Senate Moves Toward End Game on Student Aid Appropriations

The Senate has passed the FY 2008 Labor-HHS-Education appropriations bill by a veto-proof margin of 75 to 19. The October 23 vote is a victory for student aid – in a roundabout way.

First, the vote margin raises the stakes for President Bush's threatened veto of the largest domestic spending bill. Subcommittee Chairman Tom Harkin's (D-Iowa) goal in bringing the education appropriations bill to the floor was getting it passed and to conference with the House in a form, and with a vote margin, that would serve as a strong counterbalance to the veto threat. In July, the House had fallen four votes short of reaching a veto-proof margin.

Harkin's success was derived from his convincing domestic spending advocates not to offer big amendments that would have increased education and health funding, and would have cost key votes from budget hawks. Also critical was his decision to drop controversial stem cell language. In conversations with stakeholder groups like NAICU, Harkin asked organizations to avoid even "good amendments, because they could jeopardize passage." Then when they brought the manager's amendment to the floor, Harkin and Ranking Member Arlen Specter (R-Pa.) dropped the controversial stem cell language as a "compromise," to show the president they meant business. This helped bring on 29 Republicans in support of the bill.

Secondly, the vote margin helps ensure that Pell Grants won't be underfunded in the end game this year. The Senate bill maintains a Pell Grant maximum of $4,310, and flat-funds the other student aid programs. However, it will cost an additional $826 million next year just to keep Pell at $4,310. The House bill spends $2 billion to increase Pell to $4,700. Unfortunately, when the House and Senate meet to conference the bill, we expect that, at best, the Pell maximum will stay at $4,310. This is because the Pell Grant program has already received a huge infusion of new funds from last month's budget reconciliation bill. With so many other domestic programs vying for money, the new reconciliation bill funds could end up hurting our chances of even keeping the baseline funding for Pell at the current $4,310.

What's at Stake: Funding for the Pell Grant Program

As demoralizing as it is to anticipate that final Pell appropriations may only maintain a $4,310 maximum grant, an even worse scenario is that the maximum grant could actually end up being cut. If the president doesn't sign the bill, and if Congress then can't override the veto, the president's proposed overall level of spending would be part of the necessary negotiations. The presidents' budget proposed a Pell Grant maximum of $4,600, with a baseline of only $4,050 from appropriations (anticipating that Congress would make up the difference with additional Pell money from the reconciliation process).
A more optimistic scenario, though, is that we manage to keep the Pell maximum in the appropriations process at $4,310. Then the added reconciliation funds would bring the total Pell Grant for next year to $4,800.

Next Steps: We May Be Calling on You

The Senate named conferees immediately after passing the bill. This means the conference with the House will be quick, since informal conversations had already begun in advance of the Senate vote.

Once the bill is finalized, Harkin and House Chairman Rep. David Obey (D-Wis.) would like support from advocacy groups to garner the largest votes possible for final passage in the House and Senate. We’re asking NAICU presidents to be prepared to respond to action alerts over the next few weeks, asking members of Congress to vote for final passage, and asking the president to sign the bill.

For more information, contact Stephanie Giesecke, stephanie@naicu.edu

DREAM Act Defeated in Senate

The Senate has rejected a bill that would have allowed college-bound illegal immigrant minors access to green cards, and expanded educational opportunities. The Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act, S. 2205, would have removed some of the federal barriers to higher education for illegal immigrant children who have lived most of their lives in the U.S., attended American schools, and now have the desire and ability to go to college.

Senate Majority Whip Richard Durbin (D-Ill.), introduced the bill, and pushed for consideration on the Senate floor. On October 24, S. 2205 failed by a 52-44 vote – short of the 60 votes necessary to allow the Senate to consider the legislation. This means it’s unlikely that we will see any further consideration of immigration legislation for the remainder of the year.

Senators who opposed bringing the DREAM Act to the floor were not necessarily opponents of the measure, but feared stripping these least controversial measures from comprehensive immigration legislation and moving them separately. Many feel this will hurt – if not preclude – any broad-scale immigration reform.

NAICU joined several other higher education associations in sending a letter to members of the Senate, voicing our strong support for the DREAM Act. The letters emphasized that it is in our nation’s best interest to educate all interested students, and that we have a responsibility to assist young people who are already living in our communities, and who are working hard to be productive members of society, by providing increased access to higher education.

For more information, contact Karin Johns, karin@naicu.edu

Private Colleges Should Review New Lobbying Rules

Recent amendments to the Honest Leadership and Open Government Act revise ethics and lobbying rules for interacting with government officials. President Bush signed the new amendments into law on September 14. Private colleges should review the legislation with legal counsel to ensure that they are in compliance.

A memo distributed by the American Council on Education gives a detailed overview of the act, and of the changes affecting colleges and universities. The memo is available on line at: www.acenet.edu/AM/Template.cfm?Section=Home&TEMPLATE=/CM/ContentDisplay.cfm&CONTENTID=23707.
The biggest changes relate to gift and travel bans. Private colleges employing a lobbyist are banned from giving gifts and paying for meals for members of Congress and their staff. Private colleges that do not employ a lobbyist may give gifts or pay for a meal for members and staff, if they are valued at less than $50. On the other hand, public colleges – whether they employ a lobbyist or not – are allowed, as entities of the state government, to give gifts, buy meals, and provide tickets to home sporting events to congressional members and staff. Many members and staff, however, won’t accept gifts or meals from anyone to avoid any perceived ethics violation.

New House rules aim to limit reimbursed travel for members of Congress and staff from private entities. However, the rule contains an exemption for private colleges and universities. New Senate rules allow private colleges to provide travel for senators through an exemption for all 501(c)3 organizations. Likewise, public colleges and universities are exempt from both the House and Senate rules. All travel requires pre-approval by the House and Senate ethics committees.

For federally-registered lobbyists at any entity, the rules include increased disclosures, as well as increased fines for not complying. For earmark projects in appropriations, there also are increased disclosures on the part of the member of Congress requesting the funds.

NAICU is a 501(c)3 organization, and government relations staff are registered lobbyists. We comply with all reporting requirements and follow the gift bans accordingly.

For more information, contact Stephanie Giesecke, stephanie@naicu.edu

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**U-CAN Celebrates First Month, Continues to Grow**

In the month since U-CAN was released publicly, the statistics show that the consumer information project is thriving and reaching a wide audience. The early success is only expected to grow as we enter the second stage of the roll-out, which includes targeted outreach to high school college counselors, radio talk show interviews nationally, and Facebook and YouTube campaigns aimed directly at students.

Here's a snapshot of U-CAN stats since the launch on September 26:

- Total participating institutions: 686
- Total profiles published publicly: 500
- Total visits to the U-CAN site: 62,268
- Total page views: 398,899
- Profile with the most hits since launch: Adelphi University, New York (2,253 hits)

For up-to-date statistics and information, visit the U-CAN blog: http://ucan-network.blogspot.com

To sign up to participate in U-CAN, institutions can complete the on-line participation form: http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=x0N4oE1_2fw0k4tKileg1Y8g_3d_3d

For more information, contact Tony Wagner, tonyw@naicu.edu (U-CAN Web and profiles) or Tony Pals, tony@naicu.edu (roll-out activities and media relations)
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