

## Congress focuses on higher education

Last month, House Education and Workforce Committee Chair Virginia Foxx (R-North Carolina) released her long-awaited Higher Education Act (HEA) reauthorization legislation. This sweeping reform of higher education raises some concerns for ACRL members.

To put the significance of the legislation into context, it is helpful to clarify the purpose of an authorization bill, which is basically to create a program to address a need. Authorization legislation generally includes an ending date for the program and a funding level. If Congress determines that the program is still meeting a need, a reauthorization will extend the life of the program while also allowing Congress to make necessary changes to the program. A reauthorization is not necessary for a program to continue, and many programs still receive annual appropriations despite having no working authorization. The HEA, which expired in 2013, is a good example. Nevertheless, a reauthorization is valuable in providing a signal to Congress that the program is still important and worthy of funding.

The Promoting Real Opportunity, Success, and Prosperity through Education Reform (PROSPER) Act released by Foxx stands out from previous bills. The original HEA was signed into law by President Lyndon Johnson in 1965 and has been reauthorized eight times since, most recently in 2008. In the previous Congress, the education

policy mainly centered on the Every Student Succeeds Act, which governs our nation's K–12 policy. In the current Congress, attention now turns to higher education. The PROSPER Act would address obligations on higher education institutions and change how Americans attend and pay for college.

The PROSPER Act would largely keep the overall structure of the HEA, while consolidating and eliminating certain programs and authorities. ALA is particularly alarmed by the proposed elimination of the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program, which supports graduates working in the public sector—including libraries—and often in lower paying jobs. ALA is working to protect this program. ALA is also concerned with the proposed elimination of funding for teacher preparation programs under Title II of the HEA.

Consolidation of loan programs and loan repayment plans is a major change proposed by the PROSPER Act. The Act would streamline grant programs into four categories (undergraduate, graduate, parent, and consolidation). Critics of the PROSPER Act claim these changes will increase the cost of college education on lower and middle class families.

Introduction of the PROSPER Act is only the first step in what is likely to be a months-long march towards the final HEA. While Foxx expects the bill to move quickly, House Democrats expressed concerns over key provisions and disappointment about not being included in the development of the bill. The Senate is not expected to consider HEA bills anytime soon. ALA's Washington Office will continue to monitor the legislation and advocate to protect programs benefitting libraries and students. *RM*

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