

AAG Washington Monitor

Senate Finally Takes Up Higher Ed Act

In recent weeks, Senate watchers have been captivated by the confirmation hearings for Chief Justice-nominee John Roberts. Nonetheless, the Senate has succeeded in also confronting other pending business and on September 8, the Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Committee finally held a mark-up on the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (HEA). The House Education and Workforce Committee passed a separate version of the legislation (H.R. 609) in July following a contentious three days of debate and votes.

By contrast, the Senate bill (S. 1614) was co-sponsored by HELP Chairman Michael Enzi (R-WY) and Ranking Member Ted Kennedy (D-MA) and passed the committee by a vote of 20-0.

While Kennedy did say that panel Democrats were unhappy with a few provisions in the bill which they would try to address on the Senate floor, it was clear at the quick mark-up session that the numerous hours of bipartisan work that went into crafting the legislation had paid dividends. Among the bill's key provisions:

- The income cut-off for the Pell Grant program would increase from \$15,000 to \$20,000. The maximum award would also increase to \$6,300 over a five-year period.
- The fixed interest rate for consolidated student loans would remain at 6.8 percent, but the fixed rate on loans to parents would increase from 7.9 percent to 8.5 percent.
- A fellowship program would be created to encourage women and minorities to pursue careers in the academy.

- Changes would be made to simplify student financial aid processes.

It remains unclear when either house of Congress will vote on the committee bills. Following the votes, the conference process—which reconciles differences in the House and Senate bills—could prove quite difficult and acrimonious.

Prospects for the geography education bill (S. 1376) are still uncertain—it remains unclear whether the legislation will be attached to the HEA. We at the AAG are in close contact with the National Geographic Society and others supporting the bill. (For more on S. 1376, please see last month's AAG Washington Monitor). ■

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