

# THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

## Archives

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### Lobbying to Protect Student Aid

*By Jim Zook*

Washington, D.C. -- Three thousand miles away from their campuses, seven Oregon student leaders got a lesson in politics last week from the head of their Congressional delegation, Sen. Mark Hatfield.

The students called on the courtly chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee to enlist his help in protecting student-aid programs from conservative attacks on federal spending.

Their visit was part of the United States Student Association's National Lobby Day. Their message: Students cannot afford the cost of a college education without federal assistance.

"We wanted to bring to you what students were talking about and what their concerns are, especially this year because everybody is much more tense about what's been happening in D.C.," said Jennifer Williamson, federal-affairs coordinator for the student government at the University of Oregon. "People are starting to get scared."

The Senator told the students that he, too, wanted to safeguard student aid. Then he told them what he would do, and why that may necessitate cutting those programs in order to avoid their total elimination.

"It's easy for you to say, 'Stand your ground,' which I admit to you I will do," said Senator Hatfield, who earlier this month had been the lone Senate Republican to vote against a proposed Constitutional amendment to require a balanced federal budget. "But the answer isn't that easy because, oftentimes, my friends, truth is found in shades of gray and not just either/or situations. I can tell you today that you won't like what happens, what the end product is. You will not like it."

Faced with proposals to cut billions in federal support provided for them, students are organizing in opposition.

Campaigns aimed at Capitol Hill are generating thousands of letters and telephone calls voicing support for student-aid programs. Students in Boston, New York, and Providence staged regional rallies last week. Work-study students at the University of Vermont are organizing a one-day work stoppage to illustrate the contributions they make to university operations.

"Our lobbying day was a good indication showing that students are working very hard on this issue," said Laura McClintock, legislative director of the United States Student Association. "We have a lot of sustained grassroots work going on, and we are now working to figure out what our next huge event will be."

On some campuses, administrators are encouraging the student activism. The financial-aid office at the University of Evansville coordinated a letter-writing campaign last month aimed at Indiana's Congressional delegation. Public- and private-college presidents in Maine issued a rare joint statement in opposition to the proposed cuts.

A big push for publicity will come this week, when groups at more than 150 colleges plan to hold rallies for a "National Day of Action." The day was set by the University Conversion Project, a Boston-based student organization.

"The first goal is to increase national visibility for student opposition to the cuts and to the House Republican agenda in general," said Jeremy Smith, a spokesman for the project. "The second goal is long-term coalition building, to oppose this agenda of social underdevelopment. The third thing is to shake student apathy generally."

All the lobbying and protest activity is prompted by fears of legislation already moving in Congress, and more just around the corner. In general, the protests have been prompted by Republican calls to focus on deficit reduction even if it causes pain for beneficiaries of such social programs as student aid.

Students are anxious to block the enactment of proposed spending rollbacks -- known as rescissions -- for the current federal fiscal year, which runs through September 30. Earlier this month, the House of Representatives' rescission bill included the elimination of the \$63.4-million State Student Incentive Grants Program and of financing for several graduate fellowship programs, all designated for academic 1995-96.

The day after the student meeting, Senator Hatfield said that the Senate rescission legislation now being drawn up would not include the cuts for State Student Incentive Grants. The Senate is expected to debate that bill this week.

More serious threats to federal-aid dollars loom in coming years. Republican leaders of the Congressional budget committees are preparing a seven-year budget plan that aims to balance the federal budget by 2002. It is expected to accomplish that goal through severe cuts in such domestic programs as student aid.

Among the leading candidates for cuts is the interest subsidy that is paid on student loans while borrowers are still attending college -- an estimated cost to the federal government of \$9.56-billion over the next five years. If it is shifted to students, the expense would total much more, as interest that compounds over the life of each student loan.

In coming years, Senator Hatfield said, the best-case scenario that he can envision is a maintenance of current financing levels for student aid.

"We cannot make very easy predictions for the future until we get the budget resolution," said the Senator, who taught political science at Willamette University before entering public office. "If they get into a massive tax-reduction program, then they will reduce the discretionary programs to offset the loss of revenue, and that will have a tremendous impact."

The students who visited Capitol Hill last week hoped to personalize the scope of that impact by telling how the cuts would affect their ability to pay tuition. Some said they wondered whether members of Congress -- particularly House Republicans,

more than half of whom are in their first or second terms -- understand the significance of the proposed cuts.

"I have a number of friends looking to teach or do social work -- community-based types of work, things that build rather than take away," said Kirti Shastri, a junior at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. "For them, there is a real issue of accruing a lot of interest on top of their debts."

As is the case with most national student movements, the message coming from the body of student activists is somewhat diffuse. Much of the campus-level activism is organized by liberal groups opposed to most of the legislative agenda drawn up by House Republicans. Some student leaders said they recognize that this risks making their student-aid message sound too partisan.

"We've been trying to balance that out," said Ann Ochsendorf, a leader with Wellesley Against the Contract. "Student aid is a bipartisan issue, and we are trying to stress that on campus."