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# Engaging Michigan Community Alumni Networks as Catalysts for Development: Leveraging People, Platforms and Places for Michigan's Transformation

Elizabeth Carlow, Dayne Walling

2014 Co-Learning Plan Series

MSU EDA University Center for Regional Economic Innovation

**MICHIGAN STATE**  
UNIVERSITY | University Outreach  
and Engagement

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*Michigan State University*

*Center for Community and Economic Development*

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Dayne Walling**

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## INTRODUCTION

Economic transformation in Michigan is complex work requiring countless actors and ideas. One resource that has emerged with growing importance in this arena is Michigan's expatriate community. Michigan has a large diaspora of talented individuals with significant capital and palpable loyalty, and arguably the most severe socioeconomic problems and urban challenges facing the United States, which fosters a compelling motivation for those who want to give back. As Crain's Detroit Homecoming in September 2014 is advertising online: "Whether you were born in metro Detroit, grew up here, went to school here or worked here, we want you to come home and meet the 'new' Detroit." The Detroit Homecoming goals are to: "inspire action, create jobs, improve lives and build an extended community." Indeed, Michigan community alumni networks are being viewed as catalysts for development. New online platforms and creative and talented people are converging in Michigan and offering optimism toward the state's long-sought transformation.

### **Summary**

This paper and co-learning plan will explore the potential for economic development through community alumni networks. Michigan has been the birthplace of innovative alumni engagement platforms, ranging from the state's world-class colleges and universities to organizations such as Flint Club and Michigan Corps, both of which created new opportunities for non-local citizens, alumni and expatriates to contribute to, and share in, the economic revitalization of home communities across the state by partnering alongside Michigan residents, nonprofit organizations, and businesses. Drawing on the combined fifteen years of learning from Michigan Corps, Flint Club, and a critical review of survey and interview data, as well as assessments of related practices and relevant scholarship, this paper will provide recommended strategies for engaging alumni in tangible efforts that support economic progress across Michigan, primarily through opportunities to invest in entrepreneurship and civic and social innovation. This paper aims to outline the best practices and practical steps around: *(a) building a community alumni network, (b) alumni investment approaches, (c) reshaping community image*. Moreover, there are lessons for the wider field of economic and community development from this cutting-edge work.

### **Key Questions**

The three key questions for investigation are:

1. What are the common features among the best practice platforms for non-local to local community engagement and entrepreneurial support?
2. How can current opportunities for Michigan alumni to invest in emerging business, social and civic innovations be better leveraged to maximize participation and impact?
3. What types of engagement opportunities, local community features, and marketing strategies are effective for attracting and sustaining alumni investment and engagement? And how does this vary across the three Michigan cities of Detroit, Flint and Houghton?

## **Background**

Flint Club and Michigan Corps are both nonprofit organizations that share an explicit focus on engaging community alumni. Whereas most place-based efforts are guided by a community-development approach that leverages local institutional assets, residents, and business opportunities. Flint Club and Michigan Corps both embrace the notion that community-based networks are simultaneously local and virtual. They recognized that various forms of capital, including human, social, and cultural, are able to flow like economic capital across boundaries. Indeed, Internet-based technologies and modern information networks enable more effective non-local yet place-based networks to coalesce around a shared affinity—in this case a sense of connection to Michigan and its communities.

The notion of building association around a shared sense of connection to place, at least in the manifestation of particular institutions in certain places, is not new. Alumni associations for institutions such as colleges and universities date back nearly two centuries in North America. For example, the Society of Alumni of Williams College in Williamstown, Massachusetts was established in 1821 with one purpose being, “

At the turn of the millennium, there was an innovation with alumni networks due in large part to the new communication opportunities offered by the Internet. Flint Club was started around a table in Washington, DC in 1999. The genesis of the organization was the desires of the four founders to stay connected to and contribute to the life of the city of Flint, despite being expatriates. The hope was to create a network that harnessed the pride of the former automotive powerhouse city’s adherents and connect them with community initiatives, local businesses, and emerging leaders. It was a neighborhood association or a service club for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The website, [www.flintclub.org](http://www.flintclub.org), was launched in April 2001. Flint Club released its first monthly newsletter, "Flint Diaspora," in December 2001 to approximately fifty friends, family and colleagues of the founders.

