Dear Representative Cooper,

Yesterday, House Science & Technology Committee Chairman Bart Gordon introduced a new version of the America COMPETES Act (H.R. 5325) which is on the suspension calendar this morning. As described in a Committee press release, the bill is identical to H.R. 5116 except that it reduces the authorization period from five to three years. Chairman Gordon notes that eliminating the fourth and fifth years of the authorization period in the new bill reduces the total funds authorized by 50 percent.

While Vanderbilt is disappointed to see the authorization length cut from that reported by the Committee, we support H.R. 5325 and urge its passage. We believe that reauthorizing the America COMPETES Act is vital to advancing science and engineering research and STEM education in the United States. The Act provides a framework for bolstering our nation’s commitment to investments in these fields which, in turn, help to ensure our long-term economic competitiveness and create the skilled, high-value jobs necessary to American prosperity.

The reauthorization bill builds upon the 2007 COMPETES Act, which enjoyed strong bipartisan support in both the House and the Senate and was championed by two members of the Tennessee congressional delegation, Chairman Gordon and Senator Alexander. Vanderbilt is extremely grateful for the leadership provided by our delegation for the COMPETES Act and urges strong bipartisan support for its reauthorization.

We recognize that reducing budget deficits and slowing the growth of our national debt are essential to our long-term economic well-being. History has shown that investments in science and education lead to new industries and produce the kind of economic growth that is essential to reducing budget deficits. Businesses never stop investing in their future; neither should our nation.

The urgent global economic challenges so eloquently described in the National Academies’ report, Rising Above the Gathering Storm, have not abated. Other nations – most notably China – are rapidly building greater research capacity and investing strategically in science and technology to advance their international competitiveness. Congressional approval of the COMPETES Act is a signal to the rest of the world that the United States intends to continue to provide global S&T leadership.

H.R. 5325 is not a perfect bill and there are several areas that we hope to improve on as the process moves forward. Of particular concern is the amendment to H.R. 5116 offered by Representative George Miller (D-CA), adopted by the House, and included in H.R. 5325 regarding public universities’ compliance with labor union information requests. While we agree that universities must comply with all lawful requests, we believe it is a serious mistake to ask the federal research agencies to interpret and enforce state labor laws. Using federal legislation to regulate state labor practices would set a bad precedent and could seriously impair the quality of American science. We hope to work with Rep. Miller and House leadership to address this issue in conference.
We believe that the sustained steady increases in research budgets proposed in the America COMPETES Act are both fiscally responsible and critical for institutions like Vanderbilt who depend on these federal agencies to support the cutting edge research taking place in our labs. 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 09. This growth is due in part to the increases in the COMPETES agencies’ budgets.

We are grateful for past bipartisan support of the America COMPETES Act and look forward to its successful reauthorization this year.

Sincerely,

Christina West
Assistant Vice Chancellor for Federal Relations