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May 4, 2021

The Honorable Thomas Albert, Chair of Appropriations  
Michigan House of Representatives

Dear Chairman Albert,

I'm writing today to express my concern at the latest budget proposal approved by the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Higher Education and Community Colleges. While I believe the chairman is well-intended, we believe the drastic move towards a higher education funding model based almost solely on headcount does little to advance our state's goals around improved postsecondary education and meeting the workforce needs of an evolving state economy. If our shared goal as public bodies is to serve Michigan residents, we need to embrace reinvestment in higher education and incorporate thoughtfully considered productivity metrics.

Michigan ranks below the national average in postsecondary degree attainment and 33rd in median household income. This is not coincidental. The data have shown consistently that workers with higher levels of education earn higher wages, yet Michigan ranks 44th in per-capita support for higher education. Instead of a new funding structure that radically redistributes an already insufficient level of support, our state needs to invest more to make a high-quality college education more affordable to Michigan families – at least to the level of our peer institutions and neighboring states. If left unaddressed, this trend of inadequate state support will greatly diminish Michigan's ability to develop the talent needed for the state to compete economically, both domestically and globally.

Historically, the dialogue related to university funding centered on each school's unique mission and capacities, not just the number of students. Previous models acknowledged the differing cost to educate students in vastly different areas of study and research, from liberal arts to advanced robotics to nursing. The training for these fields requires significantly different resources for advanced labs, equipment, and instructional needs. The University of Michigan competes to recruit the best students, the best faculty, and the best researchers here in Michigan, across the nation and around the world. Our budgetary needs reflect our position as the nation's top public research university with achievements spanning nearly every field of science, engineering, medicine, social sciences, and the humanities, from driverless car technology to the delivery of quality K12 education. Our discoveries help launch new businesses and our graduates attract outstanding employers to our state. These are key aspects of our mission, and our state is better off for it.

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Page Two

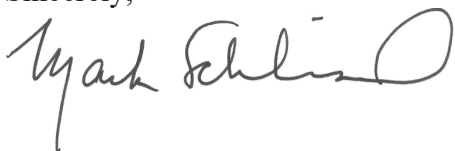
Lastly, a shift in funding of this magnitude would jeopardize the University of Michigan's unique ability to serve all of Michigan's students. Our Go Blue Guarantee, established in 2018, is a promise of free tuition for students from families with income of \$65,000 or below and assets below \$50,000, as well as tuition support for many Michigan students from families earning more. In comparison, the median household income for Ionia County is about \$57,000. That promise means more than one quarter of our in-state students pay no tuition. That's about 4,500 future doctors, engineers, entrepreneurs, etc., who may not otherwise have been able to access a world-class education. They graduate with little or no debt and with an education that makes them competitive for well-paying jobs.

The experiences students have at schools like the University of Michigan prepare them to have an amazing impact on our state as the next generation of leaders, educators, small business owners, health care providers, lawyers, and scholars. As a University of Michigan alumnus, you know firsthand the transformative power that comes from a world-class education delivered at an in-state price.

When the University of Michigan celebrated its Bicentennial in 2017, you were among the legislators who sponsored a bill to commemorate this historic achievement for our state and your alma mater. I'm sure you did so with great pride – a pride shared by President Gerald R. Ford, Antonia Novello, John Seely Brown, Arthur Miller, Alexa Canady, and hundreds of thousands of other alumni who made their mark on the world. The resolution stated, in part, that “education has always been a priority in Michigan,” that “Michigan's constitution was ahead of its time in the establishment of educational institutions which were publicly funded,” and that “the University of Michigan provides a world-class education to a diverse student body.”

I ask that you consider our important mission – and the mission of all 15 of our state's public universities – as you move forward in this critical process of providing robust support for all of our public universities and their students.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mark Schlissel". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop at the end.

Mark S. Schlissel

President  
University of Michigan

Cc: House Appropriation Committee