like. The substitute amendment reforms current law in a way that balances the interests of the various sectors of the patent community and substantially improves the patent system overall. We urge you to support this carefully crafted legislation.”

EXECUTIVE BRANCH

WHITE HOUSE REQUESTS IDEAS ON ADDRESSING GRAND CHALLENGES

The White House Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) and the National Economic Council (NEC) last month issued a Request for Information (RFI) aimed at gathering ideas from the public about how the nation can harness science and technology to address the “grand challenges” of the 21st century.

Those interested in responding to the February 4 notice should do so by April 15, 2010.
The RFI says that the Obama Administration believes that grand challenges—such as solar cells as cheap as paint or biological systems that can turn sunlight into carbon-neutral fuel—should be an important organizing principle for the nation’s science, technology, and innovation policy. The announcement adds that grand challenges can promote innovations that lead to economic growth and high-quality jobs, encourage multi-sector collaborations to address important problems in new ways, and inspire students to become the next generation of scientists and engineers.

The request asks members of the public to:

- Weigh in on grand challenges that the Administration already has identified;
- Suggest other grand challenges the Administration should consider;
- Identify partners that might be interested in collaborating with one another and with the Administration to achieve one or more of these goals; and
- Propose models for creating an “architecture of participation” to allow many individuals and sectors to contribute to solving grand challenges.

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