Friday, February 1, 2008

CONGRESSIONAL SCHEDULE  NEW

BUDGET AND APPROPRIATIONS
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CONGRESSIONAL SCHEDULE  NEW

The House and Senate are out of session today.

CQ Today reports that the House will conduct no legislative business next Monday or Tuesday so that Members can be in their districts for the “Super Tuesday” presidential primaries. The House will return on Wednesday. The following day, February 7, the chamber will begin consideration of the Higher Education Act (HEA) reauthorization (see item below).

When the Senate returns on Monday, it will resume consideration of legislation (S. 2248) to reauthorize the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act. The chamber also is expected to take up two competing versions of the economic stimulus package: the $150-billion version approved by the House (H.R. 5140) and the $158-billion version reported from the Senate Finance Committee.

As reported previously, the White House will release the President’s FY09 budget on Monday, February 4. For the first time, the budget documents will not be printed, but released only in electronic form on www.budget.gov. The “E-Budget” will be fully searchable and available for downloading, according to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). Additional information about the budget release was provided by OMB in a January 9 press release.

AAU on Monday will develop a package of summaries and analyses of the FY09 budget requests for the federal research and education agencies that the association follows. Those materials will be posted on the AAU Web site throughout the day as they are completed.
BUDGET & APPROPRIATIONS

REPUBLICAN MEMBERS OF CONGRESS ASK PRESIDENT TO INCLUDE $300 MILLION IN SUPPLEMENTAL BILL FOR ENERGY RESEARCH

Under the leadership of Rep. Judy Biggert (R-IL), six Republican Members of Congress on January 31 sent a letter to President Bush asking him to include $300 million for the Department of Energy Office of Science in his FY08 supplemental appropriations request. Their goal is to reverse the “drastic cuts” to high energy physics and other scientific programs in the FY08 omnibus appropriations bill. (See also Energy Sciences Coalition letter below.)

The letter was also cosigned by Reps. Ralph M. Hall (R-TX), Vernon Ehlers (R-MI), Roscoe Bartlett (R-MD), Robert J. Wittman (R-VA), and Michael McCaul (R-TX).

A press release from Rep. Biggert’s office said, “Closing key facilities and dismissing hundreds of the nation’s top researchers is not the way to keep America competitive in the global market. The President reiterated his support for the sciences in his State of the Union address, so let’s start by getting funding for our premier laboratories back on track.”

OTHER CONGRESSIONAL ISSUES

HOUSE TO CONSIDER HEA REAUTHORIZATION BILL ON FEBRUARY 7

As noted above, the House will begin consideration of its version of the Higher Education Act (HEA) reauthorization bill (H.R. 4137) on Thursday, February 7.

At this writing, it remains unclear what changes to the Education and Labor Committee-passed bill will be included in the manager’s amendment and which other amendments the Rules Committee will allow Members to offer on the House floor.

AAU staff will provide additional information about consideration of H.R. 4137 when it is available. The Senate approved its version of HEA reauthorization (S. 1642) on July 24 by a vote of 95-0. The most recent extension of the Act expires March 31.

--AAU and NASULGC Express Continuing Support of Loan Default Rate Change

AAU and the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC) sent a letter to Committee Chairman George Miller (D-CA) on January 30 expressing continuing support for an amendment added to the bill in committee that would change the calculation of the cohort default rate on student loans from two years to three years.

The letter states that this modification, offered in committee by Reps. Raul Grijalva (D-AZ) and Tim Bishop (D-NY), “would improve the accuracy of the student loan default measurement and provide more meaningful information for students, families, and taxpayers.”

The Career College Association is actively opposing this change in federal law.
NIH RELEASES FY08 FISCAL POLICY FOR GRANT AWARDS

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) has released its fiscal policy guidance for FY08 grant awards. The document adjusts the agency’s fiscal policy set during the series of continuing resolutions last fall and reflects approval of the FY08 omnibus appropriations bill. The omnibus bill provided NIH with a budget of $29.2 billion, a one-percent increase over FY07 funding. The policy guidance gives individual institutes discretion about allocating this adjustment, but states that:

- Non-competing awards will receive an overall increase of just one percent, rather than the three-percent inflation increase expected previously;
- The average cost of competing grants will be allowed to increase by one percent (which will allow NIH to support an estimated 9700 new grants in FY08);
- NIH will seek to fund a number of new investigators comparable to the average of the last five years; and
- Ruth L. Kirschstein National Research Service Award (NRSA) stipends, tuition, and training-related expenses will be flat-funded at FY07 levels.

ENERGY SCIENCES COALITION URGES $300 MILLION IN SUPPLEMENTAL FY08 RESEARCH FUNDING

The Energy Sciences Coalition sent letters to President Bush, key federal agency officials, and congressional leaders on January 28 urging them to provide $300 million in additional FY08 funding for the Department of Energy (DOE) Office of Science. The purpose is to make up for cutbacks caused by the final FY08 omnibus appropriations bill.

The Coalition letter was signed by Intel Corporation Chairman of the Board Craig Barrett and several association leaders, including AAU President Robert Berdahl. It has been endorsed by more than 40 organizations and universities. (Institutional endorsements will continue to be solicited and added to the list.)

The letter asks the President and Congress to add $75 million to the economic stimulus package in order to prevent imminent layoffs at DOE national laboratories, user facilities, universities, and industry facilities. It asks that an additional $225 million be added to an FY08 supplemental funding package to prevent a “significant and permanent loss of vital U.S. scientific capabilities.”

The final FY08 omnibus appropriations bill funded the DOE Office of Science at $4 billion, which is $221 million, or 5.8 percent, above FY07 spending but $380 million below the President’s FY08 request. The increase included $125 million in congressional earmarks, however, so the increase for competitive research programs was only $97 million, or 2.6 percent.

Within the total, four budgets were particularly hard-hit: Basic Energy Sciences, High Energy Physics, Fusion Energy Sciences, and Nuclear Physics. Programs and projects in each of these areas are facing layoffs of existing scientific and technical personnel.
Additional information about the DOE Office of Science budget—including potential job losses by program—is provided in a January 30 speech by DOE Under Secretary of Science Raymond Orbach. His presentation notes that President Bush will continue to demonstrate his strong support for the physical sciences in his FY09 budget request. “But if the FY09 enacted budget proves similar to FY07 and FY08, a ‘three-peat,’ the future of the physical sciences will be in jeopardy.”

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