June 16, 2014

The Honorable Barbara Mikulski
The Honorable Richard Shelby
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairwoman Mikulski and Vice Chairman Shelby:

As the United States Senate prepares to debate the FY 2015 Commerce, Justice and Science and related agencies appropriations bill (HR 4660), the Council on Undergraduate Research (CUR) urges you and your colleagues to carefully consider the proposed funding of agencies and programs that support high-quality undergraduate student-faculty collaborative research and scholarship.

Undergraduate research is an inquiry or investigation conducted by an undergraduate student that makes an original intellectual or creative contribution to the discipline. The more than 10,000 members at nearly 1,000 institutions that belong to CUR believe that the best way to capture student interest and create enthusiasm for a discipline is through research in close collaboration with faculty members. Federal investments in research support this endeavor broadly and HR 4660 affects the health and prospects of undergraduate research on campuses nationwide.

While CUR and its colleagues in the research and education advocacy community are encouraged by the modest increases in the bill proposed for the National Science Foundation and, specifically, the Education and Human Resources directorate, we feel that the increases fall short of what the country needs to sustain its innovation economy, particularly as agencies and researchers are still recovering from the devastating effects of sequestration. In addition, discussions of potential efforts to allow Congress to dictate detailed funding levels at the National Science Foundation are troubling. CUR agrees with many other scientific and research organizations that argue that to encourage the most innovative science, the U.S. scientific enterprise must remain insulated from political and ideological pressure. CUR also objects to repeated efforts reduce funding for the National Science Foundation’s (NSF) Social, Behavioral and Economic Sciences (SBE) directorate.

Undergraduate research has been cited by numerous national reports and experts, including the President’s Council of Advisors on Science and Technology, as a powerful strategy for increasing student
retention in degree programs and boosting student graduation rates, particularly for students who sometimes struggle in higher education. Undergraduate research is an effective practice that supports multiple national policy goals for several reasons: (1) it increases students’ level of professional aspiration, (2) it builds core competencies in the skills valued in the workplace and (3) it connects students with mentors.

Business, industry and governmental entities (including defense) are sectors that are increasingly engaged in directing undergraduate education pathways, particularly in the STEM disciplines. Nations vigorously compete and strive to take full advantage of a complex, globally-interconnected economy fueled by bringing research rapidly to market. In this emerging context, undergraduate research has now been officially “discovered,” and touted as a critical element in individual, institutional and national achievement. The science and research supported by HR 4660 are buoyed by the practice. CUR will be working with you and your colleagues in the Senate to ensure that the programs and agencies that support undergraduate research receive adequate funds via the appropriations process.

If you or your staff have any questions about CUR, undergraduate research or federal policies that affect the practice, please call me at 202-783-4810, extension 201, or contact me at eambos@cur.org. Thank you for your attention to these views.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Ambos
Executive Officer

cc: Members of the United States Senate