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CONGRESSIONAL SCHEDULE

The House and Senate convened in lame-duck session this week, with Democratic leaders hoping to move a bailout package for the ailing domestic auto industry, an extension of unemployment benefits, and possibly a second economic stimulus package. But at week’s end, only the unemployment extension (H.R. 6867) had been approved and sent to the President, who signed it into law today. Democrats now intend to wait until the new Congress convenes in January to move a stimulus package, working with the new President. However, House and Senate leaders may call Members back for another abbreviated lame-duck session during the second week of December to reconsider aid to the auto industry. They have called on industry leaders to submit, by December 2, information on how they would use federal aid to help turn their companies around.

BUDGET & APPROPRIATIONS

SENATE STIMULUS PACKAGE INCLUDED RESEARCH FUNDING  UPDATED

Senate Democratic leaders hoped to bring up a $100-billion economic stimulus package (S. 3689) this week, but they were unable to overcome Republicans objections. The plan, which Senate Democrats had unveiled November 17, included $1 billion for the National Institutes of Health and $175 million for the Department of Energy (DOE) Office of Science.

The House did not consider a package as House Democratic leaders wanted to wait to see if the measure could pass in the Senate.

DEMOCRATS HOPE TO FINISH FY09 APPROPRIATIONS IN EARLY JANUARY
CQToday reports that House and Senate Democrats hope the appropriations committees will complete their work on the remaining FY09 appropriations bills next month, with the goal of assembling them into an omnibus package that would be voted on in Congress in early January and sent to the new President when he takes office. This report dovetails with reports by AAU staff that House and Senate appropriators are working to negotiate final FY09 appropriations levels to meet a self-imposed deadline of December 15.

The publication adds that Democrats want to spend $24.5 billion more in overall FY09 discretionary spending than the $992 billion that President Bush requested, noting that “they don’t expect to pare back their spending ambitions at all when assembling the omnibus for Obama.”

Earlier this year, Congress and the Administration were unable to complete work on nine out of the 12 FY09 appropriations bills; only Defense, Homeland Security, and Veterans Affairs were approved and signed into law. Funding for programs covered under the other nine bills was frozen at their FY08 base levels in a continuing resolution that expires on March 6, 2009. The omnibus appropriations bill that is now being developed would fund those programs through the entire fiscal year, which ends in September, 2009.

**STUDENT AID ALLIANCE REQUESTS $500 INCREASE IN PELL GRANT MAXIMUM AWARD**

The Student Aid Alliance sent a [letter](#) to House and Senate leaders on November 12 urging them to provide a $500 increase in the Pell Grant maximum award in the next economic stimulus package. The letter requests that leaders raise the maximum award to $5,300 in order “to help relieve the immediate financial pressure on students and families and also provide lasting benefits to our nation long after the economic challenges we face are behind us.”

**DEFENSE DEPARTMENT PLANS TO INVEST ADDITIONAL $400 MILLION IN BASIC RESEARCH**

Earlier this month, the Department of Defense [announced](#) that it plans to invest an additional $400 million in basic research at universities over five years to “sustain and strengthen the nation’s commitment to long-term basic research.” The agency’s press release notes that this type of investment is in line with recommendations made by the National Academies’ 2005 report, “Rising Above the Gathering Storm” and “numerous other independent national security and scientific advisory groups.”

**EXECUTIVE BRANCH**

**ASSOCIATIONS QUESTION DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION DATABASE PLAN**

A group of eight higher education associations, including AAU, has submitted [comments](#) to the Department of Education questioning its plan to create a new records system that would “allow massive amounts of irrelevant, unnecessary, and erroneous information about U.S. citizens to be secretly compiled” and then disclosed to various outside entities without consent. The comments respond to a [notice](#) in the October 16, 2008 Federal Register.
The November 17 letter, spearheaded by the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO), urges the agency’s Office of Inspector General (OIG) to “better clarify the connection between the records it seeks to maintain and its specific statutory mandate.” While acknowledging the OIG’s obligation to prevent and detect waste, fraud, and abuse, the letter expresses alarm at the scale and scope of the current proposal and the OIG’s apparent view that it may disclose individually identifiable information from the system to such outside entities as foreign agencies and private organizations, without the consent of the individuals involved.

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