Friday, April 13, 2007

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CONGRESSIONAL SCHEDULE  NEW

The Senate was in session this week but is out of session today; the House has been out of session for the second week of its spring recess. Both chambers will reconvene on Monday, April 16.

The Senate is scheduled to resume consideration of the FY07 intelligence authorization bill (S. 372) on Monday. The chamber also is expected to consider legislation (S. 3) to allow the government to negotiate Medicare prescription drug prices, which Republicans may filibuster.

CQToday reports that the House next week may take up a water projects authorization bill (H.R. 1495), as well as a measure dealing with taxpayer protections (H.R. 1677) and a bill (H.R. 1257) to allow shareholders of publicly traded companies to weigh in formally on executive compensation plans.

BUDGET & APPROPRIATIONS

CONFERENCE ON FY07 SUPPLEMENTAL FUNDING BILL COULD MEET NEXT WEEK  UPDATED

The chairmen of the House and Senate appropriations committees hope to convene a public conference on the FY07 emergency supplemental funding bill (H.R. 1591) next week, but no date has been set. President Bush has threatened to veto the measure if it contains a timeline for withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq.
FY08 BUDGET CONFERENCE EXPECTED TO CONVENE NEXT WEEK

National Journal reports that House and Senate negotiators on the FY08 budget resolution will begin conference negotiations next week. Since the House and Senate discretionary spending levels are close, the overall discretionary spending level is likely to be $20 billion above the President’s FY08 request. Among other issues to be worked out are funding issues related to reauthorization of the Higher Education Act and the State Children’s Health Insurance Program, as well as how far to extend the Administration’s tax cuts and how to provide relief from the alternative minimum tax.

As previously reported, House Budget Committee Chairman John Spratt (D-SC) has said he believes an agreement can be concluded by the end of the month. However, Senate Budget Committee Chairman Kent Conrad (D-ND) has declined to offer a timeline, telling the Journal, “Do you really think, after being here for 20 years, I would provide a timeline on anything with regards to this institution?”

OTHER CONGRESSIONAL DEVELOPMENTS

SENATE APPROVES STEM CELL RESEARCH BILLS

The Senate on April 11 approved legislation to expand federally funded embryonic stem cell research (S. 5). The 63-34 margin was not sufficient to override the President’s promised veto of the legislation. The chamber also approved by a vote of 70-28 a measure (S. 30) promoted by its sponsors as an alternative that would avoid harming living embryos.

CQToday reports that the House is expected to approve S. 5 next week when it returns from the spring recess. The House approved a similar bill earlier this year (H.R. 3), but the Senate bill contains added language encouraging the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to pursue other forms of stem cell research. The President has vowed to veto a final bill if it reaches his desk. Although neither chamber has been able to approve the legislation by a veto-proof majority, news reports indicate that Democratic leaders plan multiple votes on the issue to showcase their efforts to expand medical research and force the President to issue more high-profile vetoes.

The Stem Cell Research Enhancement Act (S. 5), which is supported strongly by the research community, would authorize federal funding of human embryonic stem cell research conducted on cell lines derived from embryos left over from in-vitro fertilization that otherwise would be discarded. Under current law, federal funding may be used only on a limited number of human embryonic stem cell lines derived before the President’s policy was announced in August 2001.

The alternative stem cell bill (S. 30), which supporters say would avoid the ethical issues of human embryonic research, calls for using only embryos that are “naturally dead.” But stem cell scientists quoted in the April 11 edition of the New York Times said that S. 30 would enable little new research, “citing the lack of consensus in determining when an embryo is ‘naturally dead’ and the challenges of generating usable embryonic stem cells from dead embryos.” There is no House counterpart to S. 30.
Rep. George Miller (D-CA), chairman of the House Education and Labor Committee, will hold a hearing April 25 to take testimony from New York Attorney General Andrew Cuomo on “unethical practices and conflicts of interest” in the student loan industry. Mr. Cuomo has been leading a widely publicized investigation into the relationships between student lenders and school financial aid offices, and between lenders and federal student aid officials.

The hearing titled, “Examining Unethical Practices in the Student Loan Industry,” is scheduled for Wednesday, April 25, at 10:30 a.m. in 2175 Rayburn Building.

The hearing notice and a statement by Democratic members of the Committee are available at: http://edworkforce.house.gov.

OTHER

HILL BRIEFING ON THE ROLE OF BASIC RESEARCH IN INNOVATION SCHEDULED FOR APRIL 17

The Task Force on the Future of American Innovation will hold a briefing on the role of basic research in the nation’s economic competitiveness and national security on Tuesday, April 17, from 12:00 noon to 1:30 p.m. in 2325 Rayburn House Office Building. The briefing is being held in conjunction with the House Research and Development Caucus, chaired by Reps. Rush Holt (D-NJ) and Judy Biggert (R-IL).

Members of the CFR are encouraged to ask congressional staff to attend. Those who wish to participate must RSVP to Jessica Delucchi at 202-646-5046 or delucchij@battelle.org.

Among the speakers at the session will be C. Dan Mote, President of the University of Maryland, College Park; Anita Jones, Professor of Engineering at the University of Virginia and former Director of Research and Engineering at the Department of Defense; and Amy Burke, Director of Government Relations at Texas Instruments. Reps. Holt and Biggert will make opening remarks.

The innovation task force, a coalition of businesses and business organizations, scientific and engineering societies, and higher education associations in which AAU participates, released its second benchmarks report in November, 2006. It is entitled, “Measuring the Moment: Innovation, National Security, and Economic Competitiveness.” AAU staff played a significant role in producing the report. Additional information about the task force and the benchmarks report is available at: http://futureofinnovation.org.

ACE and AAU SUBMIT HEA RECOMMENDATIONS TO HOUSE EDUCATION PANEL NEW

Acting on behalf of 15 higher education associations, including AAU, the American Council on Education (ACE) today submitted to the House Education and Labor Committee a comprehensive set of recommendations for reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (HEA).
AAU submitted its own letter, which endorses the broad community recommendations, but also addresses graduate education in greater detail. In addition, the AAU letter mentions that the association is developing procedures for providing expanded and more accurate information on time-to-degree, retention and graduation rates, and post-graduation outcomes at AAU institutions, which it will encourage its member institutions to adopt.

--The Community Recommendations:

The cover letter for the ACE-led community recommendations notes that they cover “access to higher education, improving the financial aid delivery system, enhancing college preparation, bolstering programs that provide need-based student aid, and improving loan counseling and management.” They also include proposals for teacher training, international studies, and graduate education, as well as suggestions for improving the AC/SMART grant programs, accreditation, and the negotiated rulemaking process.


--AAU Recommendations:

The AAU recommendations support the community proposals, but provide more detailed recommendations affecting graduate education students and programs. Specifically, AAU calls for:

- Raising authorized funding levels for the Javits Fellowship and Graduate Assistance in Areas of National Need (GAANN) programs;
- Clarifying the link between stipend levels for the Javits and GAANN programs and stipends for the National Science Foundation’s Graduate Research Fellowships program;
- Eliminating the need analysis requirement for graduate student awards under GAANN and Javits;
- Maintaining the current method of determining areas of national need for the GAANN program;
- Creating a Patsy T. Mink graduate education program for students from underrepresented minority groups who wish to become faculty members, as proposed in the last Congress; and
- Increasing the annual and cumulative borrowing limits for graduate students under the Stafford subsidized loan program.

The AAU statement also urges Congress to preserve the current non-governmental, decentralized system of higher education accreditation. “Federalizing this process would lead to the homogenization of American higher education and undermine the diversity of institutions, which has been vital to the success of the American system.”


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