

# AAG Washington Monitor

## House Passes Higher Education Act

On February 7, 2008, the House of Representatives passed H.R. 4137, the College Opportunity and Affordability Act, better known as the Higher Education Act reauthorization. The bill received an overwhelming bipartisan majority of 354-58 and is primarily focused on reducing college costs and simplifying the process of applying for financial aid.

Many of the bill's provisions were opposed by institution heads, including a requirement that the colleges and universities in the top 5 percent of their peer group in terms of tuition increases over a five-year period would have to report to the U.S. Secretary of Education as to the reasons for their increases. These schools would also be required to convene "quality efficiency task forces" to study why their price is going up so rapidly and what they can do to constrain costs.

Despite the large vote in favor of the bill, there was some partisan bickering during the debate, as the Democratic majority blocked votes on several controversial GOP amendments. These included provisions related to David Horowitz's Academic Bill of Rights and efforts to curb financial aid for undocumented students.

Senate and House leaders will begin meeting soon to conference their competing versions of the reauthorization. One key part of this process will be the fate of a proviso in the House bill blocking the Department of Education from regulating higher-ed accreditation, something the Bush Administration "strongly opposes."

## President Bush Releases Federal Budget; Condemns Earmarks

On February 4, 2008, a week after delivering his final State of the Union Address, President Bush released his Administration's ultimate budget proposal. Given the animosity that characterized the recently-concluded Fiscal Year 2008 appropriations battle, several political analysts have termed the FY 2009 budget "dead on arrival." Nonetheless, it will serve as a starting point for Congressional Democrats when they begin to put together their spending plan for the coming fiscal year.

In his speech, Bush took a strong stance against Congressional earmarks, many of which fund research projects. The President told the audience that earmarks are "special interest projects that are often snuck in at the last minute, without discussion or debate" and undermine Americans' "trust in their government." He went on to assert that if Congress passes "an appropriations bill that does not cut the number and cost of earmarks in half, I will send it back to you with my veto." Bush followed on this threat by issuing an Executive Order "that directs federal agencies to ignore any future earmark that is not voted on by the Congress."

While the President used his bully pulpit to take this strong public stance against earmarking, his actions will probably have little to no effect. Congress can take steps to get around the order in the coming appropriations cycle, and realistically it will be up to Bush's successor to enforce the policy, something a President Clinton, McCain, or Obama may disagree with. Folks in the science policy community have generally

reacted with ambivalence to Bush's remarks on earmarks – most seem to think it's hollow talk by a President trying to recast himself as a budget hawk as he prepares to exit stage right.

Meanwhile, the National Science Foundation (NSF) fared quite well in the Administration's budget. Bush had also made of point of highlighting the American Competitiveness Initiative, a Congressionally-authorized program that includes the doubling of the NSF's research budget, during the State of the Union. In the President's FY 2009 budget, the Foundation's research account would receive a boost from \$4.805 billion to \$5.594 billion (\$789 million – 14.1 percent). This should mean new funding will be available to the NSF's Geography and Regional Science program.

The United States Geological Survey (USGS), meanwhile, received a \$968.5 million proposed budget for FY 2009, a decrease of \$38 million (3.9 percent) from the FY 2008 enacted level. The Administration explains that the decrease is due largely to "\$87.8 million in reductions for lower priority efforts and un-requested increases." This cut has a direct impact on the Survey's Geographic Analysis and Monitoring program, as decreases of \$1.94 million in priority ecosystems funding and \$1.013 million in "lower priority geographic research" are mentioned in the budget detail. The USGS is, however, promoting its Global Change efforts, which includes substantial geography funding. ■

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