August 26, 2015

President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear President Obama:

Our nation’s higher education institutions have long held great economic potential. While the primary purpose of academic research remains the education of America’s next generation of scientists and engineers, it is vital that our innovations are commercialized so they may benefit society and create economic opportunity.

Early-stage ideas and novel technologies need to be further along before the market is ready to embrace their true potential. We believe higher education has a unique role in supporting students, faculty, and regional community members to advance this innovative potential. Ideas alone do not create economic impact. It is the innovator behind the innovation who makes the difference between a patent that sits on a shelf and technology that benefits humankind. We believe creativity, innovation, and an entrepreneurial mindset can be taught. Moreover, we believe the innovation ecosystem has the potential to engage all students, regardless of major or department.

Our goal is to provide all students on Michigan State University’s campus, regardless of major, with access to innovation and entrepreneurship learning opportunities. We recently hired our first Director of Undergraduate Entrepreneurship to provide focus to our efforts around entrepreneurship and innovation, and today we commit to the following to help make that possible:

We commit to expanding the innovation ecosystem to include underserved populations across campus and encouraging practices that result in more diverse team creation. Research shows that teams can strengthen the innovative potential of the project at hand when they incorporate multiple viewpoints. We will do this by taking a critical look at our current outreach methods and practices, such as prerequisite requirements and declarations of major that serve as artificial barriers to the participation of a diversity of innovators.

We commit to mapping and highlighting the landscape of available infrastructure, while also urging limited-access facilities to open their doors more broadly. Centrally located innovation spaces, makerspaces and co-working spaces are breeding grounds for a creative culture on campus. This culture is counter to traditional approaches, such as lab facilities that are only open to students taking a certain class or enrolled in a certain major. We will work to maximize the accessibility of such spaces to students of all majors.
We commit to connecting the many resources and champions of innovation and entrepreneurship so they may understand how to better support one another. From learning and venture creation resources to prototyping labs and makerspaces, a high-functioning ecosystem is one in which stakeholders are highly networked and able to leverage one another. We will work to create networking opportunities for these campus leaders, encouraging collaboration and mutual support—particularly among colleges.

We commit to celebrating all faculty and student innovation and entrepreneurial outcomes, from creative pursuits to big entrepreneurial successes. We recognize that the best innovation and entrepreneurship ecosystems foster a culture of risk-taking and stamp out a fear of failure. We will do this by celebrating all entrepreneurial activity, from small wins and big wins to small failures and big failures, by holding more demo days, competitions, design challenges, hackathons, speaker series and other events.

We commit to encouraging the creation of student and faculty venture teams to explore commercialization opportunities, spinning out of the university ecosystem when they are able. We will do this by expanding the number of seed funding opportunities, mentoring and advising resources available to such teams. We will also do this by investigating and changing current policies that inhibit participation in innovative and entrepreneurial activities.

We commit to expanding programs that require faculty and students to “get out of the building” and talk with potential users of new products or services. Successful innovators are willing to reach beyond the walls of academia to ensure their innovations will be embraced by humanity. Only by understanding the customer’s pain points and validating a business model hypothesis can an innovator successfully advance an offering beyond the walls of academia. We will do this by expanding on-campus innovation programs.

We commit to supporting innovative faculty teaching practices that nurture 21st-century skills through innovation, entrepreneurship, creativity, design thinking, making, and lean startup approaches. We will evaluate current faculty incentives to incorporate new teaching methods and build teams of institutional change agents who share and help advance best practices quickly and effectively.

To mark this first-ever Demo Day at the White House, we commit to enhancing and expanding our innovation ecosystems using these principles.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

June Pierce Youatt
Provost and Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs