

Obama's higher ed stance criticized by N.C. representatives

By Benji Schwartz | The Daily Tar Heel

Reps. Virginia Foxx (R-N.C.) and John Kline (R-Minn.) criticized President Barack Obama's stance on using executive orders for higher education policy in a joint letter released last week.

The pair, both leaders in the House of Representatives' education committee, decried a statement Obama made during a higher education summit last month .

"I've got a pen to take executive actions where Congress won't, and I've got a telephone to rally folks around the country on this mission," Obama said.

Foxx and Kline said this signaled a deepening conflict between Congress and the executive branch and an overreach of presidential power.

The representatives further said they had been hoping to create the legislation through bipartisan agreement in Congress as well as partnership with the administration.

"The president needs to work with Congress so that we can bring the higher education community together and find common ground as we reauthorize the Higher Education Act this year," Foxx said in a statement. "Unfortunately, we are off to a difficult start.

"The president's repeated threats to circumvent Congress and the failure of his Department of Education to submit any plan or goals for the reauthorization are worrisome indicators."

George Leef, the director of research at the Pope Center, a right-leaning education policy think tank in Raleigh, said he had never heard of such a clash between the president and Congress on higher education before.

"I believe this is unprecedented," Leef said. "In the past, the president suggested higher ed policies that he would like and Congress then debated, and often the end product was largely what the president wanted. We are now in uncharted waters."

Neal McCluskey, the associate director for the Center of Educational Freedom at the libertarian Cato Institute, said executive orders in terms of education were typically reserved for K-12 education rather than higher education.

“I think this is part of the broader debate over what the president said at the State of the Union, that he’d use executive action if the Congress doesn’t do what he wants,” McCluskey said.

“It keeps action from being taken in higher education. The Higher Education Act is I think maybe a year overdue, and that’s nothing for Washington at this point.”

The representatives further requested a briefing on the president’s future plans to use executive orders in higher education.

Both Leef and McCluskey agreed this was a completely unprecedented move on the parts of the representatives.

Leef said this had to do more with the unprecedented nature of Obama’s policy, while McCluskey attributed this to the structure of the U.S. government.

“Congress is constantly asking for briefings calling executive officials to testify,” McCluskey said.

“I don’t think there is anything out of the ordinary about this, and that it’s really how the government is supposed to work with equal branches checking each other.”