Dear President Obama,

Throughout your first term and during the campaign you emphasized the importance of investing in research and guaranteeing that all qualified students can graduate from college without a crushing burden of debt. You said that these investments are essential to the economic prosperity, national security, and overall well-being of the United States.

At the Democratic National Convention in September, you predicted that if students, teachers, parents, and principals worked together, and government provided assistance, our country would “out-educate and out-compete any nation on earth.” ([http://www.npr.org/2012/09/06/160713941/transcript-president-obamas-convention-speech](http://www.npr.org/2012/09/06/160713941/transcript-president-obamas-convention-speech))

And on election night, you said, “Despite our differences, many of us share hopes for America’s future. We want our kids to grow up in a country where they have access to the best schools and the best teachers, a country that lives up to its legacy as the global leader in technology and innovation, with all the good jobs and new businesses that follow.” ([http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2012/11/07/transcript-obamas-victory-speech/](http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2012/11/07/transcript-obamas-victory-speech/))

We agree, of course, that education—and educated citizens—are essential for American society to successfully meet the challenges of the 21st century. And we appreciate the initiatives you pursued during your first term.

Building on your record, your priorities, and, most important, the needs of our nation, we propose a higher education agenda for your consideration. We realize that in doing so we risk being dismissed as self-serving spendthrifts, but do not apologize for advocating targeted investments that will generate substantial dividends, in the context of effective cost containment in higher education:

1) Improve access to higher education by maintaining and extending American Opportunity Tax Credits and Pell Grants. Many public and private colleges and universities are doing their part, allocating ever larger sums from their budgets for financial aid. We must and will do more, as you have urged, to restructure and reduce administrative costs to make higher education more affordable. But on our own, we cannot guarantee access to all academically qualified students from economically disadvantaged families. ([http://money.cnn.com/2012/09/28/pf/college/student-loan-defaults](http://money.cnn.com/2012/09/28/pf/college/student-loan-defaults))
2) Push for passage of the DREAM Act, which will give the undocumented children of illegal aliens, some of whom are among America's best and brightest students, the chance to become productive (tax-paying) citizens by dint of their own efforts in college or the military.

3) Work with Congress and governors to assist public colleges and universities, many of which have been devastated by reductions in state appropriations and forced to impose substantial increases in tuition.

4) Use the presidential bully pulpit to encourage collaborative partnerships among the private sector, government, and our community colleges, public and private four-year colleges, and research institutions. In addition to research and innovation, faculty and staff in colleges and universities, including those at academic health centers, have an enormous direct and indirect impact on their communities through the goods and services they produce. Institutions of higher education, especially our community colleges, also can—and do—respond quickly and effectively to the needs of business and displaced workers, with training programs and other initiatives.

5) Make good on your commitment to double the research budgets for key government agencies. (http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=obama-romney-science-debate)

As you have recognized, about half of the economic growth in the United States since World War II is the result of technological innovation, much of it (including vaccines, lasers, the MRI, and the Internet) traceable to federally funded, university-based research.

Enhanced federal funding in the physical sciences, life sciences, and engineering will give a leg up to the next generation of researchers. It will also help us compete with other nations, some of which are now spending a higher percentage of GDP than the United States on research and development. (http://www8.nationalacademies.org/onpinews/newsitem.aspx?RecordID=13396)

Work with Congress to eliminate the arbitrary caps on payments for university administrative costs for federally funded research—and return to a system in which legitimate expenses, determined by well-established procedures, are reimbursed.

6) Increase allocations to the National Endowment for the Humanities. Far from a frill, the humanities help us understand what it means to be fully human. Programs funded by the NEH prepare young men and women to adapt to workplaces, where careful reading, effective writing, and critical and creative thinking are more important than narrow technical skills. Because they enhance our knowledge of the cultures, languages, histories, religions, and values of our allies and our adversaries around the world, they are also as essential as our military might in securing our future. And yet, annual appropriations for the NEH are stuck at 1/21,000 of the federal budget, a few pennies more per capita than the cost of a postage stamp.

We are acutely aware of the budgetary challenges our country now faces—and the dire consequences of going over the “fiscal cliff.” But in these difficult times, and, we believe, especially in these difficult times, prudent, well-considered, strategic investments in research and in human capital must be made to build a fulfilled, secure, and prosperous future for the next
generations of Americans.

Sincerely,

David J. Skorton and Glenn C. Altschuler

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