May 10, 2013

The Honorable Eddie Bernice Johnson
Ranking Member
House Committee on Science, Space and Technology
394 Ford House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Ranking Member:

I write on behalf of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) to announce our objection to recent legislative proposals that would add an unnecessary layer of review to the process through which the National Science Foundation (NSF) awards research grants. We thank you for your advocacy thus far in highlighting the problems with such proposals and ask that you continue your support for the funding of research and education projects of high scientific merit. Founded in 1902, the AAA is the primary professional society of anthropologists in the US, with over 12,500 members.

In recent weeks, draft legislation has been circulated by the Chairman of the Committee that would require that the Director of the NSF, prior to making any grant funding award, certify that the research project is “…in the interests of the United States to advance the national health, prosperity or welfare, and to secure the national defense by promoting the progress of science.” Such requirements being placed on the NSF leadership undermine the peer-review process and threaten academic freedom by removing the influence of those best positioned to examine the scientific merit of the thousands of proposals the agency reviews each year. The proposals outlined in the so-called “High Quality Research Act” also threaten to jeopardize much-needed funding for social science research.

Basic research in the social sciences is key to our understanding of individuals and society. Through generous funding form the NSF, anthropology has enhanced scholarly knowledge in the areas of cultural resource protection, environmental sustainability, preservation of languages, child health and development and access to quality healthcare.

Under the proposed legislation, funding for such critical research might be severely restricted or even eliminated. Moreover, the bill, if implemented into law, would prioritize one type of scientific research over another at a time where there are calls for comprehensive and expansive approaches to investigatory and field-work based study.

In a recent speech before the National Academy of Sciences, President Obama noted that his Administration has undertaken efforts in “…promoting the integrity of the scientific process…not just in the physical and life sciences, but also in fields like psychology and anthropology and economics and political science…” and “we’ve got to make sure that we are supporting the idea that they are not subject to politics.” We at the AAA support the President’s approach, and also believe that NSF’s system of support for basic research is based upon excellence, competitive scientific merit, and peer review.
We are grateful for the public support we receive for our research. We appreciate the importance of using taxpayers’ funds wisely, as we are taxpayers too. We are also convinced that there is no adequate substitute for the approach NSF uses in assessing the adequacy of proposed research and its contributions to science and society.

As this bill makes its way through the legislative process, I’d like you to know that the AAA, its membership, staff and leadership are willing to be helpful to you in any way we can to protect NSF and its processes. If you have any questions, comments or concerns about this letter, please contact AAA Director of Public Affairs, Damon Dozier, at (703) 528-1902 or ddozier@aaanet.org.

Sincerely,

Leith Mullings
President, American Anthropological Association

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