STATEMENT BY AAU EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE
ON SUPPORT FOR THE SOCIAL AND BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES

Following is a statement by the Executive Committee of the Association of American Universities on the importance of the federal investment in research in the social and behavioral sciences.

On behalf of the 62 leading research universities that make up the Association of American Universities, the AAU Executive Committee wishes to express its unequivocal support for federal funding of the social and behavioral sciences.

We make this statement now because of a number of disturbing actions indicating that some in Congress seek to relegate such research to a second-class status in federal research funding by imposing restrictions on it, or worse, barring federal funding of such research entirely.

These actions include a provision in the Consolidated and Further Continuing Appropriations Act of 2013 (P.L. 113-6) that puts new conditions on the funding of political science studies by the National Science Foundation (NSF), a provision proposed in a House subcommittee but not included in P.L. 113-6 that would have barred economic health research by the National Institutes of Health (NIH), and recent communications from Members of Congress which have questioned the value of social science research grants awarded by the NSF and other federal research agencies.

We understand that there are significant constraints on the discretionary funds that support research and education, and we strongly believe that taxpayer dollars used to fund research should be spent wisely. Indeed, AAU has long supported merit-based allocation of federal research funds as the surest means of supporting the best science.

Even in the context of federal budget constraints, we believe that actions by Congress to defund or stigmatize entire disciplines of research would severely cripple, in principle and practice, the federal government’s historically productive commitment to the funding of basic research across all disciplines. The social and behavioral sciences – anthropology, economics, political science, psychology, linguistics, sociology, among others – have been funded by NSF, NIH, the Department of Defense, and other federal agencies to directly support their missions by advancing fundamental new understanding of business and the economy, of human development and behavior, of groups and organizations, of other nations and cultures, and of our democracy and how it can be strengthened. This research has been important to addressing the nation’s
most pressing challenges in areas such as national security, education, commerce, health, energy, crime and public safety, and transportation.

For example, NSF-funded social sciences research has strengthened public safety by helping governments at all levels to prepare for and respond to natural disasters; made possible the development of life-saving kidney transplant exchanges; provided the Federal Communications Commission market-based auction tools for selling the electromagnetic spectrum to communications companies, maximizing both government revenue and economic use of the airwaves; provided the nation’s military with tools for educating personnel on nonverbal communication that is critical for troops working with non-English speaking citizens overseas, and compiled enormously useful longitudinal data in such areas as science, innovation, income and other economic indicators, political participation, health, violence, and social networks.

Insights and innovations from the social and behavioral sciences are no less valuable than discoveries in the physical and life sciences. Moreover, interdisciplinary research engaging the social and behavioral sciences is producing new knowledge and understanding that would not have emerged from research within single disciplines. In fact, many innovations and new technologies, such as touch screen tablets and mobile phones, rely upon knowledge and discoveries from the physical and life sciences combined with insights from the social and behavioral sciences.

The extraordinary success of federal research agencies such as NSF and NIH over the decades has been a result, in significant measure, of Congress providing strong funding of fundamental research across all disciplines based on proven merit-review processes and refraining from a political process of picking winners and losers among grants or disciplines. We urge Congress and the Administration to provide robust funding for federal research agencies without inappropriate restrictions, so that they can continue to fulfill their missions of supporting the full range of scientific research across all disciplines.

The Association of American Universities is an association of 60 U.S. and two Canadian research universities organized to develop and implement effective national and institutional policies supporting research and scholarship, graduate and professional education, undergraduate education, and public service in research universities.