July 6, 2011

The Honorable Barack H. Obama  
President of the United States  
The White House  
Washington, DC 20500

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden  
Vice President of the United States  
Eisenhower Executive Office Building  
Washington, DC 20501

The Honorable John Boehner  
Speaker of the House  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi  
Minority Leader  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Harry M. Reid  
Majority Leader  
U.S. Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Mitch McConnell  
Minority Leader  
U.S. Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Mr. President, Mr. Vice President, and Senate and House Leaders:

As you negotiate an increase to the federal debt limit and a framework for future federal spending and revenue levels, we urge you to make student financial aid and research and innovation clear priorities for continued federal support.

Our nation must address budget deficits and the growing debt if we are to remain vibrant, secure, and competitive for the coming decades. We need to do this in a sensible and strategic way that allocates federal resources to areas where there is a clear federal role and that give us the best chance of improving our future.

The report of the National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform made clear that maintaining the nation’s ability to make critical investments must be a goal of any serious deficit-reduction plan. The Commission also recognized what previous generations of federal policymakers wisely decided long ago – the federal government has an essential role to play in supporting education and research, because they are critical to building a stronger economy and a better America.

Economists estimate that half of the growth in the U.S. economy over the past 50 years can be attributed to technological innovation, much of which has its roots in scientific research supported by the National Institutes of Health, the National Science Foundation, the Department of Defense, the Department of Energy, NASA, and other federal agencies. In addition, research and scholarship supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities enriches the lives of our citizens while aiding our understanding of technological and scientific progress as well as broader social and international issues tied to our national economic and security challenges.
Furthermore, as the importance of higher education and the number of students pursuing a postsecondary education continue to grow, sustaining federal student aid – especially the Pell Grant program – is critical. One of the hallmarks of our nation’s higher education enterprise is the principle of access regardless of socioeconomic status. As other nations aggressively build their human capital, we cannot afford to forfeit this principle. Nor can we afford to shortchange the education and training this and future generations will require to perform in increasingly high-skilled occupations.

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 investment portfolio. Reducing the federal deficit cannot and should not fall solely – or even primarily – on non-security domestic discretionary spending. Serious deficit reduction efforts must put the entire federal budget on the table, including defense spending, entitlements, and additional revenues generated through tax reform and measures to improve economic growth. Efforts to reduce the federal deficit should not preclude prudent federal spending that will pay dividends into the future.

Again, we fully recognize the importance of deficit reduction and getting the nation’s debt under control. The wellbeing of future generations of Americans depends on it. Their wellbeing also depends on continued strong support for student financial aid and research and innovation. These are investments that will help produce the economic growth we need and the quality of life those future generations deserve.

Respectfully,

Hunter R. Rawlings III
President
Association of American Universities

cc: House Majority Leader Eric Cantor
    House Majority Whip Kevin McCarthy
    House Minority Whip Steny Hoyer
    Senate Majority Whip Richard Durbin
    Senate Minority Leader Jon Kyl
    William M. Daley, Chief of Staff to the President
    Bruce Reed, Chief of Staff to the Vice President
    Jacob J. Lew, Director, Office of Management and Budget
    Arne Duncan, Secretary of Education
    John P. Holdren, Assistant to the President for Science and Technology and Director, Office of Science and Technology Policy