AAU STATEMENT ON HOUSE COMMITTEE APPROVAL OF FIRST ACT

Following is a statement by the Association of American Universities on approval of the FIRST Act by the House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology, which occurred on May 28.

When the FIRST Act was introduced earlier this year, AAU stated that the bill lacked a vision for the nation’s scientific enterprise. In response to the National Academies’ *Rising Above the Gathering Storm* report, the 2007 and 2010 America COMPETES Acts established a unifying vision of enhancing America’s competitiveness through science and innovation. The FIRST Act as passed by committee this week, while somewhat improved, still lacks this vision and does little to advance science and close our nation’s innovation deficit. We urge the full House either to amend it significantly or to vote it down.

The *guiding principles* for reauthorization of the COMPETES Act endorsed last year by the business, scientific, and higher education communities continue to be our guidepost for assessing this legislation. Unfortunately, the bill continues to conflict with or fall short of these principles in a number of ways.

First, the *guiding principles* call for funding targets for National Science Foundation (NSF) and the National Institutes of Standards and Technology that permit real growth for these agencies. Investing robustly in these research agencies is critical to our future national competitiveness and economic growth. The proposed legislation, however, caps investments in these agencies at levels that fail even to keep pace with inflation, much less keep up with the higher inflation for research costs. On this basis alone, it is clear that the FIRST Act would not help our country confront its innovation deficit, and it clearly would not provide the necessary federal funding to support America’s research enterprise.

In addition, the *guiding principles* say the legislation should support basic scientific research across all scientific disciplines. They read, “Support funding increases without offsets that would force significant and potentially detrimental tradeoffs between one field of science and another.” The FIRST Act, however, would do exactly this, significantly cutting social, behavioral, and economic research at NSF, which is critically important to understanding and solving our nation’s economic, energy, health, and security challenges. It also would cut important geosciences research.

Finally, the *guiding principles* urge Congress to “[r]educe or eliminate unnecessary or duplicative federal regulations and reporting requirements.” Instead, the FIRST Act adds regulations. For example, it imposes new grant conditions that would reduce the flexibility for NSF peer review panels to support scientific proposals from researchers who have received NSF funding for more than five years. These conditions are overly prescriptive and unnecessary, and they strike a blow against the U.S. peer review system, which is based upon the premise that scientists -- not politicians -- are best able to make decisions about which science projects are worthy of funding and which are not.
We appreciate that the committee approved an important amendment offered by Representatives Sensenbrenner and Lofgren that makes the bill’s language on public access to the results of federally funded research far more consistent with the strong process being implemented by the Administration. The original version of the legislation would effectively have doubled the time before the public could freely access such research.

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The Association of American Universities is a nonprofit association of 60 U.S. and two Canadian preeminent public and private research universities. Founded in 1900, AAU focuses on national and institutional issues that are important to research-intensive universities, including funding for research, research and education policy, and graduate and undergraduate education.

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