



What should community college leaders do plan ahead? Build relationships with elected officials early and nurture them often. This election is the first following the 2020 Census and realignment of seats. Each campus should be sure it knows the elected officials from all of the Congressional districts from which it draws students, or at least its local students.

118th Congress: Prepare for Offense and Defense in the Years Ahead

Community colleges must prepare for two distinct types of negotiations with lawmakers.

BY CARRIE WARICK-SMITH

IN FOOTBALL, YOU FREQUENTLY HEAR THE CLAIM THAT “defense wins championships.” However, the military adage focuses on offense, with the idea that “the best defense is a good offense.” As community colleges consider their advocacy work for the 118th Congress, it’s going to be very important to consider both.

The metaphor should not be taken too far. Community colleges are not under attack or trying to win a game. But there are two very distinct types of negotiations coming over the next two years. One, what we’ll call the “offense,” involves issues where there is likely bipartisanship and a real opportunity to make progress for campuses and students. The other, what is likened here to “defense,” are those where promises made in the early days of this Congress could undo advancements made over the past several years.

Offense: Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act

The House Education and Workforce Committee and the Senate Health Education Labor and Pensions (HELP) Committee oversee both education and workforce bills in their respective chambers. Key laws include the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 (HEA) and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 (WIOA). While partisan HEA reauthorization bills are anticipated this year, particularly in the House, it is unlikely that they will gain traction. The real opportunity for bipartisan agreement and progress is for WIOA.

In the House Education and Workforce Committee, the two leads stay the same while switching roles as chair and ranking member with the change in majority in the House. They are longtime committee heads Representative Virginia Foxx (R-NC) and Representative Bobby Scott (D-VA). In 2021, Reps. Foxx and Scott held three bipartisan hearings and several talks around reauthorizing WIOA. While ultimately then-Chair Scott introduced a bill on his own, WIOA was the area where the

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most progress was made and generally where it seems there could be the possibility for agreement during the 118th Congress.

At the time of the release of Rep. Scott's bill, Rep. Foxx released a statement committing to "working toward substantive reforms for America's workforce development system." She added, "I believe it is critical that a WIOA reauthorization increase employer involvement and empower both states and communities to ensure their workers have the skills they need for successful and rewarding careers."

Offense: Farm Bill

The Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018, more commonly known as the Farm Bill, has been passed nearly every five years since its creation in 1933. Unlike several education bills, the supports for farmers and for the country's food safety net programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), motivate both sides of the aisle to come together every five years to reauthorize the Farm Bill on time.

The current iteration of the Farm Bill expires on September 30, 2023. Given its timeline and history, the Farm Bill is one of the best opportunities for community colleges to successfully advance priorities during 2023. There are two key components to this front: SNAP and rural community college agricultural programs.

For SNAP, the safety net that provides food security to millions of individuals each year, there are both access and eligibility challenges. The Government Accountability Office (GAO) estimated in December of 2018 that 3.3 million college students are eligible for SNAP benefits but fewer than half receive them. The reauthorization of the Farm Bill provides an opportunity to both increase the percentage of eligible students receiving SNAP and room to examine the student eligibility criteria, which are different from those for non-students, to help ensure all students with food insecurity receive the support they need.

The second portion of the Farm Bill where community colleges could see benefit is for those schools with agriculture programs, particularly in rural settings. As agriculture becomes more technologically advanced in both its processes and equipment, there is need for farm workers with training beyond what can be learned on site. One example includes technicians to repair farm equipment. The need for this type of agriculture program is only increasing, and the Farm Bill is an ideal place for rural community colleges to receive the funding necessary to support the start-up or expansion of these programs.

Defense: Appropriations and "Cut-as-you-go"

In order to secure the House speakership, Rep. Kevin McCarthy (R-CA) cut several deals with the conservative holdouts who forced the speaker election to stretch over four days and a historic 15 rounds of voting. Two of those affect federal spending and could cause community colleges to be in the position of defending key programs that are crucial to colleges and to students.

One promise is to freeze spending at FY 2022 levels. Whether or not defense (as in national defense, not the sports metaphor) spending will be included in these freezes is unknown. But under this agreement, programs important to community colleges at best would not see a decrease in funding levels.

Additionally, Speaker McCarthy agreed to the "cut-as-you-go" rule. This means any legislation that increases mandatory spending over five or ten years is not able to be considered.

Planning Ahead

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Further, examine the committee assignments of the delegation to see where there are places that campus interests align. Think beyond just education and appropriations. Consider Agriculture for the Farm Bill, Judiciary for immigration issues, or Ways and Means or Tax for issues related to higher education tax credits and taxability for the Pell Grant.

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