Neither house is in session today. Both will reconvene on Monday, April 14.

The House of Representatives next week is expected to consider a bill to simplify the federal tax code (H.R. 5719) (including a provision that would ease the tax treatment of employer-provided cell phones and PDA’s), and a bill to ensure the continued availability of student loans (H.R. 5715) (see item below). The House may also continue consideration of legislation on monitoring beach pollution (H.R. 2537). House Republicans are expected to seek procedural votes on a measure to extend President Bush’s tax cuts permanently.

The Senate next week is expected to consider the highway technical corrections bill (H.R. 1195). CongressDaily reports that the chamber also may consider a bill regarding insurance for disabled veterans (S. 1315) and a measure to prevent insurance companies from discriminating against those with genetic traits for certain diseases (S. 358).

**BUDGET & APPROPRIATIONS**

**SENATOR ALEXANDER WARNS OF PENALTY IF U.S. FAILS TO SUPPORT ITER IN FY08**

Efforts continue to encourage the White House and Congress to include funding for science in the FY08 supplemental appropriations bill. As reported previously, the final FY08 omnibus...
appropriations bill provided far less for science programs at the Department of Energy (DOE) Office of Science, the National Science Foundation, and the National Institute of Standards and Technology than had been expected and than is needed to prevent layoffs of scientific and technical personnel at several DOE and university laboratories and to sustain the nation’s competitiveness agenda.

At a hearing of the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on State and Foreign Operations on April 9, Senator Lamar Alexander (R-TN) focused on one aspect of the problem: that the FY08 omnibus funding bill provided none of the $160 million requested by the Administration for the U.S. portion of the International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor (ITER). He reminded Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice that failure to provide the agreed-on U.S. funding for this international fusion energy project could result in a penalty to the U.S. government of $750 million. The lead U.S. laboratory for ITER is Oak Ridge National Laboratory in his home state of Tennessee.

“Not including this funding to begin with is an embarrassing mistake by Congress,” said Senator Alexander. “We’re at a time when we are concerned about climate change and clean air, but we are not doing what we agreed to do to help with this problem. The deal we made said that if we don’t put in our $160 million, we may be charged $750 million. Congress should fund these programs like it said it would and be a leader in encouraging such endeavors rather than undermining them…”

A press release about Senator Alexander’s statement is available on his Web site.

SCIENTIFIC SOCIETY LEADERS URGE SCIENCE FUNDING IN THE FY08 SUPPLEMENTAL APPROPRIATIONS BILL

A group of 19 scientific society leaders has sent a letter to President Bush and congressional leaders urging them to support a minimum of $500 million for science programs in the FY08 supplemental appropriations bill. The April 7 letter advocates additional funding for the National Science Foundation, the Department of Energy Office of Science, and the National Institute of Standards and Technology.

OTHER CONGRESSIONAL DEVELOPMENTS

WORK CONTINUES ON SENATE PATENT REFORM BILL

Leaders of the Senate Judiciary Committee continue to consider changes to the committee-passed patent reform bill (S. 1145) in an effort to gain the widest possible support before taking the measure to the Senate floor. Committee staff is working to develop compromises on several issues that would be incorporated into a manager’s amendment. Although reports over the past few weeks have indicated that such an amendment was close to being introduced, thorny issues remain and work continues.

An indication of the difficulty of the discussions came on April 9 when Senator Arlen Specter (R-PA), ranking member of the committee, said publicly that he could not support some of the new language proposed by Chairman Patrick Leahy (D-VT), principally on the issue of damages for patent infringement suits. Mr. Specter told CQToday, “I am hopeful that we can reach an agreement, but more work has to be done to get it right.”
The five higher education associations working together on patent reform are continuing to convey their views to the committee, as described in a letter of February 5.

As soon as the manager’s amendment is made public, AAU will send it to campuses.

HOUSE COMMITTEE APPROVES BILL TO INCREASE STUDENT LOAN BORROWING LIMITS  UPDATED

The House Education and Labor Committee on April 9 approved by voice vote the Ensuring Continued Access to Student Loans Act of 2008 (H.R. 5715), which would increase borrowing limits for federal graduate and undergraduate student loans. The bill is expected to be considered on the House floor next week. The bill aims to ensure that students and families have greater access to low-cost federal student loans even if the turmoil in national credit markets leads to more expensive and harderto-obtain private loans.

The measure is similar to a bill (S. 2815) introduced in the Senate last week by Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee Chairman Edward Kennedy (D-MA). The Senate bill has not yet been considered.

The House bill would increase annual loan limits for dependent and independent undergraduates by $2,000. For dependent students, the limits would be increased to: $5,500 for first year students; $6,500 for second year students; and $7,500 each year for the final two years. Additionally, the bill would increase the aggregate borrowing limits (for both subsidized and unsubsidized loans) from $23,000 to $31,000 for dependent undergraduates and from $46,000 to $57,500 for independent undergraduates. For graduate students, H.R. 5715 would increase the annual borrowing limit for unsubsidized loans from $12,000 to $14,000.

The bill also would make other changes to federal student loan programs. For example, it would give parent borrowers participating in the PLUS program the option to defer repayment up to six months after their children leave college. Additionally, the bill would give the Secretary of Education the authority to advance federal funds to loan guaranty agencies operating as lenders-of-last-resort in the event they lack sufficient capital to originate new loans. The bill also would allow guaranty agencies to function as lenders-of-last-resort on a school-wide basis.


EXECUTIVE BRANCH

DOE OFFICE OF SCIENCE ANNOUNCES NEW ENERGY RESEARCH CENTERS PROGRAM

The Department of Energy (DOE) Office of Science is seeking proposals for Energy Frontier Research Centers under a new program aimed at speeding scientific breakthroughs needed for advanced energy technologies. Awards for this first group of centers are likely to be in the range of $2–5 million a year for an initial five-year period. About $100 million will be available for the new centers program in FY09. The competition is open to universities, DOE laboratories, and other institutions.
OTHER

HIGHER EDUCATION ASSOCIATIONS URGE CAUTION ON PROPOSED INTERNATIONAL STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES PROPOSAL

The six presidentially based higher education associations, including AAU, have sent comments to the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) expressing reservations about the OECD proposal to assess student learning outcomes on an international scale. OECD officials hope to develop a way to measure the skills and abilities of graduates as a means of determining if and how higher education systems are meeting expectations of quality. The organization is moving ahead with a feasibility study, following earlier meetings with groups of experts.

In their letter of March 27, the associations outlined a number of considerations for the study, including the difficulty of measuring student learning across institutions with different goals, missions, and resources. They also expressed concern that results could be used to penalize institutions and to create another institutional ranking system. “Although your stated intention is not to develop another ranking system,” they wrote, “it is highly likely that the results will indeed by used to rank institutions.” They added, “Our collective experience with assessment has shown how complex these assessments are and the extent to which they must be rooted in the institution’s mission and curriculum.”

The letter was sent by the American Council on Education on behalf of AAU, the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges, the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities, the American Association of Community Colleges, and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities.

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