Testimony of

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Before the
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Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on the Interior and Environment

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Dear Chairman Moran and Ranking Member Simpson:

On behalf of the Association of American Universities (AAU), an organization of 60 leading U.S. public and private research universities, I appreciate the opportunity to testify before you today on the FY2010 budget of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). The Endowment is the single most important source of federal support for humanities research and humanities public education. We believe that the nation would benefit from a significant funding increase for the NEH, in part as a complement to the federal investment in science and engineering research. It is through the humanities that we can better understand and address the social, economic, and political changes associated with technological development and globalization. We also believe that as teachers and supporters of the humanities, we have an obligation and an opportunity to support through history, literature, and language a culture of tolerance and civility, which is greatly needed today. NEH strengthens and benefits the nation by promoting excellence in the humanities and conveying the lessons of history to all Americans.

We believe that our country’s ability to meet the complex changes of today and tomorrow requires a renewed commitment to the humanities. AAU supports $204 million in program funds for the NEH in FY11, including $144 million for national programs (an increase of $44.4 million above FY10) and $60 million for the federal/state partnership (an increase of $19.6 million above FY10). We strongly oppose the $7.2 million in cuts the Administration has proposed for NEH programs in FY11.

The History of AAU and the Humanities

AAU universities are devoted to maintaining a system of high-quality academic research and education in a wide range of fields at the undergraduate, graduate, and professional levels. Our member universities perform about 60 percent of federally funded university-based scientific and engineering research. But our schools also are leaders in humanities through their support of academic departments, public performance and lecture facilities, museums, and centers. For our institutions, the humanities are both subjects of research and a critical element of undergraduate and graduate education. AAU institutions use NEH grants for research and scholarship that help preserve the nation’s diverse heritage, educate the next generation of Americans, and bring the humanities to the wider public.

For example, the University of Virginia currently has two long-standing NEH-supported projects: The Papers of George Washington, a comprehensive edition of Washington’s correspondence, and The Papers of James Madison, a project to publish annotated volumes of Madison’s correspondence and writings. Madison is the Virginia statesman most remembered for his public service as “Father of the Constitution” and as fourth president of the United States.

Indeed, AAU institutions are engaged in a wide range of activities that focus attention on the benefits of a humanities education. AAU’s 2004 report, Reinvigorating the Humanities: Enhancing Research and Education on Campus and Beyond, not only called for university presidents and chancellors to give increased attention to the humanities but also provided an inventory of exciting campus projects and programs around the country. As a follow-up to the 2004 report, AAU encouraged its members to convene campus roundtable discussions on emerging trends and best practices in the humanities. While many institutions had been actively engaged in such discussions for some time, the AAU report provided a new focal point for the deliberations among campus constituencies. These campus efforts culminated in a national convocation with the American Council of Learned Societies in 2006, which brought together university, association, federal agency, and congressional leaders to discuss building
an action agenda for the humanities in academic and national life. More recently, AAU assembled a small group of provosts and graduate deans to discuss how academic institutions and the Endowment might better support humanities graduate students and faculty. These discussions have helped to shape our funding priorities, including a new graduate education program to facilitate greater interaction among humanities graduate students and faculty.

Restoration of NEH Funds to Support Competitive Programs

The President’s proposed FY11 budget would cut the Endowment’s resources at a time when the agency is operating at only about one-third of the capacity it had in 1979, which in inflation-adjusted dollars would amount to $429.2 million today. In the 1980s, the agency sustained some of the most severe funding reductions of any federal agency. In 1994, the NEH budget was cut by 41.5% from the previous year. Over time, the combined impact of budget cuts and inflation has reduced the number, diversity, and buying power of grants provided by the NEH. It is worth noting that the NEH received no funding in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.

The President’s FY11 request would cut funds for national programs by $5.3 million (5.7%) below FY10. The relatively small amount of money saved by the proposed cuts would contribute little to overall budget savings but would have a serious impact on the Endowment’s ability to support humanities research and education. NEH application rates already demonstrate significant unmet need. In FY09, the NEH received 4,366 competitive grant applications representing more than $402 million in requested funds. But the Endowment was able to fund less than 17 percent of these peer-reviewed project proposals.

While universities have tried to close some of this funding gap with their own funds, it is increasingly difficult for them to do so. Public and private colleges and universities across the country continue to feel the effects of the recent economic recession, including budget cuts, hiring freezes, staff layoffs, course reductions and more. Institutions are struggling to maintain continued access to high-quality programs, which is particularly evident in the humanities disciplines. As recently reported by the National Governors’ Association, states face an $18.8 billion budget gap in FY10 which many states will address, in part, by making further reductions in higher education. Beyond significant declines in state funding, colleges and universities are in the midst of a perfect storm of decreased endowment values, tightened credit, declining private contributions from individuals and corporations, increased student financial need, and reduced tuition revenue. Despite the loss of revenue, colleges and universities have worked to increase their aid to students in order to preserve student access. AAU members alone provided almost $5 billion in student aid last year. We cannot assume that higher education can continue to compensate for a lack of growth in federal funds for the humanities.

In addition, foundation support for the humanities has slipped during the past decade. Foundation assets are down about 22%, with giving down about 10%. This is a larger dip than in previous recessions. The humanities community is concerned that not only is overall foundation support going down, but that the share of foundation support for the humanities also is dropping. Moreover, there has been a long-term shift among foundations away from funding for scholarship and core disciplines toward funding for public programming. These funding trends are of particular concern to AAU institutions because unmet need is forcing humanities students (particularly graduate students) to assume growing debt.

