April 12, 2010

The Honorable Bart Gordon
Chairman
Committee on Science and Technology
2321 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Gordon:

On behalf of Vanderbilt University, I write to strongly endorse your efforts to reauthorize the America COMPETES Act. This landmark legislation has brought national attention to the importance of federal investments in basic research. In an era of heightened partisanship, the America COMPETES Act stands out as a shining example of bipartisanship and further evidence that support for science and engineering research crosses party lines. Furthermore, the reauthorization of the COMPETES Act would be a fitting capstone to your impressive career, a final reminder that scientific research and STEM education are critical to our innovation economy and our long-term economic competitiveness.

The Rising Above the Gathering Storm report, released by the National Academies and subsequent COMPETES Act of 2007, represented a turning point in America's commitment to ensuring our workforce retains its edge in the global economy. The sustained, steady increases in the budgets for the National Science Foundation, Department of Energy's Office of Science, and National Institutes of Standards and Technology that the legislation authorized are strongly endorsed by the research community, including Vanderbilt.

We urge you to continue that path in this reauthorization; steady, sustained increases in research budgets are critical to institutions such as Vanderbilt who depend on these federal agencies to support the cutting-edge research taking place in our labs. These agencies also support our graduate students who are making decisions about their future career path. Legislation such as the COMPETES Act reinforces to these young researchers that the federal government prioritizes science and engineering research and encourages them to pursue careers in research.

Over the last three years, Vanderbilt has seen its federally funded research budget increase from $351 million in FY 2006 to nearly $425 million in FY 2009. This growth is due in part to the increases in the COMPETES agencies' budgets. Vanderbilt strongly supports many of the new programs that are expected to be reauthorized in the COMPETES Act, including ARPA-E, the energy innovation hubs, and the energy frontier research centers (EFRC). These programs offer our faculty researchers exciting new opportunities for cutting-edge energy research.
We are pleased that Dr. Peter Cummings, the John R. Hall Chair Professor of Chemical Engineering, is a co-PI on an EFRC with Oak Ridge National Lab. ORNL’s EFRC seeks to improve our understanding of how gases and liquids interact with solid surfaces in applications ranging from better batteries to more efficient methods for converting solar and electrical energy into fuel, improved fuel cells, and enhancing the corrosion resistance of materials.

The Vanderbilt Institute of Nanoscale Science and Engineering (VINSE) is also a direct beneficiary of the COMPETES Act. Created in 2002, VINSE brings together faculty from the College of Arts and Science, the School of Engineering, and the Medical Center to discover and utilize nanomaterials and nanoscale phenomena in four major thrust areas: nanobio, nanoscale optics, nanoscience theory, and nanotechnology and new materials. Educational outreach is associated with the NSF funded Vanderbilt-Fisk IGERT program in the nanosciences, as well as the Interdisciplinary Graduate Program in Materials Science. VINSE includes more than 60 graduate students and approximately 20 research associates. In addition to collaborative research that crosses boundaries of academic disciplines within Vanderbilt, VINSE partners with nearby Oak Ridge National Laboratory and Fisk University. Since its creation, VINSE has received approximately $70 million, with over $23 million of that received in the last three years, including $9.7 million from NSF and DOE.

VINSE and Dr. Cummings’ EFRC are but two examples on Vanderbilt’s campus of how the COMPETES Act has fostered new and innovative research enterprises. We look forward to what the reauthorization of the COMPETES Act will mean for our faculty researchers and our students.

Once again, thank you for your leadership on the reauthorization of the America COMPETES Act. Vanderbilt joins with our fellow Tennesseans in commending your unwavering support for STEM education and science and engineering research. We are fortunate to have as one of Tennessee’s representatives someone who is as deeply committed to this effort as you are. The Vanderbilt community looks forward to celebrating the passage of the second America COMPETES Act later this year.

Sincerely,

Nicholas S. Zeppos
Chancellor

cc: Provost and Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs Richard McCarty
Vice Provost for Research Dennis Hall, Dean of the Graduate School
Dean Camilla Benbow, Peabody College of Education and Human Development
Dean Carolyn Dever, College of Arts and Science
Dean Ken Galloway, School of Engineering