Opening Statement - Congressman Daniel Lipinski
Subcommittee on Research & Science Education
Hearing on
The Role of Research Universities in Securing America's Future Prosperity: Challenges and Expectations
June 27, 2012

Thank you Chairman Brooks for holding this hearing, and thank you to the witnesses for taking the time to be here today. I fully agree with Chairman Brooks' comments about the importance of the Morrill Act. Its passage 150 years ago was undoubtedly an important milestone in our country's history.

Research universities are an extremely vital part of our nation's R&D infrastructure and are thus critically important to America's future economic success – that means, American jobs. I understand this from personal experience as a student and as an assistant professor at some of our nation's finest research universities, Northwestern, Duke, Stanford, Notre Dame, and the University of Tennessee. I appreciate the opportunity to explore in depth the challenges all of our research institutions currently face and discuss possible steps that both the government and universities can take to help address these challenges.

Research universities' contributions to the health, security, and prosperity of the American people cannot be overstated. Advances in the fields of medicine and biotechnology, the development of critical new military technologies, and countless economically important companies and products can be traced back to research conducted in university labs. In addition to contributing immeasurably to our economic prosperity and well-being, research universities also train the next generation of scientists, engineers, and innovators. For anyone interested in the role the federal government played in starting up Silicon Valley by funding research at Stanford University you should read online The Secret History of Silicon Valley by Steve Blank.

More broadly, the university-government partnership that began 150 years ago with the Morrill Act has been critical to making many of these contributions possible. The federal government's support of academic research and patent laws that expedite the commercialization of such research have helped make many of our research universities the best and most productive in the world. Today a number of countries are attempting to emulate our system and they are increasingly competing with us to attract the world's top talent.

Unfortunately, I say this at a time when research universities face acute challenges that threaten their ability to continue to provide a world-class education and help ensure the United States remains the global leader in innovation. The financial stress and resulting budget deficits our country has faced in recent years have forced the federal government to back away from bipartisan commitments to significantly increase support for basic research at universities. At the same time, public universities have received less financial support from state governments, putting increased pressure on funding sources like tuition to make up the difference.

Despite the fiscal challenges we face, we in government cannot afford to jeopardize our nation's future prosperity by not providing sustained and predictable support for scientific research and affordable education. At the same time, I believe that research universities need to adjust to this new fiscal environment by finding new and innovative ways to operate. I also believe that it remains well within the ability of our universities to continue to deliver a top-notch education, allow creativity and innovation to thrive, and attract some of the best researchers and students from around the country and the world.

In closing, there are a couple of issues in particular that are raised in the NRC report that I look forward to discussing today. First, I am very interested in hearing about efforts to accelerate the pace at which discoveries make their way from the lab to the market, and would welcome your thoughts on how the federal government can help you in these efforts. Also, I would like to hear about any initiatives at your universities aimed at addressing the high attrition rate of students in STEM subject areas and the need for greater diversity. Related to that, I'd like to learn more about how you are working with industry to make sure you are graduating students with the skills they need to succeed in the workforce.

Thank you again Chairman Brooks for holding this important hearing, and I look forward to a productive exchange with our witnesses. With that I yield back.