



HEA Extension Passed

By Judith Earley



Lawmakers wanted President Bush to sign an extension of the Higher Education Act (HEA) by June 30, 2006, when the current HEA was set to expire.

The bill, H.R. 5603, was proposed by Rep. Ric Keller (R-FL) on June 14, and was approved by the House of Representatives under suspension of the rules on June 21, 2006. During the debate on the House floor, whereas House Democrats backed the bill, they also criticized their Republican colleagues for reauthorizing a portion of the HEA in conjunction with the Deficit Reduction Act.

The Senate passed a comparable extension the following week on June 23.

Initially, the Senate had included HEA reauthorization legislation as part of the Deficit Reduction Act; that piece of legislation was passed in February 2006. However, since only the student-loan provisions of their reauthorization bill made it into the final version of the Deficit Reduction Act, the Senate was forced to draw up and pass a new bill in an effort to tackle the rest of the stipulations outlined in HEA.

This extension will keep the current legislation active through September 30, 2006. Passing the HEA extension in the House and Senate does not make any amendments to the HEA the way it exists now. Because lawmakers have not been able to complete the reauthorization process for nearly two years, the HEA has already been extended numerous times.

The latest 90-day extension indicates that representatives and senators alike are still attempting to actually make the final editions to the reauthorization bill before the 109th Congress wraps things up this session. On the other hand, not everyone sees it that way. Various onlookers do not foresee that the HEA will be reauthorized this year; instead, they believe that when the 110th Congress convenes, it will have to begin the HEA reauthorization process from the very beginning.

The Higher Education Act (HEA) provides authorization to the major federal student aid programs that are responsible for the majority of financial assistance granted to postsecondary students. The premise behind its re-approval or reauthorization by Congress every five years the encouragement of growth and change within the program.

However, the present HEA reauthorization process has become entangled with the nation's budget reconciliation through the enactment of the Higher Education Reconciliation Act of 2005 (HERA). The HERA was signed into law on February 8, 2006; and it addresses the budget-related provisions in the Higher Education Act. This leaves the remaining programs in the hands of lawmakers and dependent upon the completion of the reauthorization process.