ASSOCIATION OF AMERICAN UNIVERSITIES

July 23, 2013

The Honorable Jay Rockefeller
Chairman
Senate Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable John Thune
Ranking Member
Senate Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Lamar Smith
Chairman
House Science, Space, and Technology Committee
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Eddie Bernice Johnson
Ranking Member
House Science, Space, and Technology Committee
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairmen Rockefeller and Smith and Ranking Members Thune and Johnson:

On behalf of the Association of American Universities (AAU), an association which represents 60 leading public and private research universities in the United States, I am writing to share with you a set of Guiding Principles we hope you will consider as you continue work on the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) Act of 2013.

The research university community has a longstanding, collaborative relationship with NASA that is built on the strong support within NASA for university-based research. While we understand the serious budget constraints faced by the country, we are concerned that NASA is being asked to do too much with too few resources and that our nation’s leadership in space and related capabilities is at risk. In order for NASA to remain the world’s premier space agency, NASA needs: consistent and robust federal funding to support a sustained vision; a balanced portfolio across programs and missions; and a continued commitment to building the next generation NASA workforce.

Guiding Principles for the NASA Authorization Act of 2013

A Sustained Vision and the Funding to Support that Vision – As the world’s premiere space agency, it is imperative that the Administration and Congress work with the National Academies, NASA Advisory Councils, industry, and academia to develop and sustain a strategic vision for the country’s space program, which includes exploration (human and robotic), science, aeronautics, and space technology. Federal funding for NASA has fallen sharply in recent years due to continuing stress on the non-defense discretionary budget and sequestration. As a result, NASA has failed to keep pace in the development and successful completion of exploration, scientific, aeronautical, and space technology missions. This has resulted in a degradation of NASA’s mission and next-generation capabilities. AAU strongly encourages the 113th Congress to consider the recommendations made by the National Academies in Decadal Surveys when making decisions about authorized funding levels for the space agency. Sustained federal funding is critical to America’s future in space.

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A Balanced NASA Portfolio across Programs and Missions – AAU strongly supports the Sense of Congress outlined in the NASA Authorization Act of 2010 section 803 that “a balanced and adequately funded set of activities, consisting of research and analysis grants, technology development, small, medium and large space missions, and suborbital research activities, contributes to a robust and productive science program and serves as a catalyst for innovation and discovery.” AAU has consistently supported this for NASA’s research portfolio—including a balance among exploration, science, aeronautics, and technology. Within Science, NASA must also continue strong support for the earth science, planetary science, heliophysics, and astrophysics divisions, given the interconnected nature of the Earth, Sun, our solar system, and the universe. AAU also supports a balance in the size of missions. In our view, it has always been important to support flagship missions, but not at the expense of medium and small missions—many of which are led by Principal Investigators at AAU universities and play an important role in training America’s next generation workforce.

A Commitment to Building America’s Next Generation Workforce – An essential component for a successful NASA mission is the education and training of young scientists and engineers. These individuals will provide the expertise the U.S. needs to maintain its technological and economic competitiveness and support America’s future activities in space. NASA training and education programs carried out at the nation’s universities produce a double pay-off: the development of instruments, hardware, and software for missions and the training of students who will be tomorrow’s technological and scientific innovators. It is absolutely essential for NASA to remain committed to supporting its undergraduate training programs and graduate fellowships and traineeships. The National Space Grant College and Fellowship program boasts a 91 percent retention rate for its participants in STEM fields and has served as a conduit for engagement for students at over 850 colleges and universities across the country. Likewise, many graduate fellows supported by NASA Mission Directorates reside at AAU institutions and learn from talented faculty who are often leading and supporting NASA missions. AAU supports continued education, outreach, and fellowship and training opportunities at NASA. We also urge Congress to ensure any changes to STEM programs at NASA are made through a transparent and stakeholder-informed process.

Thank you for your leadership and support of NASA, and for your consideration of the Guiding Principles included in this letter. We stand ready to work with you to ensure the nation’s continued leadership in space.

Sincerely,

Hunter R. Rawlings III
President

Cc:
U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation
U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Science, Space and Technology