

U.S. Rep. Virginia Foxx: Limit Federal Role in Higher Education

by Joyce Jones, March 9, 2011

As head of the House Education Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Training, expect U.S. Rep. Virginia Foxx, R-N.C., to play a pivotal role in crafting federal policy impacting a wide range of higher education issues. The 21-member subcommittee holds jurisdiction over postsecondary student assistance and employment services, the Higher Education Act, Title IX and science and technology programs, among other issues.

Foxx is no stranger to the world of higher education. She holds an Ed.D. in curriculum and teaching/higher education from the University of North Carolina-Greensboro and is a former community college president. She says the federal government has too much control over higher education, and she would like to explore whether some of that power could be wielded at the state level.

The outspoken lawmaker voted against the Higher Education Act of 2008 and is firmly opposed to the controversial “gainful employment” regulation being proposed by the U.S. Department of Education, saying it unfairly targets for-profit institutions. She sat down with *Diverse* to discuss her vision for the subcommittee, her criticism of the Education Department and the role of the federal government in higher education.

DI: What are your goals and priorities for the subcommittee?

VF: The subcommittee hasn’t met yet and the full committee hasn’t met. I want to wait until we have a full committee meeting for us to talk about what our overall goals and priorities are going to be.

I think that you’ve heard from Speaker of the House John Boehner and other leadership that all committees are going to be very involved with oversight issues in this session, so I expect us to spend a lot of time doing oversight and looking at regulatory issues. Those are two major things that I know we’re going to be involved with but we have not set the priorities yet in terms of which particular issues we’ll address within the broader framework.

DI: You’ve expressed concern about the role of federal funding in higher education and whether tax dollars are being spent wisely in terms of student financial aid. How do you think your subcommittee will tackle the federal loan issue?

VF: In terms of the role of the federal government in education, and higher education in particular, I think we want to look at how much money is being spent at the federal level and for what benefits. I think we should look to see whether the states, if given the opportunity, could spend the money more efficiently and effectively than the federal government does. We have a huge federal bureaucracy and that’s one of the things that I think our committee needs to look at. What is it costing the citizens of this country to have programs run out of the federal government instead of our state governments?

DI: Would you favor cuts in the Pell Grant program, which has almost doubled in the past few years?

VF: We will look at where the cuts need to come in federal spending. I don’t think it’s appropriate for us to say any program is off the table. My understanding from the Speaker is that everything is on the table and that we’ll be looking at every federal expenditure in order to come up with the \$100 billion that we pledged we would cut out of the budget this year.

DI: Would you like the new House majority to repeal the student loan reform bill and restore the Federal

Family Education Loan program?

VF: We haven't established any priorities, so I don't know if that's going to be on the table or not. I think we'll want to look at that program and see what revisions or changes may need to be made.

DI: Do you think the proposed "gainful employment" rule should be applied to all schools?

VF: I think it definitely unfairly targets for-profits. If it is something that makes sense for them, then it makes sense for all of higher education.

I worked at Appalachian State University for 15 years. I was also president of a community college. I was on a school board for 12 years, so I have a lot of background in higher education. You can't target one sector. We have great higher education opportunities in our country, with a wide range of ways for students to continue their education. But you can't make rules for one segment of our educational structure.

All higher education is vocational education because anyone who's going to college is going to college because they want to get a job, ultimately. I don't think it's appropriate to call one segment of education "vocational" and another something else. I don't know anybody going to college or university that doesn't want a job at the end of that time.

DI: The Senate Education Committee has done a lot of investigation into the for-profit sector. Will you hold similar hearings?

VF: I suspect we're going to have some hearings — not just in the for-profit sector, but we'll probably be looking for information on what's happening in the public sector also. For instance, what kind of graduation rates do they have? What's the loan burden when these students get out? I think you have to look at all sides.

DI: What do you think are the biggest challenges facing the higher education sector overall?

VF: Recent research by two sociologists shows very little value added to most of higher education. Students in higher ed don't gain the kinds of skills that they need to continue in the work world. So I think higher education is going to have to prove its worth in the future. It has gotten very expensive, and I think [some people] are already questioning the amount of money that's going into higher education. I think you'll see, as money gets tighter and tighter, people raising the issue of what is the result of their spending and their time commitment. But that's always been an issue, it just may get to be more of one because of the tightness of money and people scrutinizing more and more what's happening as a result of those funds.

DI: Do you think there should be some investigation about why it's so expensive to go to college?

VF: There is some good research that shows the more student aid that's given, the higher the cost of tuition and fees. So it appears that the institutions feel comfortable about raising their prices when federal spending for aid goes up.

DI: A lot of minority-serving institutions receive a good deal of federal funding for programs, particularly to support programs like engineering and research and development. Do you support those programs?

VF: I just think we have to make sure that people can be accountable for the money that is being spent and can show the results they promised to show as a result of the spending, whatever institution it is.

DI: Do you think that the Department of Education should have less power over higher education?

VF: I have a philosophical belief that the federal government should basically not be involved in higher education. The Constitution is very clear. The founders said if it wasn't given as a responsibility of the federal government then it's left to the states or the individuals. So far, I haven't been able to find where education is a responsibility of the federal government. So, I think we have to look at that, but we have to look at lots of other things that the federal government does that it wasn't assigned to do and see if it can be done better at the state and local level.