The term expatriate traditionally refers to someone who leaves one’s native country for another land. Here it is used to define those who are from a city or community or who spent a meaningful amount of time in a place, are now living elsewhere, but nevertheless have a strong sense of attachment or dedication to the former place. For self-identified expatriates, the term is not meant to imply the historical understanding of having been banished or deported, however from the research presented here, individuals do often have mixed feelings about the place from which they expatriated from and there is a common theme of concern about not having found a job opportunity, or moving a family somewhere else, often outside of Michigan. This research also uncovered a sense of dissatisfaction not only with Michigan’s economic, but also cultural offerings as a motive for leaving the state.

The term diaspora is apparent in dialogue about cities that have lost a large percentage of residents over time such as Flint, Michigan and Youngstown, Ohio. This term offers a way to understand the latent dispersed community network. A diaspora is made up of people who have

scattered, who no longer live in the place where they or their ancestors previously lived. Cities with a declining population necessarily have former residents who are now somewhere else, however near or far. The fact that people are mobile and spread across metropolitan regions, across states and the world is apparent, but the interesting question is how a community alumni network can be activated and organized.

The potential for tapping expatriate resources has continued to catalyze new development in Michigan. A decade after Flint Club was founded, Michigan Corps was started in October 2010 to mark John F. Kennedy's launch of the Peace Corps 50 years prior. The organization adopted the phrase: "Ask what you can do for your state", which to this day summarizes Michigan Corps' call to Michiganders everywhere. Michigan Corps launched with funding support from a network of expatriate Michiganders who were passionate about giving 'forward' to a new economic future for the state. This network, dubbed the "Founding Corps" includes a group of prominent Michiganders from across the country and other national leaders who stepped up to eagerly support the role Michigan Corps could play in the state's revitalization.

Similar to other cities that looked to their expatriates for infusions of new energy, ideas, and talent, Youngstown, Ohio started attracting young professionals back as part of their revitalization strategies in the past ten years. Inc. Magazine profiled Youngstown's efforts in an article titled, "Semper Youngstown," by Bill Donahue in May 2010 (Donahue, 2010). Donahue wrote, "Until about 2005, Youngstown was a hard sell to young creative types. Now, though, there is a small community of tech people who have come back to their hometown, to embrace the place as though it were the lost Holy Land." The new economic activity was centered on the Youngstown Business Incubator. A number of blogs with titles such as "Youngstown Renaissance" and "I Will Shout Youngstown" were started to tell the city's new story that reflected the "semper" or "always" of Youngstown spirit.

This co-learning plan was proposed in order to explore the state's expatriate community. Can any other American state claim - at once - a credible centrality to the American story, a large national diaspora with significant capital and palpable loyalty, and the most severe socioeconomic problems facing the United States? As communities across Michigan, in particular Detroit and Flint, face severe fiscal crises, it becomes increasingly necessary to turn to non-traditional sources of capital and innovation to design methods by which quality of life can be sustained and improved within these communities. This can only be accomplished with new, creative solutions that are sufficiently capitalized to scale and address wide-spread community challenges across the areas of unemployment, urban infrastructure, transportation, education, and more. Indeed, the clusters of social entrepreneurship and business innovation in Detroit, Flint, and smaller communities such as Houghton around Michigan Tech are beginning to influence the direction of the state's economic future towards transformation.

By economic transformation, the authors refer to the most sophisticated, forward-leaning, proactive economic development work happening statewide, led by private and public entities alike. Such work entails grassroots social entrepreneurship aimed at activating vacant spaces, providing job opportunities in low-income communities, enhancing quality of life standards



through cutting edge innovations in education, access to healthy foods and more. It also includes workforce training for chronically unemployed individuals, as well as the retention, attraction, and expansion of local companies. These are the long-term drivers of economic development and transformation.

Therefore, as new entrepreneurial talent burgeons in Detroit and across Michigan, the need for early stage, risk-tolerant financial investment, expertise and access to networks is growing. In working with social entrepreneurs across Michigan, Michigan Corps has observed a scarcity of start-up capital with a consideration for social impact. While existing philanthropic and financial institutions are offering capital within their missions and means, start-ups are struggling to get capital in place. One remedy that has shown promising signs is to harness new capital from outside the region to sustain and grow a movement of entrepreneurs reinventing Michigan's economy.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Co-Learning Framework**

A number of research methodologies, including an online survey, key informant interviews, and focus groups, were combined in order to present a wide range of findings and insights for this co-learning plan. Additional learning opportunities will be presented by Michigan Corps to an open forum in each focus community and one non-local gathering following the completion of the work as part of the ongoing engagement with the Michigan State University Center for Community and Economic Development, EDA University Center for Regional Economic Innovation.

