September 18, 2006

The Honorable Joe Barton
Chairman
House Committee on Energy and Commerce
2125 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC  20515

Dear Mr. Chairman:

This letter follows up on our September 14 meeting, in which I told you that the Association of American Universities (AAU) endorses the National Institutes of Health (NIH) Reform Act of 2006. We support your effort to reauthorize NIH and commend your commitment to strengthening the world’s preeminent biomedical research agency.

AAU’s 60 U.S. public and private research universities perform 60 percent of federally supported university-based research and award more than half of the Ph.D. degrees awarded in the U.S. each year. As such, we are mission partners to NIH, conducting much of the research that gives NIH its well-deserved reputation for cutting-edge and life-enhancing research.

We thank you for your determination to authorize five percent increases in NIH funding for each of the three years of the bill. Your stated intent to champion NIH and secure such increases in the next three years is the single most positive development for NIH since we entered the current pattern of flat or declining appropriations. We look forward to working with you to achieve your objective of sustained NIH funding.

We also wish to express support for the establishment of a "common fund" for high-risk, high-reward biomedical research within NIH. Your legislation builds upon the common fund that NIH Director Elias Zerhouni has advocated and already begun to implement. The common fund will reflect and encourage the interdisciplinary and collaborative nature of today’s biomedical research enterprise. Once the common fund authorized in your bill has achieved the stated goal of comprising five percent of NIH’s budget, we will work with NIH to assess the success of this new funding mechanism.

AAU also supports the creation of an NIH “scientific management review group” to review the agency’s organization and structure. We agree with you that evaluating and reporting on NIH’s research portfolio should ensure that our nation’s significant investment in biomedical research is directed to areas of greatest scientific opportunity and public health need. Your bill also recognizes the critical importance
of nurturing young scientists and supporting and encouraging investigator-initiated research.

In conclusion, I want to express my appreciation for the good faith that you have shown in consulting with AAU and its members in developing this draft. We are especially indebted to your staff, Ms. Cheryl Jaeger and Ms. Katherine Martin, for their accessibility and responsiveness to our suggestions and concerns. We are grateful for your leadership and determination to ensure that NIH continues to excel in supporting medical science—and to see that NIH receives appropriate resources to accomplish its mission.

On a personal note, I appreciated the opportunity to get reacquainted last Thursday, and I hope you will call upon us at AAU as your committee addresses this and other issues affecting research universities in the future.

Sincerely,

Robert M. Berdahl
President