March 14, 2013

Dear Chairman Mikulski and Ranking Member Shelby:

I am writing to express the strong opposition of AAU and its 60 leading U.S. public and private research universities to the Coburn-McCain amendment to the Consolidated and Further Continuing Appropriations Act of 2013.

This amendment would eliminate National Science Foundation (NSF) funding for any studies in the field of political science, diverting a portion to research at the National Cancer Institute in the National Institutes of Health and the remainder to deficit reduction.

The amendment sets up a false dichotomy between medical research and research in the social sciences that we emphatically reject. The arguments for providing additional funds for NIH and specifically for NCI are obviously strong, and we wish Congress were providing more funding in FY13. However, such funding should not and need not come at the expense of political science research. Indeed, this amendment is wrong for a number of reasons.

First, political science research is important to the country. It provides critical information about how democracy works that is useful not only to this country but also to fledgling democracies seeking to make their new forms of government work. As Jonathan Bernstein has pointed out in the Washington Post, Congress and state legislators work very hard to enact legislation that affects our election processes. They deal with issues relating to funding, redistricting, voting rights and obligations, nomination processes, and others. If peer-reviewed academic research can help inform debates over these issues, that alone makes such research worthwhile.

Second, this amendment sets a very bad precedent by simply eliminating funding for an entire area of peer-reviewed research. Such a decision should not be made hastily and without significant consideration. This arbitrary proposal circumvents the Congressional committees of jurisdiction whose responsibility it is to authorize and review NSF’s research activities.

Third, our system of research funding has served this country extremely well, including funding of the social sciences. Congress has wisely left decisions about
specific funding levels of the various disciplines to experts at the individual science agencies who are best able to evaluate research opportunities. This amendment sets a precedent that could only set back that system.

Finally, let me note that at a time when our country ought to be sustaining its investment in research, the Budget Control Act and the subsequent sequester have already taken a huge bite out of research funding. This amendment proposes to reduce research funding even more, taking us further in the wrong direction.

Thank you for your consideration of our views.

Sincerely,

Hunter R. Rawlings III
President