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CONGRESSIONAL SCHEDULE  NEW

The House did not meet today. The chamber is scheduled to reconvene in pro forma session on Monday, December 16, after which it is expected to adjourn for the year. The House yesterday approved the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2013 (see next item below), which included a three-month “doc fix” to prevent a cut in Medicare physician reimbursements. The House also approved the FY13 Defense authorization bill (H.R. 3304) and a 30-day extension of current farm programs.

The Senate met today to consider executive branch nominations. It will reconvene on Monday, December 16. The chamber next week will take up the budget agreement and the Defense authorization bill, both of which are expected to pass. CQ.com reports that the Senate will not take up the farm bill extension because Democratic leaders believe a multi-year farm bill will be ready for floor votes in January. The Senate is scheduled to adjourn for the year next Friday, December 20.

BUDGET & APPROPRIATIONS

HOUSE APPROVES TWO-YEAR BUDGET DEAL, SENATE EXPECTED TO DO SO NEXT WEEK  UPDATED

In an important display of bipartisanship, the House yesterday approved the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2013 (H.J. Res. 59) by a vote of 332 to 94, with the support of 169 Republicans and 163
Democrats. The package now goes to the Senate, which is scheduled to begin consideration of the measure on Tuesday, December 17.

The deal, crafted by FY14 budget conference committee leaders Rep. Paul Ryan (R-WI) and Senator Patty Murray (D-WA), sets the top-line discretionary spending levels for both FY14 and FY 15 and would avert the threat of a government shutdown when the current FY14 continuing resolution expires on January 15. (A series of short explanations of each part of the agreement is available on the House Budget Committee website.)

AAU issued a statement supporting the agreement on December 11 and joined in a letter from several higher education associations urging Members of the House to approve the package.

--Outline of the Agreement

The budget deal would increase discretionary spending in FY14 by $45 billion over the FY14 sequester level, evenly divided between defense and nondefense programs. The $1.012 trillion total is halfway between the House-passed and Senate-passed FY14 budget resolutions. Another $18 billion of sequester relief would be provided in FY15. The sequester cuts would be replaced by a combination of user fees, policy changes, and higher pension contributions for federal workers and benefit modifications for certain military retirees. Among the policy changes, the deal would change how certain nonprofit student loan service providers are paid. And to provide $23 billion in deficit reduction, the plan would extend the two-percent cut to Medicare providers by two years, through FY23.

One of the most important outcomes of the agreement is that the designation of discretionary spending totals for both fiscal years should allow the House and Senate appropriations committees to set spending priorities, rather than falling back on mechanical continuing resolutions or across-the-board cuts. House Appropriations Committee Chair Hal Rogers (R-KY) praised the agreement, and Senate Appropriations Committee Chair Barbara Mikulski (D-MD) said she hoped the deal marked “an end to the shutdown, slowdown, slamdown politics that have damaged our economy and families.” The White House issued a statement calling the agreement “a good first step.”

HIGHER EDUCATION ASSOCIATIONS URGE MEMBERS TO APPROVE BUDGET AGREEMENT NEW

A group of 18 higher education associations, including AAU, sent a letter to all Members of the House expressing support for passage of the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2013. The letter said that the measure “is a sensible, balanced and bipartisan approach that helps to address our nation’s fiscal challenges. It would allow Congress to begin to undo the damage caused to federal student aid and research programs imposed by sequestration.”

UMR PUBLISHES SEQUESTER STORIES FROM BIOMEDICAL RESEARCHERS AROUND THE COUNTRY
United for Medical Research (UMR), a group in which AAU participates, released a series of stories on December 10 detailing the harmful effects of the budget sequester on projects and laboratories funded with support from the National Institutes of Health (NIH).

The report, “Sequester Profiles: How Vast Budget Cuts to NIH are Plaguing U.S. Research Labs,” features biomedical researchers around the country describing how sequester-driven cuts in NIH funding have forced them to lay off bright young colleagues, slow their research, and even close laboratories.

OTHER CONGRESSIONAL ISSUES

ASSOCIATIONS OFFER VIEWS ON SENATE BILL TO CURB ABUSIVE PATENT LITIGATION  NEW

The six higher education associations that have been working together on patent reform sent a letter to the Senate Judiciary Committee on December 11 detailing their views on Chairman Patrick Leahy’s (D-VT) bill to address abusive patent litigation (S. 1720). The letter thanked the Chairman and his Senate co-sponsors for their effective work in addressing this “costly and corrosive problem,” and offered some suggested modifications to the bill. The committee will hold a hearing on this issue on Tuesday, December 17.

While the associations generally support S. 1720, they are concerned that the bill could be modified with provisions from other Senate bills that are substantially similar to provisions of concern that were included in the House-passed version of the bill (H.R. 3099). The Senate bills in question are sponsored by Senators John Cornyn (S. 1013), Charles Schumer (S. 866), and Orrin Hatch (S. 1612). As the associations said in a statement about H.R. 3309 on December 2, “Although we strongly support the goals of this legislation to reduce abusive patent litigation practices, the cumulative impact of a number of the provisions of this bill would seriously undermine the ability of legitimate patent holders to enforce their patent rights.” (See the associations’ statements on H.R. 3309 here.)

EXECUTIVE BRANCH

ORGANIZATIONS ISSUE NEW REPORT ON IMPLEMENTING SELECT AGENT AND TOXIN REGULATIONS

Three associations and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) have published a new report that offers recommendations to campuses and diagnostic laboratories about how to implement federal regulations on the use of select agents and toxins in research. The report, issued by the American Association for the Advancement of Science, AAU, the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities, and the FBI is based on the fourth workshop the organizations convened in April, 2013. The document describes the experiences of officials at research institutions and diagnostic laboratories in implementing the regulations, and offers suggestions for addressing the challenges faced by research institutions and diagnostic laboratories in doing so.

OTHER
U.S. research universities use a wide range of methods to assess and improve undergraduate engagement and learning, and they are rapidly expanding these efforts, according to a report AAU issued on December 12. The report was based on a survey of the association’s 60 U.S. member institutions conducted earlier this year. The results reflect responses from 37 AAU member universities (62 percent of the U.S. membership), including 24 public and 13 private institutions.

The vast majority of the institutions responding to the survey use quantitative data (such as time-to-degree and graduation rates) to measure student success; use student surveys to determine the quality of students’ experience; establish specific educational objectives for their undergraduates; and/or use a variety of tools to assess student learning. The survey also found that universities are devoting significant staff and financial resources to these efforts. The report contains numerous anecdotes and examples. To encourage participation, AAU protected the anonymity of the universities that responded.

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