



Photo Credit: iStock/ uschools

What to expect (and not expect) from Congress in 2016

by Jim Hermes

Have you heard? It's an election year. And while most people are focusing on the presidential candidates, there's still work to do in Congress. However, an election year generally means a shorter legislative calendar, and that means less time to get things done—111 days, to be precise. More disheartening news: As the presidential election draws closer, the partisan divide in Congress grows even beyond where it normally is, making it even harder to get legislation passed.

Despite this news, the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) continues to advocate for legislation that would benefit community colleges and their 12.5 million students. Here are some of the issues, in addition to the annual funding legislation, AACC is focused on.

HIGHER EDUCATION ACT (HEA) REAUTHORIZATION:

There is so much at stake for community colleges in the HEA, including reestablishing the year-round Pell Grant, reforming flawed graduation rates, staving off any risk-sharing schemes that would impose financial penalties on community colleges and improving the loan programs to give institutions more tools to combat over-borrowing.

It's very unlikely that Congress will finish with the HEA reauthorization this year. However, this does not mean that important milestones won't occur. The Senate may introduce a comprehensive reauthorization bill this year, and it could even make it through committee markup. The situation is less clear in the House, where repre-

sentatives may proceed as they have previously by introducing smaller, focused bills rather than one large one.

PERKINS ACT REAUTHORIZATION: The Perkins Career and Technical Education Act also is up for reauthorization. The act remains a vital source of support for community colleges. The bill, overall, is far shorter and simpler than the HEA and there does not seem to be an appetite on the Hill and elsewhere to make fundamental changes to the program. That means there's a good possibility that Congress may make further progress, if not finish, the Perkins reauthorization this year. There has been a lot of activity in the Senate, less so in the House.

AACC wants to see streamlined accountability measures, provisions focusing on how its programs are serving the needs of business and a new program to support community college capacity along the lines of the U.S. Department of Labor's Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) program.

AMERICA'S COLLEGE PROMISE: The \$90 billion price tag associated with the America's College Promise Act makes the fight to get it passed an uphill battle in Congress. There may be some room to do something on a smaller scale as a start. AACC supports the bill and continues to work off Capitol Hill to advance the free community college tuition concept at the state and local levels.

The College Promise Campaign, launched in late 2015 by the White House, continues to bring awareness of "promise" programs that already exist across the country and encourage the development of new programs to help qualified students receive two years of community college education at no cost.

NEW OVERTIME RULES: For years, employees earning less than \$23,660 have been, in the eyes of the government, hourly (non-exempt) employees and eligible for overtime pay. The Labor Department has proposed new rules that would increase that salary floor to \$50,400. This large increase may have a significant impact on employers, including community colleges. AACC has joined with other organizations to call for a phased-in increase to a lower salary threshold than called for in the proposed regulations. Final regulations are expected later this year.

Join AACC's government relations team at a legislative update session during the AACC Annual Convention, April 11, 3:00–4:00 p.m. ■

Jim Hermes is the associate vice president of government relations at the American Association of Community Colleges.