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CONGRESSIONAL SCHEDULE  NEW

The House met earlier today in pro forma session, with no votes. Next week’s legislative program has not yet been announced.

The Senate did not meet today. When it reconvenes on Monday, December 10, the chamber will resume consideration of a bill to extend a Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation program (S. 3637).

BUDGET & APPROPRIATIONS

“FISCAL CLIFF” NEGOTIATIONS CONTINUE  NEW

Democratic and Republican leaders in Washington continue to spar publicly over how to reach a deal to avoid the year-end “fiscal cliff,” but there are some signs that the deal-cutting may be getting serious. President Obama and House Speaker John Boehner (R-OH) held private talks yesterday, and provided no information about their discussions. Roll Call reports that the greatest obstacle to a deal appears to be raising tax rates on the top two percent of taxpayers, which the President continues to demand and many Republicans continue to resist. Also at issue is how and by how much to reduce spending on entitlements. There appears to be general agreement on both sides, writes the publication, that the tax rate increase and some curbs in entitlement spending will be part of a final package. But time is running short, with just three
weeks until all of the Bush-era tax cuts and other tax benefits expire, and sequestration – across-the-board cuts in defense and nondefense spending – kicks in.

**SCIENTIFIC AND HIGHER EDUCATION GROUPS URGE A BALANCED BUDGET COMPROMISE  *NEW***

A group of 116 scientific and higher education associations and universities, including AAU, today sent a letter to President Obama and House and Senate leaders urging them to “work together to achieve a bipartisan compromise that avoids the fiscal cliff and moves the country on to sound fiscal footing without sacrificing our nation’s crucial investments in science and technology.”

The letter, led by the American Association for the Advancement of Science, says that nearly every national priority, “from health and defense, agriculture and conservation, to hazards and natural disasters, relies on science and engineering. Sequestration threatens all of these priorities, by requiring up to $12 billion in R&D funding cuts annually across defense and nondefense programs over the next decade.” It notes that federal nondefense R&D has already declined by five percent in the past two years, after remaining flat for the past decade. The letter adds, “We recognize that the United States faces severe fiscal challenges, and we urge you to begin to address them through a balanced approach that includes tax and entitlement reform.”

**STEM GRADUATE STUDENT GROUP POSTS VIDEO ON “STAND WITH SCIENCE” INITIATIVE  *NEW***

Founded by a group of graduate students in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields to support sustained federal funding of research, “Stand with Science” has launched a letter-writing campaign to urge policymakers to avoid the year-end budget sequester and give funding priority to scientific research. The organization’s brief new video, “The Spirit of What’s Next: An Unproductive Use of Desk Space,” cleverly makes this point.

**OTHER CONGRESSIONAL ISSUES**

**SENATOR LEVIN COMMITS TO ADDRESSING SATELLITE ISSUE IN DOD AUTHORIZATION CONFERENCE  *NEW***

Following Senate approval of the Defense authorization bill (H.R. 4310) on December 4, Armed Services Committee Chairman Carl Levin (D-MI) committed to working to change the federal statute that places all satellites on the U.S. Munitions List, a policy that has harmed space science research and education at U.S. universities. He said he would do so during the House-Senate conference on the legislation.

Chairman Levin made the commitment during a floor colloquy with Senator Michael Bennet (D-CO), who had offered an amendment to change the law—based on legislation he introduced earlier (S. 3211)—which was not included in the final authorization bill. In the colloquy, Senator Levin said,
“I want to thank the Senator from Colorado for his work on reforming our nation’s export control laws. The House version of the National Defense Authorization Act includes provisions addressing these issues. I support his efforts in this area and I intend to work with the House of Representatives to address these reforms in conference.”

Last month, AAU, the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU), and the Council on Governmental Relations (COGR) wrote to Senator Levin to express support for changing the export control statute on satellites. They said in their letter that the blanket statutory requirement that places all satellites on the U.S. Munitions List—even those that are dual-use and pose minimal national security risks—harms space science research. The policy has hindered the participation of leading international scholars and students in many space-related research projects and classes and has impeded U.S. space scientists from participating in legitimate and potentially valuable international scientific collaboration.

