June 11, 2012

Chairman Tom Harkin
Labor, Health and Human Services and Education Subcommittee
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Ranking Member Richard Shelby
Labor, Health and Human Services and Education Subcommittee
Committee on Appropriations
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairman Harkin and Ranking Member Shelby:

As you and your colleagues consider FY 2013 funding levels for programs at the Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services and Education, the Council on Undergraduate Research (CUR) urges you and your colleagues to adequately invest in a number of 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 nearly 900 institutions and over 7,000 individuals who 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.

The attention being paid science and research at the federal level is exciting. Federal investments in undergraduate research are vital to the future of America, and have a profound impact on local communities. The country’s priorities—developing clean, renewable energy sources, establishing a “green” economy, encouraging innovation, supporting research and discovery to fight disease and improve the country’s health care system—are supported by undergraduate research. Federal spending priorities should recognize the endeavor’s important role in pursuing these goals.

While CUR and its colleagues in the STEM education community would like to see full funding for a number of Department of Education programs, we recognize these challenging fiscal times. We urge you to adequately fund the Institute of Education Sciences (IES), an agency that funds a litany of research studies contributing to large-scale educational evaluations and development. Specifically, the IES National Center of Education Research (NCER) supports a variety of rigorous research opportunities that contribute to increasing student achievement and improving the quality of education provided to students. We urge you and your colleagues to fund the IES at least at the FY2012 Omnibus level of $594 million.

Additionally, federal student aid programs are very important to CUR members. CUR urges you and your colleagues to preserve the integrity and goals of the Pell Grant program. The importance of ensuring access to postsecondary education for thousands of low- and middle-income students nationwide cannot be overstated. The Federal Work Study program was level funded in FY2012, and CUR requests no additional cuts to this student-centered program. Programs like Pell Grants and the Federal Work Study program are instrumental in bringing a broad range of students to the country’s college campuses to obtain a higher education and experience undergraduate research.
Furthermore, the Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program, one of the eight TRIO programs, provides disadvantaged students the opportunity to participate in undergraduate research experiences. The ultimate goal of this program is to increase the attainment of Ph.D. degrees by students from underrepresented segments of society, and undergraduate research experiences provide a pathway to such an academic pursuit. The Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program received a $10 million rescission in FY2012 and CUR requests this program receive an increase in FY2013 to balance such a devastating cut to an instrumental program for disadvantaged student population.

CUR is pleased that you and your colleagues remain committed to supporting the National Institutes of Health (NIH), and CUR and its members are particularly hopeful that adequate funds reach the Institutes’ Research Project Grants, Research Centers, and Research Careers. These programs are the primary mechanism for funding ongoing and new biomedical research. We encourage you to maintain, at a minimum, level funding for these grants, as well as adequate funding for Research Centers and Research Careers sufficient to support much needed biomedical research.

These programs provide crucial to providing high-quality research opportunities at the undergraduate level. Please do not hesitate to contact me at 202.783.4180 or eambos@cur.org, if you or your staff have any questions. Thank you for your attention to these views.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Ambos
Executive Officer

cc: Members of the Senate Labor, HHS and Education Appropriations Subcommittee