Green & White Glove Service: Bridging The Gap Between Employer Upskilling Initiatives and MSU Graduate Education

***Strategic Plan Theme*: Student Success**

***Funding Level*: Below $1 million**

***Facility Needs*: No new facilities will be needed**

***Submitting Unit*: Broad**

Collaborating colleges/departments/units involved with this proposal.

College of Veterinary Medicine, Hub for Innovation in Learning and Technology, Eli Broad College of Business, College of Education College of Agricultural Natural Resources, College of Social Science, College of Communication Arts and Sciences

What is the proposal's big theme or idea?

Green & White Glove Treatment for Employers to Sponsor Workplace Leaners

What is the proposal's goal?

Working with organizations interested in upskilling their workforces (sponsoring learners) necessitates a more flexible approach than that used in attracting individual students. Strong programs at MSU are already attracting interest from our state's largest employers, and we need to reduce the frictions associated with welcoming this group of learners.

The economics behind recruiting organizational partners—in lieu of recruiting individual students—tips heavily in our favor. Moreover, the current state of the US labor market has created an unprecedented demand for partnerships between large employers and institutions of higher learning. Chipotle, Disney, Federal Express, JP Morgan, Rocket, Target, Walmart, and others have begun adding undergraduate degree completion, and more recently, graduate-level career development opportunities—all in partnership with US universities, and all in service of attracting, retaining, and strengthening their workforce.

These companies and others embody a growing demand for developing employees with academic partners today, proffering a perfect match with the experience, the human capital, and the online learning assets at MSU ready to meet said demand.

Define the significance, or impact of your big idea.

Establishing partnerships with large employers creates value for employers, MSU, and most important of all, learners who may otherwise delay or indefinitely postpone the furthering of their educations. Where we at MSU fall short, however, is in our ability to work with employers—both in terms of policies, and policy overrides. Instead, our academic policies at MSU are optimized for traditional audiences of on-campus learners in full-time, 4–6-year cohort-based programs.

Some frictions encountered to date—and suggested remedies—include: • Admission of employer sponsored students is still done in a traditional manner, leaving it to departments and Program Directors to shepherd the relationship between the sponsoring employer who has referred a cohort of their employees, the student, and the program. Meanwhile, all other units at MSU treat the student as an individual; e.g. student accounts, compliance (e.g. insurance), etc. • Mis-directed communication: MSU does a great job keeping students

informed and up to date. The trouble we run into is when communications are directed to audiences for whom the information does not apply. No university will never be able to personalize messaging at MSU's scale, however we can take steps to assuage the problem, including: o Developing greater transparency and inclusiveness in the development and distribution of applicant and matriculated learner communications from the University. Creating pathways for segmented and programmatic communications that align with a learner's (modality, plan-type, etc.) status to increase applicability to the intended audiences which will be value additive and reduce confusion and anxiety for the recipient. o A less effective, albeit simpler approach, may be to share forthcoming central communications from the university to students, with all program directors ahead of distributing the message to students. Doing so would allow program directors to alert students in bulk when an inbound email may not apply to said students—thereby eliminating the need for the programs and their directors to respond to dozens—and in some programs—hundreds of individual correspondences from confused students. • Billing organizations/programs instead of students: Employers view sponsored learning as both a career development activity, and a job perquisite. The latter suggests that even though all employers view benefits differently, some may wish to absorb all the costs that would ordinarily fall on students. We do not have a standardized and scalable way of supporting this without intercepting each fee individually. Accordingly, we suggest: o Securing pathways in our finance system to provide the option of redirecting all student fees and supplemental charges to the program or the employer—as opposed to invoicing individual students.

Who will be impacted?

If this idea is coupled with others related to lifelong learning and undergraduate online degree completion, a large swath of upwardly mobile adult learners who have already proven themselves to be mature, dedicated, and capable to their employers, might be able to leverage those relationships to gain favored access to an elite education at the leading, globally-engaged, land-grant university.

Departments with in-demand career-oriented programs will benefit from an influx of pre-qualified and well supported students that have applicable experience and additional social support from coworkers and organizational learning leaders in their HR department. Working professionals, in-turn, create classroom-value when sharing their own experiences, ameliorating the learning experience for greener classmates looking to land their first professional opportunities upon graduation. A deliberate strategy targeting large employers would expand the reputation and reach of our highest quality programs, while leveraging our extant network of 500,000+ living alumni, many of whom lead the world's largest employers today.

What does sustainability for your proposal look like?

Employers seeking an academic partner to upskill their employees have very different considerations in choosing a university or program than do individual students. The former are searching for a partner who can deliver benefits to a group of learners, whereas the latter is optimizing exclusively for themselves—but we treat both employers (regardless of size) and prospective students the same. Speed and agility matter in nascent markets—the more expeditiously we can respond to incoming proposals, the more likely we are to begin winning share of mind with Corporate Learning Officers, and Chief HR officials. To do so, however, we need a transparent and thorough process for adjudicating such requests.

We recommend creating a dedicated process across the Offices of the Provost and the Office of the Controller to swiftly adjudicate idiosyncratic contractual requests. The process would be triggered whenever a program or college is negotiating with an employer to educate a sufficiently large number of employees. The system should be established with the objective of providing a coordinated response to incoming proposals within 15 days of receipt. The specific terms that could be adjusted in the process would include requests for: volume discounts, modification of minor academic policies (e.g. eliminating the need for letters of recommendation), alterations to standard tuition terms (e.g. more generous reimbursement deadlines in response to late drops), adding additional sections of extant courses, and similar adjustments in service of earning the opportunity to educate the employer's workforce. Akin to MOUs with outside universities, the terms often require adjudication by the OPB and the Office of the Provost (GC is also involved, but GC sign-off is the last step in the process, and therefore less time-sensitive than the general terms of engagement).