The associations expressed strong support for Senator Bennet’s bill, which would return to the executive branch the authority to determine the export control jurisdictional status of satellites and related items.

ASSOCIATIONS EXPRESS SUPPORT FOR GOALS OF SENATE DATA ACT

Three higher education associations, including AAU, sent a letter to Senators Mark Warner (D-VA) and Ron Portman (R-OH) on December 5 expressing support for the goals of S. 3600, their latest version of the Digital Accountability and Transparency Act (DATA).

The letter, sent by AAU, APLU, and COGR, says that the associations strongly believe that financial transparency of federal award funds is essential to ensuring public trust and thanks the Senators for taking a more streamlined approach toward improving transparency in S. 3600 than in their original bill (S. 1222). The associations note that the original legislation would have imposed significant new compliance costs on universities that would have taken time and resources away from scientific research and education activities. The letter adds:

“Overall, we believe that S. 3600 is sound legislation. We commend you for the improvements made to the original bill and we support consideration of the legislation by the Homeland Security and Government Affairs Committee. We look forward to working with you through the legislative process.”

EXECUTIVE BRANCH

NIH RELEASES PLAN FOR IMPLEMENTING BIOMEDICAL RESEARCH WORKFORCE RECOMMENDATIONS

National Institutes of Health (NIH) Deputy Director for Extramural Research Sally Rockey announced at a meeting on December 6 the beginnings of an implementation plan for recommendations developed by the NIH Biomedical Research Workforce Working Group. The group published a draft report last June that made a number of recommendations regarding
graduate students, postdoctoral trainees, information collection/analysis/dissemination, salary support, and issues related to the larger biomedical workforce.

Dr. Rockey said that the implementation plan was developed by an internal team, with advice from the NIH institute and center directors. The agency will continue to work on the plan, and expects to issue a series of Requests for Information (RFI) to solicit advice from the biomedical research community before moving forward.

Additional information about the proposed plan and a statement by NIH Director Francis Collins are available here on the NIH website.

Current elements of the proposed implementation plan are:

1. Creation of a new grant program to encourage innovative training approaches to complement traditional research training at institutions that receive NIH funds;
2. Require Individual Development Plans (IDP) for all trainees supported by NIH;
3. Reduce length of graduate student training;
4. Increase stipends and benefits for postdoctoral students;
5. Increase the number of awards that encourage independence;
6. Develop a simple and comprehensive tracking system for trainees;
7. Change the review process for those on training grants and on research grants;
8. Launch a multi-faceted conversation with the extramural research community on the impact of a 20-year phase-out of faculty salary support on NIH grants;
9. Create a functional unit at NIH to assess the biomedical research workforce that would coordinate activities across NIH to provide a unified source of information and data on workforces issues; and
10. Establish a working group to study the optimal research training for individuals in clinical disciplines.

**DOD RELEASES TUITION ASSISTANCE MOU NEW**

The Department of Defense (DOD) on December 6 released its revised memorandum of understanding (MOU) that colleges and universities must sign in order to participate in the Department’s Tuition Assistance (TA) program for military service personnel. Based on a review by the higher education associations that have been working with the Department on the MOU, including AAU, the revised version includes the changes that the higher education community negotiated with the Department several months ago.

The deadline for institutions to sign the MOU is March 1, 2013. Those colleges and universities that do not sign by the deadline will be unable to enroll service members under the TA program until they do so. Institutions that signed an earlier version of the MOU may choose to retain that original agreement or to sign the revised MOU.

As expected, DOD also announced that it will release a third MOU in the spring of 2013 that includes more provisions from the Administration’s executive order issued last April, “Principles for Excellence for Educational Institutions Serving Service Members, Veterans, Spouses, and other Family Members.”
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