November 23, 2011

CONGRESSIONAL SCHEDULE  NEW

Congress was out of session this week, and both the House and Senate will return on Monday, November 28. No legislative schedule for the House has been announced. When the Senate returns, it will resume consideration of the Defense authorization bill (S.1867).

The failure of the Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction to agree to a deal of at least $1.2 trillion in deficit reduction over 10 years will leave Congress with a difficult end-of-year session. The House and Senate will need to agree on a final package of the remaining nine FY12 appropriations bills. In addition, they will need to figure out whether and how to extend—and, possibly, find funding offsets for—several expiring provisions. These include the so-called “doc” fix to prevent a precipitous drop in Medicare payments for physicians, the payroll tax cut, unemployment insurance, and several expiring business and middle-class tax provisions, including the IRA charitable rollover and the tuition deduction.

Democratic leaders “are hoping to attach all those measures to a resolution funding government past the December 16 expiration of the current continuing resolution,” reports National Journal Daily.

BUDGET & APPROPRIATIONS

DEFICIT COMMITTEE FAILS TO REACH AGREEMENT  NEW

Despite the unprecedented power given to the Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction to forge a deficit-reduction deal, the panel failed to work through partisan differences and reach an agreement in time to offer Congress a package for consideration today, as required under the Budget Control Act (BCA).

The BCA required deep, automatic cuts in both defense and domestic spending if Congress failed to produce legislation cutting the deficit by at least $1.2 trillion over 10 years, and these
cuts were viewed by many as serious enough to force a compromise. However, the delay in implementing those cuts until January, 2013 undercut the urgency of a deal. In addition, both parties may be calculating that the results of the election will shift the partisan balance of power in Washington in one direction or the other. Nevertheless, the looming budget cuts, combined with the scheduled expiration of the Bush tax cuts at the end of 2012, could create pressure for a larger deficit-reduction agreement in a lame-duck session after the election. While there will be much talk between now and then of reducing deficits—if only to make it politically possible to deactivate the automatic spending cuts—it is unlikely that any serious efforts will take place before the election.

Many higher education and research associations and institutions—including AAU—pressed congressional leaders and members of the “Super Committee” to reach a “big” agreement that would address the nation’s budget and deficit challenges while preserving the nation’s capacity to spur innovation and economic growth through investments in higher education and basic research.

Along with contacts made by individual institutions, these efforts included a letter sent to the committee by a group of 130 university presidents and chancellors whose institutions are members of AAU and the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU), as well as a letter sent by a group of 70 scientific societies and organizations coordinated by the American Association for the Advancement of Science. AAU President Hunter Rawlings and APLU President Peter McPherson penned an op-ed carrying the same message that was published in the online version of Roll Call. These and related efforts will continue.

EXECUTIVE BRANCH

ASSOCIATIONS URGE DEFENSE SECRETARY TO WITHDRAW MOU ON MILITARY TUITION ASSISTANCE  NEW

A group of higher education associations, including AAU, has written to Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta urging him to withdraw the Department’s Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for the Military Tuition Assistance (TA) program.

Many colleges and universities are concerned that the Department, in making a good-faith effort to ensure better educational outcomes for service members and protect against fraud, has included provisions in the MOU “that are inconsistent and, in many cases, incompatible with [institutions’] well-established academic policies and administrative practices.” The provisions deal with the awarding of academic credit, in-school residency requirements, education plans, tuition policies, and payment processing, among other academic policies. “These provisions are at odds with traditional assumptions about federal versus institutional control over academic affairs and thus have far reaching implications,” the associations said, adding that if these issues cannot be addressed, many institutions will be unable to sign the MOU “despite their strong desire to do so and their ongoing commitment to educating Service members.”

The MOU was first issued March 15, 2011, and unless institutions submit a signed MOU to the Department by January 1, 2012, they will lose their eligibility to participate in the TA program. The letter asks the Secretary to withdraw the MOU and reopen a discussion about ways to modify the document to enable institutions to participate without compromising their academic policies and the Department to ensure that proper safeguards are in place to protect against fraud and abuse.
ASSOCIATIONS RESPOND TO NACIQI DRAFT OPTIONS PAPER ON REFORMING ACCREDITATION  NEW

As part of its review of the nation’s higher education accreditation system, the Secretary of Education’s National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity (NACIQI) last October issued a draft discussion paper outlining 30 potential options for reforming the system.

The options paper, which is based on two public hearings, written comments, and committee deliberations over the past year, will help inform the Committee’s formal response to Education Secretary Arne Duncan at the end of this year. The draft acknowledges the tension between using accreditation as a gatekeeper for student aid eligibility and using it as an agent to promote quality and continuous improvement. The document also recognizes several of the challenges articulated by AAU and AAU members over the course of this year, including the current structure of regional accreditation and undifferentiated reviews (that is, requiring the same level of review for institutions that have demonstrated longstanding quality performance as for institutions that appear unstable or low-performing, or which are newly accredited). Other identified issues include the high cost of reviews and burdensome data collection processes.

Several higher education associations, including AAU, submitted comments on the draft options paper, and AAU will also submit separate comments. The community recommendations provide a series of principles for NACIQI to take into account in making final recommendations to Secretary Duncan. These include the principle that the central focus of accreditation must remain the specific mission of the institution and that the federal government should not play a role in the assessment of student learning outcomes.

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