March 7, 2011

The Honorable Lamar Alexander
455 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Alexander,

We write to express our deep appreciation for your longstanding commitment to making research and education funding a priority within our federal budget, even in times of fiscal downturns. We hope that you and your colleagues will continue to recognize that science and technology are keys to America’s long-term economic prosperity and national security and will ensure these budgets are prioritized as decisions are made regarding the FY 11 appropriations process.

Budget deficits have the potential to cause both short- and long-term damage to the economy. They must be addressed, and we applaud your thoughtful efforts to do so. Federal policymakers must prioritize scarce dollars on programs that provide long-term national benefits, such as science and engineering research and education. Indiscriminate, across-the-board cuts in government spending might reduce the deficit in the short term, but they also would limit our ability to set our economy on a firmer foundation for future growth and economic prosperity. Ultimately, a decline in scientific research funding would lead to lower levels of innovation and competitiveness for years to come. Cutting student aid jeopardizes the ability of thousands of students to attend our universities.

As you well know, Tennessee receives a significant amount of support from agencies such as NIH, NSF and the Departments of Energy, Defense and Education. These funds support both research conducted on our campuses and high-paying jobs for Tennesseans – as faculty, researchers, staff, post-docs, graduate students and even undergraduates. As major employers in Tennessee, our universities have a tremendous economic impact, as employers, educators and trainers of the next generation of scientists, engineers and educators.

Vanderbilt University received over $527 million in federal research funding in the past year. That research has led to dramatic advances in fields as varied as personalized medicine, nanotechnology and effective teaching practices. In 2008, the University of Tennessee’s federal research portfolio, in coordination with UT-Battelle managed Oak Ridge National Laboratory, added more than $4 billion to Tennessee’s state gross domestic product and over 45,000 full-time jobs were supported by DOE operations.

If the cuts proposed in H.R. 1 are enacted, at risk will be millions of dollars in anticipated research funding; the ability to hire new faculty, post-docs and graduate students; and the financial aid packages already in process for next year’s class. We strongly urge you to reject the draconian cuts proposed by H.R. 1 in favor of a Continuing Resolution that recognizes science and education as important federal priorities.

Sincerely,

Nicholas S. Zeppos
Chancellor
Vanderbilt University

Joe DiPietro
President
University of Tennessee