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Michigan’s Public Universities Embrace Entrepreneurship: Activities Help Students, Communities, and Local Business

–For Immediate Release–

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Entrepreneurial degrees, classes, clubs and competitions are springing up at all 15 Michigan public universities, a new survey by the Michigan Sense of Place Council shows, as higher education institutions react to the state’s changing economy. The Council is a public-private collaborative that supports development of places with a quality of life that attracts talented people and entrepreneurs and that can compete in a global marketplace.

“It’s pretty phenomenal how much has begun happening in a short period of time,” said Rob Fowler, CEO of the Small Business Association of Michigan and chair of the Council’s entrepreneurship committee. “It seems like it’s happening all over the state. Much of it is student led, but it includes entrepreneurship degrees at the bachelor’s and master’s level, helping companies in their communities through venture capital funds and incubators, and student clubs and companies.”

For more than a decade, SBAM has been a leader in pushing for more entrepreneurial education and opportunities on college campuses, working with state, university and business leaders to increase the awareness of the importance of entrepreneurs as the state moves away from its longstanding dependence on the traditional automotive economy.

The survey by the Sense of Place Council of entrepreneurial opportunities on public university campuses in Michigan was conducted by Public Policy Associates, Inc. (PPA) of Lansing. Jeffrey D. Padden, president of PPA, said the Sense of Place Council regards cultivation of entrepreneurial spirit as critical to creating vibrant regions, downtowns, and neighborhoods where people want to live, work, and open businesses.

“This survey showed that in recent years, all sorts of entrepreneurial activities have exploded on campuses across the state. Michigan’s universities are well on the way to creating truly entrepreneurial campuses,” said Mr. Padden. “Small businesses, started by risk takers prepared for major challenges, are vital to any successful community, particularly our downtowns. Entrepreneurs can drive the rebirth of Michigan’s cities, creating the exciting, livable neighborhoods that attract young talent. Universities are doing their part to fill that pipeline.”



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Michael A. Boulus, executive director of the Presidents Council State Universities of Michigan, which represents the 15 public universities, said universities have heard state leaders ask for entrepreneurial programs, and have responded with a variety of opportunities for students as well as those already in business.

“We have professors mentoring entrepreneur clubs, upper level classes on evaluation of risk, university-sponsored incubators and more. Michigan’s universities are taking the lead in ensuring those who are interested in launching a startup—or bringing an entrepreneurial spirit to their current workplace—have the tools to do so.”

Highlights of the survey results include:

More academic programs: At least 10 Michigan universities have entrepreneurial degree programs. Several have added majors or minors within colleges of business in recent years, while others have expanded their course offerings for all students.

At Michigan State University, the Eli Broad Graduate School of Management's specialization in entrepreneurship combines core business disciplines with experiential assignments in which students work with entrepreneurs to solve real-world problems.

Entrepreneur magazine ranks Central Michigan University's program in the top 26 of all regional programs nationwide. Grand Valley State University is developing a new double major in business and entrepreneurship.

Universities are also encouraging entrepreneurial thinking across disciplines. Saginaw Valley State University, for instance, offers a minor in entrepreneurship for all students in addition to its entrepreneur concentration in the MBA program.

Start up— now: Why wait for graduation to start your own business? A growing number of students are launching ventures while still in school, with the aid and encouragement of the university and local economic development agencies.

Eastern Michigan University's Center for Entrepreneurship provides resources for students starting their own business. Many other universities have similar arrangements.

In 2010, MSU and the city of East Lansing began The Hatch. It is a downtown shared workspace designed to advance the culture of entrepreneurship and boost the knowledge-based economy. At The Hatch, area college students share conference rooms and office equipment, and they support each other in their entrepreneurial efforts.



Clubs and competitions: Students at every Michigan university can join organizations to network with like-minded students and faculty and hone their entrepreneurial skills. At Michigan Technological University, members of the Entrepreneurs and Inventors Club compete in annual elevator pitch competitions (summaries of ideas that can be communicated in a 30-second to two-minute elevator ride) and a New Venture Competition.

The University of Michigan hosts a China Entrepreneurs Network aimed at building a global hub for Chinese entrepreneurs. At Western Michigan University, student teams in the Industrial and Entrepreneurial Engineering program host Innovation Day to market their products.

Learning from doers: Universities are finding creative ways to bring innovative entrepreneurs to campus to share their experiences and passion with students. Saginaw Valley State University established the Dow Entrepreneur in Residence in its College of Business and Management. At Western Michigan, the entrepreneur-in-residence is Thomas Gross, CEO of Fusion Cooling Systems, which won \$150,000 as runner up in the Accelerate Michigan Innovation competition.

On most campuses, faculty members are encouraged to explore entrepreneurial opportunities. The University of Michigan considers innovation as a factor in tenure and promotion decisions and recently established the Distinguished Innovator Award.

Michigan Tech has a formal leave program for faculty to concentrate on commercializing university technology. Wayne State University's Faculty Entrepreneurs Network supports efforts to spin off companies based on Wayne State research.

Business incubators: At least 11 of the 15 universities have formal links between entrepreneurship programs and their incubators. The University of Michigan Venture Accelerator links to U-M's programs in law, medicine, engineering, business and information technology.

Oakland University's SmartZone Business Incubator and Accelerator and the Clean Energy Research Center provide entrepreneurial resources to commercialize intellectual property.

Mr. Fowler, of the Small Business Association, said Michigan's one-time dependence on large companies for employment worked against the entrepreneurial spirit. Now, he said, the universities' embrace of entrepreneurship benefits both regional economies and the state as a whole.

“Our universities are now engaged in trying to change the culture.” he said. “If students understand that starting your own company some day is an option, as opposed to always going to work for somebody else, that’s the way you begin to change the mindset and culture.”