AAU Funding Priorities for the NEH
The humanities community’s FY11 request of $204 million in program funds for NEH represents an important step in restoring the Endowment to its historic funding levels. This request would support an increase of $144 million for national programs, including $36.9 million to increase the award rate for seriously underfunded grant competitions and $7.5 million for a new, competitively awarded graduate student-faculty program. National programs are our first priority, representing the pool of funds that support peer-reviewed, competitive grant opportunities for a wide range of educational institutions, non-profit organizations, and individual scholars around the country. They encompass NEH core programs, divisions, and special initiatives. These areas include research, education, preservation & access, challenge grants, public programs, the Office of Digital Humanities, We the People, and Bridging Cultures.

Within the education division, AAU is particularly supportive of the Summer Seminars and Institutes, which fund national faculty development programs that provide a critical forum for leading scholars and faculty to deepen their knowledge of current scholarship. Similarly, Faculty Humanities Workshops support local and regional professional development programs that allow faculty and scholars to engage in collaborative study. Within the research division, several programs, including Summer Stipends and Fellowships, support individuals or teams of two or more scholars (not including graduate students) pursuing advanced research that will contribute to scholarly knowledge or to the public’s understanding of the humanities.

One of the problems that humanities researchers and scholars face is that the reinterpretation of history and other scholarly work that often define the work of humanists do not fit the traditional concept of “research,” as we think of it in the science and engineering disciplines. AAU is working with others in the humanities community to find ways to better communicate how research in the humanities differs from research in the sciences, but is still essential to addressing many of today’s challenges.

The second priority for AAU is a new competitively awarded graduate student-faculty program. We have engaged in extensive discussions during the past two years with the White House, the Office of Management and Budget, the NEH, and Congress (particularly the House Humanities Caucus Co-Chairs) and believe that we have support, particularly with the leadership of the Endowment, for such a program. It would simultaneously expand scholarship in key areas of inquiry, support the education of graduate students in the conduct of research, and bring faculty and graduate students together in collaborative arrangements that have long characterized the sciences. In the sciences, such collaborations foster creativity by combining the knowledge and experience of faculty with the energy and creativity of graduate students. The benefits of faculty mentorship, early and in-depth engagement of graduate students in research, and the enrichment of scholarly endeavors by the close interaction of faculty and graduate students have been all too lacking in the humanities.

While we are flexible as to how the program should be structured, our initial proposal is a national competitive program in which proposals from universities would be judged on the scholarly inquiry to be conducted; the manner in which the proposed research topic would be enhanced by faculty-supervised graduate student research; the intellectual, social, or cultural significance of the research; the contribution of the research to interdisciplinary research; and the plans to communicate the research within and beyond the academic community. We believe that the first step should be internal competitions within institutions, with each university selecting which proposals should be submitted to the NEH national competition. The institutional proposals might involve a team of one
faculty member and one graduate student, or two or more faculty members working with several graduate students on an interdisciplinary topic.

This new program would build on the Endowment’s decision to allow graduate students to participate in the NEH summer seminars, as the humanities community requested. Still, the NEH does not currently support graduate research in the humanities. While the National Institutes of Health, the National Science Foundation, the Departments of Defense and Energy, and the National Aeronautics and Science Administration, have graduate education components to complement their university-based research, the NEH stands as one of the few federal agencies that does not support or train the next generation of researchers or support collaboration between students and faculty. The Endowment once funded a small dissertation fellowship program, but the program was de-funded when the agency sustained significant budget cuts in the mid-1990s.

Many details of the proposed program remain to be worked out, but we believe that NEH is uniquely positioned to promote collaboration between faculty and graduate students in a manner that both enriches humanities scholarship and helps to supply our nation with the talented and knowledgeable individuals who will contribute to a culturally competent workforce. This is a two for one in a single program. We believe it is a vital element in sustaining the pipeline of young humanities researchers and scholars.

The third priority for AAU is improved humanities data collection. AAU supports the Administration’s FY11 budget language citing the NEH’s intentions to “enter into a partnership with the American Academy of Arts and Sciences…to sustain and extend AAAS’s developmental work on the Humanities Indicators Project.” The project, which is responsive to NEH’s legislative mandate to develop a system of national information and data collection, is making a wide range of humanities data available to researchers, educators, and the general public. These data will equip policymakers and institutional administrators with statistical tools to help inform decision-making about K-12, higher education, the humanities workforce, and other areas of concern to the humanities community.

AAU encourages you to consider the importance of the humanities in our society today. NEH helps colleges and universities around the country ensure that the humanities remain central to their missions and to the cultural life of the nation. In its role as the largest federal supporter of the humanities, the NEH broadens public awareness of and participation in the humanities through teaching, scholarship, and research.

AAU, as part of the larger humanities advocacy community, supports a significant increase in the Endowment’s budget to enable the agency to more broadly support the research and education programs our nation needs to better understand an increasingly complex world. In addition, we believe that Congress has a unique opportunity to support a new program to facilitate more interaction between students and faculty in the humanities. We look forward to discussing the details of such a program as you develop the FY11 Interior Appropriations Bill.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to testify today and I welcome any questions.