President Signs WIOA, White House Releases Job Training Plan

On July 22, President Obama signed the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) into law, marking the end of an 11-year Workforce Investment Act reauthorization process. AACC supported this bipartisan legislation, which earlier this summer passed Congress by overwhelming margins. Attention now turns to the implementation phase and the regulatory process to ensure that community colleges and students are well served by the new act.

In his State of the Union Address, President Obama announced that Vice President Biden would engage in a review of federal job training programs with an eye towards better aligning them and ensuring that they are “job-driven.” The administration released the results of that review on July 22, including a number of initiatives that were already underway in the form of existing programs, and several of the reforms outlined in the document will be put in place by the WIOA.

The plan establishes a checklist of elements that federal agencies will seek to encourage or require of the education and job training programs that they administer. It includes items such as engaging employers, measuring results, and ensuring that various programs are better connected. The administration notes that this checklist played a role in $950 million in grants to be awarded this year (including round 4 of the TAACCCT grants) and $1.4 billion in grants to be awarded by various agencies in 2015. The checklist also will be incorporated into economic development and manufacturing extension programs, as well as shared with governors.

The U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), in partnership with the Department of Commerce, will establish a new Center for Workforce and Industry Partnerships, which will champion regional partnerships. DOL also will be creating a business engagement metric for all WIOA-funded programs, and adult education programs will need to address how they will teach “employability skills.” The document also notes that WIOA-funded job training programs will be required to display outcomes in a standard “scorecard” format, and that DOL does not plan to offer waivers to WIOA’s requirements in this area, as it had often done in the past. The scorecard requirements are embedded in WIOA itself.

A number of pilot programs were announced, including Department of Education experimental sites to explore student aid eligibility for competency-based and shorter term training programs, and prior learning assessment, which were originally put forward last year as part of the president’s college affordability proposals. The administration’s ongoing focus on getting the long-term unemployed back to work and expanding apprenticeship programs also will be addressed.

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA)

AACC is pleased that the new statute incorporates many of the provisions offered by the Senate HELP Committee in the bipartisan WIA bill it approved last year. Positive features for community colleges include
• Continued community college representation on local workforce development boards.
• Increased opportunity to fund training services via contracts between training providers and local workforce development boards.
• Improved performance accountability metrics that better account for WIA participants in longer-term education programs.
• The elimination of the “sequence of services” that prevented participants from entering directly into training in many areas.
• Emphasis on regional planning and service delivery, and on practices such as career pathways and sector strategies.
• An increased focus on the transition to postsecondary education for adult basic education students, including new provisions to facilitate the integrated delivery of ABE and occupational education.

The new act poses some challenges. Among them

• A state infrastructure funding mechanism that may divert partner funds into WIA infrastructure support.
• Eligible trainer provider reporting requirements that may still require reporting of employment and earnings information for non-WIA participant students.
• No authorization for a dedicated community college program, such as the Community-Based Job Training Grants.
• Optional, but not mandatory, representation of community colleges on state workforce development boards in most states.