OVERVIEW

On December 9, House leadership and appropriators released their proposal to fund the federal government for the remainder of FY 2015, which began on October 1, 2014. (Federal agencies and programs had been supported by a temporary spending measure in anticipation of Congress needing a little extra time to strike deals.) The $1.1 trillion bill has advocates going through over 1,000 pages of language and charts. The bill is a mixed bag for education and research advocates and has been cast as a last marker for this Congress and a first step toward GOP control in the next. It also has a number of policy riders of varying controversy—selling marijuana in the District of Columbia, school lunch nutritional requirements and presidential conventions are among topics addressed by various riders.

An aggressive effort by House leadership and the White House yielded passage in the House by an extremely close margin- 219 to 206. 57 Democrats strayed from Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) to approve the measure. Pelosi was livid about certain provisions that would roll back some banking regulations, and called the timing of the vote, backed up against a potential government shutdown, “blackmail.” Speaker John Boehner (R-OH) faced his own challenge, as conservative members of his caucus were displeased with the bill as well. Much of the displeasure from the GOP stemmed from the need for this to be a bill that the Senate won’t change at all, which meant Boehner and Senate Democrats had to compromise.

The Cromnibus then went to the Senate, where that body had until midnight, December 13 to pass the bill and put it on the President’s desk to avoid a government shutdown. In a surprising twist, the House passed another short-term spending measure to allow the Senate a few extra days before a looming government shutdown would go into effect. Thus, the Senate began a rare weekend session to strike a deal to pass the Cromnibus. In what may be a preview of the way the 114th Congress will carry out its business, the weekend saw exhausting in-fighting on both sides of the aisle. Republicans were vocally angry at antics pulled by Senators Cruz (R-TX) and Lee (R-UT) to make a final protest about the way outgoing Majority Leader Reid (R-NV) runs the Senate floor, which backfired, allowing Reid to take up some controversial Presidential Nominees and keep the Senate in session into this week. Senator Ayotte (R-NH) called Senator Cruz’s antics “ridiculous,” in an interview over the weekend, and many members were vocally frustrated. Meanwhile, some Democrats were equally frustrated with the contents of the spending package, and Senator Warren (D-MA) made headlines by speaking out against the special interests involved in banking provisions attached to the bill. Ultimately, the Senate passed the Cromnibus late Saturday night by a 56-40 margin, sending it to the President’s desk and avoiding a government shutdown. Obama is expected to sign the bill into law this week.
**PROPOSED SPENDING**

The proposal has both good and bad news for programs of interest to CUR. Some initial highlights are noted here.

The National Science Foundation (NSF) would see an increase of just over $172 million, getting $7.3 billion in the proposal. The Education and Human Resources directorate at the agency would get $866 million—almost $20 million more than last year. While NSF has some discretion in how it spends its allotted funds, the proposal does state that $66 million should be invested in the Advanced Technological Education program; $32 million should support the Historically Black Colleges and Universities Program; the Louis Stokes Alliance for Minority Participation programs should get $46 million and $13.5 million should be allocated to Tribal Colleges and Universities Program. The bill further states that of the funds allocated across these programs, $3 million should be support for the Foundation’s “broadening participation” efforts by creating “effective models of intervention to nurture students in STEM subjects from K-12 through undergraduate studies.” This provision was included at the insistence of Senator Barbara Mikulski (D-MD), who leads the Senate Appropriations Committee, as well as the Commerce, Justice, Science Appropriations Subcommittee. Other programs of interest to CUR—such as Advancing Informal STEM Learning, will have their funding levels determined by NSF leadership. Usually, the community gets a sense of their plans from the annual budget request. The bill language also says, “NSF's EHR termination and reduction proposals are incorporated unless specifically noted otherwise in this statement or in language in either the House or Senate report that is not modified or superseded by this statement.” This is guidance to the agency related to efforts to reorganize STEM education investments agency-wide.

It is worth noting that the bill does not mention NSF investments in the social sciences, which had been attacked by House Science, Space and Technology Committee Chairman Lamar Smith (R-TX) and conservative Republicans throughout the 113th Congress. While there is no language explicitly supporting such programs, as there was in the House and Senate spending bills proposed earlier this year, the absence of guidance suggests that current funding of such endeavors will continue. That means NSF is free to invest the $272 million it has requested for its social, behavioral, and economic sciences directorate, which is a $15 million boost over FY 2014 levels.

The National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Endowment for the Arts received the same spending levels as FY 2014. The Endowments will receive $146 million each. Given the current budget climate, arts and humanities advocates are thankful for the level funding, despite the fact that it is actually a cut in funding when inflation is accounted for, as they fear the alternative is much worse.

At the Department of Education (ED), overall spending would be increased by $137 million. Among the programs that saw a modest increase, Federal Work Study would be funded at $989.73 million, an increase of $15 million, and TRIO would be funded at $839.75 million, a $1.5 million increase. GEAR UP would receive $301.64 million, the same level of funding it saw last year and Perkins (or career and technical education) programs would also be “flat funded,” at $1.1 billion. A $303 million cut to Pell for student loan servicing would come from its current surplus, and First in the World would be cut to $60 million, a decrease of $15 million.

The proposal ignores the President’s attempt to establish an “Effective Teaching and Learning: STEM” program once again. Also of note, there is no new money for Race to the Top grants or LEAP—a blow
to the Administration’s education priorities, and the Investing in Innovation (i3) program, would only get $120 million for FY 2015, a decrease of $21.6 million. This sends a clear message to the Administration about Congress’s displeasure with ED.

Of note is the inclusion of language to support a Career Pathways program—the bill includes a new provision reinstating financial aid eligibility for students without high school diplomas enrolled in career pathway programs at community colleges. Research shows that when low-skilled adults are enrolled in these programs, which provide education, training, counseling and supportive services concurrently, they are more likely to earn college credits and workforce credentials and to receive higher wages than their peers. This language would support that effort.

NASA and NASA education programs also see increases in the bill at $18 billion and $119 million, respectively. Research budgets at the National Institutes of Health and the Department of Energy are essentially unchanged in the proposal. The National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) would be funded at $864 million, which is $14 million above the FY 2014 enacted level. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) would get $5.4 billion--$126 million above FY 2014.

CONCLUSION
ED, NASA and NSF are among the winners in the $1.013 trillion package. NIH and the Department of Energy did not fare as well with their flat funding. Advocates will continue to ferret out details of the bill as Senate leadership negotiates passage in the coming days. While the goal of passage by the end of the weekend is ambitious, it’s clear that there won’t be a government shutdown just before the holidays, and that the holiday parties at the end of the next week won’t have many Members of Congress in attendance. They should be out of town by then. For more details on the agreement, see resources prepared by the appropriations committees at: http://appropriations.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=393925 and http://www.appropriations.senate.gov/news/chairwoman-mikulski-statement-fy15-omnibus.