Student Aid Funding Victory in the Senate Budget

After a roller-coaster ride of amendments on the Senate floor, six Republicans held tight with the Democrats on March 17 to increase student aid funding by $5.4 billion in the FY 2006 budget.

NAICU members and the entire higher education community worked the Kennedy amendment really hard, and that's what made the difference in the final vote. If the amendment survives the conference committee, it will increase the Pell Grant maximum to $4,500 in FY 2006, will increase all the other student aid programs, restore funding for vocational and adult education, and provide more loan forgiveness for teachers.

The amendment introduced by Senator Ted Kennedy (D-Mass.) came up at about 5:00 p.m. on March 17. Many people on the Hill thought it was just a message amendment, and leadership staff thought they had the votes to block its passage. But when the final vote came down 51 to 49, with six Republican senators voting in favor, everyone was shocked. Senators Lincoln Chafee (R.I.), Norm Coleman (Minn.), Susan Collins (Maine), Mike DeWine (Ohio), Olympia Snowe (Maine), and Arlen Specter (Pa.) deserve huge thank-yous from you and your students for supporting the amendment to increase student aid.

We had about two hours of celebration before we learned that Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-Tenn.) was going to offer a counter-amendment at 8:45 p.m. to strip the Kennedy amendment from the budget resolution. Many members of the D.C. higher education community rushed to the Capitol to lobby senators outside the chamber, especially the six Republicans. The networks we have set up through the Student Aid Alliance, the state executives, e-mails, and cell phones were working full out to ensure that no one changed their vote. The majority was so worried about this amendment that they brought in Vice President Dick Cheney to be on call for a tie-breaker if necessary. Many senators had already issued press releases touting their vote to increase funding for student aid, so they were solid in support of the amendment.

Kennedy had prepared a list of 30 amendments for Democrats to keep the Senate in all night working on the budget, while Frist really wanted to complete consideration of the budget and break for the spring recess. In the end, Kennedy and Frist worked out a deal: Kennedy would not offer his long list of amendments, and Frist would not counter the student aid amendment.

Closing statements from Budget Committee Chairman Judd Gregg (R-N.H.) and Ranking Member Kent Conrad (D-N.D.) came up abruptly at about 10:00 p.m., signaling that a deal had been made and the student aid amendment was safe. The Senate Budget Resolution (S. Con. Res. 18) was adopted by a vote of 51 to 49.

Please thank your senators for voting in favor of the student aid amendment, and ask them to work hard to keep it when they conference with the House after the spring break.

House budget

The House also passed its budget resolution (H. Con. Res. 95) on March 17, by a vote of 218 to 214 after only one day of debate. The House budget has nothing but cuts for student aid. It proposes the same spending levels as the president's budget — which assumes the elimination of the Perkins Loan program, LEAP, GEAR UP, Upward Bound and Talent Search, and reconciliation cuts to the student loan programs. The House rejected the
Democratic substitute offered by the House Budget Committee's ranking member, John Spratt (D-S.C.), and an overall spending amendment offered by the ranking member of the Appropriations Committee, David Obey (D-Wis.). Both would have added spending for education.

Conference

The next step for the budget process is for members of the House and Senate Budget Committee to meet in a conference committee to work out the differences between their two bills. The Senate dramatically reduced its cuts to Medicaid, while it approved drilling in the Alaska National Wildlife Refuge. Many think this will be a starting point for conferees. Conference will not be an easy task on student aid issues either. Keeping the reserve funds for the Higher Education Act reauthorization and the increases from the Kennedy amendment will be our top priorities.

For more information, please contact Stephanie Giesecke at NAICU (202) 785-8866 or stephanie@naicu.edu.

Ed & Workforce Looks at Efforts to Improve International Student Access

The House Education and Workforce’s Subcommittee on 21st Century Competitiveness held a hearing March 17 and 18 on the progress made in tracking international students in higher education. According to Committee Chair Howard “Buck” McKeon (R-Calif.), the goal was to assess the current status of various systems that have been implemented to help monitor international students attending school in the U.S., as well as to discuss challenges that remain.

McKeon wanted to follow up on various steps taken since the September 11 attacks, including implementation of the Student and Exchange Visitors Information System (SEVIS) to determine whether the reported decline in foreign students applying for university admission is reversing itself, or if Congress and the federal government need to do more to restore access for international scholars. “We have the best higher education system in the world, due in part to bringing the best and brightest of other countries here to exchange ideas with our students,” he said. “We want to preserve this flow of information and culture while maintaining adequate safeguards to report and monitor these students.”

Witnesses included officials from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the U.S. Department of State, and the Government Accountability Office (GAO). The director of international education at the University of Colorado and the president of the University of Maryland also testified.

While DHS, State Department, and GAO officials feel that SEVIS is a workable and necessary tool to track international students, they also realize additional changes are necessary. Areas the witnesses cited for improvement included help desk support and fee collection procedures. The higher education representatives thanked the various departments for their cooperation in these initiatives, but expressed concern about competing countries’ implicit strategies for recruiting international students, and the lack of similar strategies in the U.S.

Although no specific legislation is planned as a result of the hearing, government and higher education officials agreed to continue working together to address issues that dissuade international students from beginning or continuing their studies in the U.S. Additional House and Senate hearings on international student issues will undoubtedly be scheduled throughout this session of Congress.

For additional information, please contact Karin Johns at NAICU at (202) 785-8866, or karin@naicu.edu.