1. Federal STEM Policy this Month

Much has been written, posted, said and tweeted about this month’s biggest federal STEM education policy news—the release of President Donald Trump’s first detailed budget request. In case you missed it, the news for STEM education and federal research programs isn’t great. If the White House had its way, there would be less of an explicit emphasis on STEM education at the Department of Education, less spent on the work of the National Science Foundation, cuts seen at the National Institutes of Health and the elimination of a number of treasured education programs at research agencies across the federal government. In the category of “better news”, the Congress had already conveyed to the White House that it won’t be taking many of its suggestions on education spending, and just before the House and Senate left town for the Memorial Day recess, agency leaders, including Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, faced tough questions and criticism from Republicans and Democrats as they defended the President’s spending wish list.

The budget request isn’t the only activity (or lack thereof) that is frustrating the STEM education and research communities. The President has been slow to staff up the Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) at the White House, even though countless organizations wrote urging him to do so as part of their transition letters sent at the beginning of the year. Several Democratic Members of the House Science, Space and Technology Committee joined in that call in sending a letter that pointed to what they consider to be the President’s reliance on “dubious” news sources and noting that the establishment of a strong OSTP could help him better vet his sources. The letter says, in part, “If you appoint a qualified OSTP Director, you will have a reliable source of policy advice for matters related to science and technology, which forms the bedrock of our national security and economic power.” The research community followed suit later in the month by signing a letter arguing for a strong OSTP that won dozens of organizational endorsements, saying, in part, “…OSTP has been directly involved in the response to the Zika outbreak; promoting cybersecurity; addressing U.S. infrastructure needs with geospatial data; combatting antibiotic resistance; developing a robust U.S. space policy; and supporting advanced manufacturing. Given the many challenges facing our nation, your Administration would greatly benefit from a cadre of experts advising on these topics and others.” No response to either missive yet.
When Congress returns to Washington, DC, the week of June 5th, they will be gauging how much work might get done before this year’s August recess. They will only have the week of the 4th of July off between now and the end of July, but still have health care policy, tax reform, the appropriations process, and perhaps an infrastructure package to consider at the White House’s behest. There’s even talk of a vote on increasing the debt ceiling before the August recess. Those are all big, complex policies that need considerable effort and cooperation to move. It’s no wonder the President is wishing that the Senate only needed 51 votes to get anything (or is it everything?) done.

2. STEM Tidbits

HOUSE AND SENATE INTRODUCE LEGISLATION TO BROADEN STEM DIVERSITY
On May 25th, Representative Eddie Bernice Johnson (D-TX), the Ranking Member of the House Science, Space, and Technology Committee, introduced H.R. 2653, the STEM Opportunities Act of 2017. The legislation is similar to legislation she has introduced in several previous Congresses. Johnson said, “The need for full engagement in STEM by women and underrepresented minorities goes beyond enabling individuals to fulfill their dreams of becoming a scientist. Our economic future relies on what we do now to nurture the STEM talent that will be necessary to meet the demands of an increasingly technological and knowledge-based economy.” The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that STEM employment is the fastest growing sector, with computer science and engineering jobs among the fastest growing STEM occupations. Johnson further stated, “We are seventeen years into the 21st century and the demographics of the STEM workforce do not reflect the diversity of the nation. In 2015, women earned only 19 percent of bachelor’s degrees in engineering and 18 percent in computer science. Black and Hispanic students are similarly underrepresented in these fields at the undergraduate level, and the problem is even more pronounced in STEM faculty. Women hold only 23 percent of all tenured and tenure-track positions, while Black and Hispanic faculty combined hold a dismal 6.4 percent of these positions.” The proposed legislation would require federal agencies that fund scientific research to collect more comprehensive demographic data on the recipients of federal research awards and on STEM faculty at U.S. universities; promote data-driven research on the participation and trajectories of women and underrepresented minorities in STEM; develop, through the Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP), consistent federal policies for recipients of federal research awards who have caregiving responsibilities, including care for a newborn or newly adopted child, and consistent federal guidance to grant reviewers and program officers on best practices to minimize the effects of implicit bias in the review of federal research grants; and require the National Science Foundation (NSF) to develop and disseminate guidance to universities to aid them in identifying any cultural and institutional barriers limiting the recruitment, retention, and achievement of women and minorities in research careers and developing and implementing current best practices for reducing such barriers. Senator Mazie Hirono (D-HI) introduced a companion bill to the STEM Opportunities Act in the Senate. For more information, please go here.

