September 6, 2012

The Honorable Dennis Rehberg
Chair, Labor-HHS Subcommittee
Rayburn House Office Building, 2358B
Washington, DC 20515-6024

The Honorable Rosa DeLauro
Ranking Member, Labor-HHS Subcommittee
Rayburn House Office Building, 2358B
Washington, DC 20515-6024

The Honorable Harold Rogers
Chair, House Appropriations Committee
Capitol Building, H-307
Washington, DC 20515-6015

The Honorable Norman Dicks
Ranking Member, House Appropriations Committee
Capitol Building, H-307
Washington, DC 20515-6015

Dear Chairmen Rehberg and Rogers and Ranking Members DeLauro and Dicks:

On behalf of the Association of American Universities (AAU) and the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU), whose combined memberships include most of the major public and private research universities in the United States, we write to express our opposition to the statutory mandates in the House Labor-HHS appropriations subcommittee bill that would restrict the National Institutes of Health’s (NIH) ability to distribute funding effectively based on the best science and public health.

The extraordinary improvements in health that have resulted from NIH-funded research are a credit to the efficient and competitive award system that is the envy of the world. NIH Institutes and Centers have the flexibility to make the type and size of awards that are best suited to meet current health challenges and scientific opportunities. These award decisions are based on the merit of the science, input from the research community, and health needs of the nation. This allows NIH to respond quickly to emerging infectious diseases, such as SARS or H1N1 influenza, to seek out the best and the brightest individual investigators to foster breakthrough discoveries, and to invest wisely and thoughtfully in the most promising areas of cutting-edge science. If NIH is to continue to fund the highest quality research and the next generation of talented researchers in the most effective manner possible, Congress should not tie the hands of the agency by setting arbitrary boundaries on the number and size of awards, dictating a minimum amount for the Clinical and Translational Science Awards (CTSA), and establishing a minimum number of National Research Service Awards (NRSA).

The bill contains other troubling provisions that we also believe to be harmful to the research enterprise. We strongly object to the proposal to lower the extramural salary cap to Executive Level III. Universities have already had to divert funds to compensate for the previous reduction in the salary limit, and now have less funding for critical activities such as bridge grants to retain talented scientists or start up packages for new young and talented researchers.

In addition, we oppose the language in the bill that prohibits the NIH from using funds "for any economic research programs, projects or activities.” NIH has a long-track record of supporting critical economic
research, particularly related to socioeconomic status and health conditions, which has proven invaluable to improving our nation’s health.

Finally, we do not support the arbitrary ratio of extramural to intramural research funding. While we appreciate the subcommittee’s strong endorsement of the extramural research community, decisions on allocating resources to the research activities supported by NIH should be made by the agency, based on the best available science.

NIH plays an enormous role in our nation’s health and economic security. Additionally, the agency provides the cornerstone of our biodefense and is the foundation of our global dominance in biomedical innovation. Crippling NIH by freezing its funding while at the same time reducing its flexibility with well-intended but ill-conceived mandates will ultimately delay the search for cures and treatments intended to benefit the American people.

Sincerely,

Hunter R. Rawlings III
President
AAU

Peter McPherson
President
APLU