Testimony to the House Appropriations Subcommittee on the Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies on FY12 funding for the National Endowment for the Humanities

Submitted by Robert M. Berdahl, President of the Association of American Universities

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Dear Chairman Simpson, Ranking Member Moran, and Members of the Subcommittee:

On behalf of the Association of American Universities (AAU), an organization of 61 leading U.S. public and private research universities, I appreciate the opportunity to express strong support for the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). AAU urges Congress to continue funding the NEH at the FY10 final funding level of $167.5 million. In particular, we remain committed to maintaining existing funding levels for the core competitive programs within the endowment.

It is important that Congress take steps to reduce federal spending and address the nation’s growing debt. We need to do this in a smart way, allocating money in a manner that gives us the best chance of improving our future. Unfortunately, deficit-reduction efforts have thus far focused almost exclusively on non-security, domestic discretionary spending – which is approximately one-sixth of the budget, yet includes most of the federal government’s priority spending for long-term economic growth and prosperity. Reducing the federal deficit in FY11 and beyond cannot, and should not, fall solely on non-security, domestic discretionary spending. Serious deficit reduction efforts must put the entire federal budget on the table, including entitlements and defense spending, and additional revenues generated through tax reform and measures to improve economic growth. Efforts to reduce the federal deficit in FY11 should not preclude prudent federal spending, such as the core competitive research NEH programs, which will pay dividends into the future.

We believe that there is a legitimate federal role in supporting the humanities as a strategic national priority. Federal support of the humanities complements federal investments in the sciences and engineering. Our nation’s long-term economic success depends on cultivating a broadly-educated workforce ready to compete in a knowledge-based, global economy. The humanities programs funded by the Endowment represent the core fields of knowledge and capacities that enrich individuals, provide a foundation for success in a wide range of careers, undergird our civic institutions, support strategic national interests, and help advance sound public policymaking in addressing the challenges of the 21st century. The high-quality projects supported by the NEH reach millions of Americans each year.

NEH Funding and Core Competitive Programs

For FY12, the President’s budget would cut the Endowment to $146.3 million, a reduction of $21.2 million (12.7 percent) from FY10 levels, with a disproportionate cut of 16 percent for program funds that support the core competitive national grants. These grants represent 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: Research, Education, Preservation & Access, Challenge Grants, Public Programs, The Office of Digital Humanities, and Bridging Cultures.

These highly competitive grants are renowned for their quality. NEH was able to fund only 16 percent of the competitive proposals it received in FY10. Funding erosion for core competitive funds would continue to have a significant impact on the Endowment’s ability to support humanities research and education into the future. Over time, the combined impact of budget cuts and inflation has reduced the number, diversity, and buying power of grants provided by the NEH, directly impacting faculty, researchers, students, and the broader public. This translates into real consequences not only for continuing efforts to understand and highlight our history, culture, and civic values, but also for our economic competitiveness and national security, as our most pressing and complex problems worldwide will not be solved by science alone. In fact, most scientists and engineers believe in the essential role of the humanities in higher education, as their undergraduate and graduate liberal-arts courses amplified their effectiveness later as a scientist or engineer.

It is misleading to assume that colleges and universities or private funding sources will be able to compensate for cut in federal funds. The recent financial crisis and subsequent recession continue to have a significant impact on public and private colleges and universities across the country, including budget cuts, hiring freezes, staff layoffs, course reductions, and more. Institutions are struggling to maintain continued access to high-quality programs, a struggle that is particularly evident in the humanities disciplines.

In addition, foundation support for the humanities has slipped since 2005. Approximately $12.34 billion was raised for arts, culture and the humanities in 2009, a drop of 8.7 percent from 2005. Gifts to arts, culture and humanities organizations comprised only four percent of the total estimated giving in 2009. The humanities community is concerned about not only the overall reduction in foundation support, but also the declining share of foundation giving in the humanities compared to overall giving. In addition, there has been a long-term shift away from funding for scholarship and core disciplines and toward funding for public programming. These funding trends are of particular concern to AAU because of the unmet need and rising debt assumed by humanities students.