TRUMP’S FY 2018 BUDGET MAKES SIGNIFICANT CUTS TO STEM AND RESEARCH
On May 23rd, President Trump released his first detailed budget request for the nation. The Fiscal Year (FY) 2018 budget proposal, titled, “A New Foundation for American Greatness,” seeks roughly $3.6 trillion in federal spending cuts over the next 10 years. Overall, the Department of Education (ED) would be cut by roughly 14 percent and the President is requesting deep reductions in science and technology research funding. Specifically, the administration’s request
calls for the termination of many research-related programs, such as the Department of Energy's Advanced Research Project Agency - Energy (ARPA-E) and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) grant and education program, slashing the entire $262 million it received in 2017. Although it was not singled out in the President’s “skinny budget” released in March, the National Science Foundation (NSF) would be trimmed by 11 percent, or approximately $776 million. Speaking at the White House budget briefing, Office of Management and Budget Director Mick Mulvaney said, “The National Science Foundation last year used your taxpayer money to fund a climate change musical,” suggesting wasteful spending at the Foundation. Additionally, the administration proposed eliminating the Department of Agriculture’s Rural Economic Development Program, which shares the purpose of developing an implementation plan for increasing access to education in the fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) in rural communities. The National Aeronautics and Space Administration’s Office of Education would also be eliminated. The plan also ignores momentum from the previous Administration behind the spread of computer science education. Ultimately, it will be up to the House and Senate to decide which proposals make it into final spending bills. With the long, drawn out FY 2017 process only recently concluded, Congress is eager to get the FY 2018 budget and appropriations bills moving along. As evidenced by the FY 2017 Omnibus, Congress is willing to defy the Administration’s priorities. However, Republican control in Congress provides a unique opportunity for a significant reduction in spending. For more information about the budget proposal, go here.

ED AND WORKFORCE COMMITTEE PASSES CTE LEGISLATION
On May 4th, Members of the House Committee on Education and the Workforce introduced the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act, bipartisan legislation to strengthen and improve career and technical education (CTE). K-12 STEM education programs rely on this program and how local districts use the associated funds in developing curriculum that convey STEM knowledge and skills. Representatives Glenn “GT” Thompson (R-PA) and Raja Krishnamoorthi (D-IL) introduced the bill to reauthorize the law for the first time since 2006. The proposal is largely identical to legislation the House of Representatives passed in September 2016 by an overwhelming vote of 405 to 5. The bill maintains many of the same contours of last year’s proposed legislation, including empowering local leaders, improving alignment with in-demand jobs, increasing transparency and accountability, and ensuring a limited federal role. In a statement, Thompson said the legislation was “a well-engineered, bipartisan reauthorization aimed at permanently closing our nation's skills gap,” while Krishnamoorthi said the training programs funded under the bill “will help hardworking families pursue more fulfilling futures while also supporting our nation's continued leadership in a global economy.” Representative Virginia Foxx (R-NC), Chairwoman of the House Education Committee, and Representative Bobby Scott (D-VA) the Ranking Member, also praised the bill. Some of the key changes in this bill include provisions that states must set performance targets based on the process outlined in their state plans and that the Secretary of Education has 120 days to review the plans as opposed to 90. The House Education Committee held a markup of the bill on May 17th and passed it unanimously out of Committee. Although the House passed a Perkins bill last year, the reauthorization push got bogged down in the Senate, where Democrats and Republicans couldn't agree on how much to limit the authority of the education secretary in any new Perkins Act. It's unclear what issues might slow Senate consideration of the matter this year, as staff on that side of the Capitol have been consumed with health care, cabinet nominations, and, at least for Senator Lamar Alexander’s (R-TN) staff, supporting new Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos. For more information, please go here.

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3. Announcements, News, and other Notable Updates

The Engineers of the Future Will Not Resemble the Engineers of the Past

Moving Beyond Meatballs: IKEA Wants To Be An Incubator for Food Innovation
Quartz (May 25, 2017)

Perkins Reauthorization: An Opportunity to Address CTE Education Teacher Shortages
Learning Policy Institute (May 23, 2017)

No Sign of EdTech in ED’s Full Federal Budget Proposal
EdSurge (May 23, 2017)

STEM Education Coalition Policy Forum Hosts Hill Briefing
STEM Education Coalition (May 11, 2017)

4. Upcoming Deadlines and Events

June Science Policy Happy Hour
Date: June 8th, 2017

Toshiba/NSTA ExploraVision Science Fair
Date: June 9th, 2017

American Geosciences Institute Briefing on Geosciences and Infrastructure
Date: June 12th, 2017

AAAS Lecture: Joining Forces to Protect the Future of Agriculture and the Planet
Date: June 15th, 2017

5. About WPLLC

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