November 12, 2010

CONGRESSIONAL SCHEDULE

Congress returns on Monday, November 15 for the post-election lame-duck session. The House has not yet announced a legislative program, but Senators can expect to deal with at least three measures on which Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-NV) filed cloture in September. These are: the Promoting Natural Gas and Electric Vehicles Act of 2010 (S. 3815), the Paycheck Fairness Act (S. 3772), and the FDA Food Safety Modernization Act (S. 510).

Congressional Quarterly reports that Senator Reid also may bring up the DREAM Act (H.R. 1751, S. 3827), which would provide a path to citizenship for young people brought to this country illegally by their parents. The measure, which is strongly supported by the higher education associations, is viewed as having little chance of approval this year.

Congressional Quarterly also reports that House Democrats—who will lose their majority in the new Congress—hope to adjourn for the year by Friday, December 3, when the continuing resolution (CR) runs out. The publication writes that House Democrats may be willing to settle for short-term continuations of spending and expiring tax cuts. They also are expected to send the Senate legislation to expand child nutrition programs (H.R. 5504).

BUDGET & APPROPRIATIONS

FISCAL RESPONSIBILITY COMMISSION LEADERS RELEASE DRAFT PROPOSAL

The leaders of President Obama’s Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform, Erskine Bowles and former Senator Alan Simpson, on November 10 released a draft proposal aimed at saving $4 trillion over the next decade through a mix of federal spending cuts and elimination of certain business and individual tax breaks. Commission members are reviewing the draft plan; the commission’s recommendations are due on December 1.
The draft calls for a cut-and-invest approach, cutting low-priority spending while protecting important investments for the future. It singles out a few areas as important investments, including education and “high-value R&D.” The co-chairs recommend establishing a “bipartisan Cut-and-Invest Committee to de-authorize outdated, low-priority and inefficient programs and recommend high priority long-term investments.”

While the proposals that have attracted the most attention involve major programs like Social Security, Medicare, and defense, among the proposals in the draft are:

- Elimination of the in-school interest subsidy in the student loan program;
- Elimination of administrative fees paid to schools for student aid programs;
- Elimination of all earmarks;
- Elimination of Department of Energy applied research on fossil fuels; and
- A 10-percent cut in Defense research, development, testing, and evaluation—apparently focused on development and beyond, not on basic research.

AAU AND APLU URGE CONGRESSIONAL LEADERS TO COMPLETE FY11 APPROPRIATIONS

AAU and the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities sent a letter to House and Senate leaders on November 8 urging them to complete the FY11 appropriations process and avoid a continuing resolution that would prevent sustained growth in federal investments in basic research and higher education programs.

The letter said that some areas of federal spending, such as basic research and federal student aid, are investments that pay dividends in a highly skilled workforce and new technologies and industries that create economic growth. The letter added, “Reducing overall spending and sustaining investments are not mutually exclusive. Our nation can and should invest in its people and its economic competitiveness while also addressing its near- and long-term fiscal challenges.”

COALITION URGES ADDED ENERGY RESEARCH FUNDING IN HOUSE FY11 APPROPRIATIONS BILL

Under the auspices of the Energy Sciences Coalition, more than 100 businesses, universities, and associations wrote to leaders of the House Appropriations Committee on November 5 urging them to provide greater funding for energy research in FY11 than the amount approved by the Energy and Water Appropriations Subcommittee.

The letter noted that the subcommittee bill would provide $4.9 billion for the Department of Energy (DOE) Office of Science, which is $4 million below the FY10 level and $221 million below the President’s FY11 request. As the U.S. economy continues to struggle and international competition for quality jobs grows, said the letter, “we need to invest in the kind of basic research so critical to improving our energy security and national competitiveness, meeting our environmental challenges, and producing new jobs and innovative technological breakthroughs that will fuel our economy well into the future.”