Continued Funding Erosion for Core Programs

Within the NEH core competitive programs, AAU is particularly focused on the research and education division. The Summer Seminars and Institutes, which support national faculty development programs in the humanities, are located in the education division. These programs provide a critical forum for leading scholars and faculty to deepen their knowledge of current scholarship in the key fields of the humanities. 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.

With respect to research, one of the problems that humanities researchers and scholars face is that the reinterpretation and other scholarly work that often defines the work of humanists and often culminates in new discoveries, as in the sciences, does not fit the traditional concept of research. AAU is working with the humanities community to find ways to better communicate humanities research and how it both resembles and differs from scientific research. NEH research programs facilitate the transfer of new knowledge among faculty, students, and the broader public.

AAU continues to support efforts to better engage humanities graduate students. The NEH does not currently support graduate research in the humanities. While the National Institutes of Health, National Science Foundation, Department of Defense, Department of Energy, and National Aeronautics and Science Administration, among others, have graduate education components that complement the agencies’ 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. While the NEH did at one time fund a small dissertation fellowship program, it was defunded when the agency was cut significantly in the mid-1990s.

Last year we proposed, in conjunction with the broader humanities community, the creation of a new competitively-awarded, graduate student-faculty program to simultaneously expand scholarship in key areas of inquiry, support the critical education of graduate students in the conduct of research, and bring faculty and graduate students together in the kind of collaborative arrangements that have long characterized the sciences. The new program was designed to build on the Endowment’s 2009 decision to allow graduate students to participate in the NEH summer seminars. We plan to revisit the proposal more formally in future years. We believe that NEH is uniquely positioned to promote a higher level of collaboration between faculty and graduate students in a manner that helps to supply our nation with the talented and knowledgeable individuals who will contribute to a culturally-competent workforce.

**AAU Universities and the Humanities**

As a follow-up to the 2004 report, AAU encouraged its members to convene roundtable discussions on emerging trends and best practices in the humanities. While many institutions had been actively engaged in these discussions for some time, the AAU report provided a 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 the appropriate role for the humanities in meeting today’s challenges.

These discussions continue today both on campuses and at the national level. Several AAU university presidents, for example, will serve as members of the Commission on the Humanities and Social Sciences, which was established recently by the American Academy of the Arts and Sciences, per the bi-partisan request from Senators Lamar Alexander (R-TN) and Mark Warner (D-VA) and Representatives Tom Petri (R-WI) and David Price (D-NC). AAU and its members
look forward to working with the Academy on this effort to identify the top actions that Congress, state governments, universities, foundations, educators, and others can take to maintain national excellence in the humanities and social sciences, and to achieve long-term national goals for our intellectual and economic well-being.

_Bridging Cultures: A Link between the Humanities and National Security_

It is important that the nation recognize the link between the humanities and national security issues, as we strive to improve our armed services’ understanding of the social, cultural, behavioral, and political forces that shape the views of regions of the world of strategic importance to the U.S. Indeed, analysts in the major national intelligence and security agencies are to a great extent humanists and social scientists. As NEH Chairman Jim Leach stated in his address to the College Art Association Centennial Convocation in February 2011, “In public policy, inadequate attention to cultural issues can cost lives as well as money…There are, of course, costs to all public programs, but the cost of not supporting some could be far higher. Just as we need an infrastructure or roads and bridges, we need an infrastructure of ideas. In a splintered society, bridging cultures may be our most difficult challenge.” The FY12 budget would devote $4 million to the Chairman’s _Bridging Cultures_ initiative, designed to renew and reinforce the bridges between the different cultures and viewpoints that are part of the fabric of American life. Beginning in the spring of 2011, eight pilot-project grantees will host regional public forums at venues across the country, focused on the role of civility in our democracy and the history and culture of Muslim societies. AAU applauds the attention on the need for a civil discourse in American life, with the hope that colleges and universities can play a role in facilitating this in the coming years.

**Conclusion**

AAU encourages the Subcommittee to take seriously 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. NEH, as the largest federal supporter of the humanities, broadens public awareness of and participation in the humanities through teaching, scholarship, and research. Along with the larger humanities advocacy community, AAU encourages Congress to continue funding the NEH at the FY10 final funding level of $167.5 million to maintain our nation’s capacity to address complex challenges by advancing an educated and competitive workforce.