For the purposes of this study, community alumni networks are defined by possessing three characteristics: a) the affinity basis of its members and supporters, being a connection to a place that may not be their current place of residence; b) a deliberate purpose and mission; and c) a dedicated and directed means of communication and interaction. This separates community alumni networks from common groups of family, friends, classmates, or former colleagues who stay in touch, and may discuss public and political affairs, but without the intention of affecting economic, civic, or social change.

### **Best Practices**

An initial review of best practices and insights from successful alumni engagement platforms, focusing on Michigan Corps and Flint Club, was conducted in order to develop key questions, identify existing knowledge and practices, and inform the design of research instruments in this expanded analysis. One piece of existing research informed the analysis. In 2012, Michigan Corps partnered with the Ross Business School at the University of Michigan to conduct a series of in-depth interviews, focus groups, and survey of 34 Michigan Corps members; twenty-one percent of respondents were Michigan alumni. The intent of the survey was to capture insights around motivations and specific desires to engage/re-engage in efforts that support Michigan's economic revitalization. The survey results are available online.<sup>1</sup>

## **Survey**

The next step in the co-learning analysis entails the design and distribution of a new “Michigan Community Alumni Survey.” This survey is designed to collect information about the most effective ways to engage Michigan community alumni, meaning people now living outside of Michigan who are interested in promoting, supporting, and investing in Michigan’s future. The survey was written to take 5-10 minutes to complete and covers a range of topics related to advancing strategies for engaging alumni in tangible efforts that support Michigan’s economic progress, primarily through opportunities to invest in entrepreneurship and local community development.

Questions were created to capture levels of perceived affinity for Michigan, preferred communication channels/strategies, and preferences around forms of engagement with Michigan. For example, in the first section, the strength of affinity for Michigan hometowns, Michigan-based colleges or universities, and former Michigan places of employment are tested. In the section on Michigan communication channels, the survey asks for the most frequented Michigan-related website and Michigan-related social networking site. The last section captures perceptions around barriers to, and opportunities for, playing an active role in spurring economic progress across Michigan.

The online survey was disseminated through alumni networks with Michigan Corps and Flint Club, as well as a number of university and professional associations, and was posted on a number of Michigan blogs such as Flint Expats and Positive Detroit with the result of 105 respondents (75 was target).

## **Interviews**

Authors will conduct original interview research including: 10 interviews with successful Michigan alumni public and private leaders (non-Michigan residents), 10 interviews with successful Michigan public and private leaders (Michigan residents, including at least two leaders of University Alumni Affairs), 3 interviews with alumni leaders in other Midwest states, and 2 interviews with editors of leading Michigan publications. A list of interview questions is included in Appendix IV.

## **BUILDING A COMMUNITY ALUMNI NETWORK**

This paper seeks to provide strategies for engaging alumni in tangible efforts that support economic progress across Michigan, primarily through opportunities to invest in entrepreneurship, civic, and social innovation. To start, the authors will outline the best practices and practical steps around building a community alumni network. The first key question is: what are the common features among the best practice platforms for non-local to local community engagement and entrepreneurial support? In other words, what does a community alumni network consist of and how do they work best?

A community alumni network consists of people who have an expressed affinity for a place even though they don’t live there and are organized for specific purposes such as supporting schools, youth, arts, economic development, and community revitalization. The new REI Michigan

Community Alumni Survey shows that people do indeed have an affinity for Michigan’s cities based on being their hometowns, their place of higher education, and their place of employment at some point in their lives. High school, university, and college alumni networks are the most established and common expression of a similar affinity, and entail linkages with the local host communities of such educational institutions. This sense of attachment and connection to place has been an enduring theme in the literature and cultural arts. The notion of a community alumni network is innovative, but also related to these precursors and is often interwoven with pre-existing networks that transcend, but are tied to, places.

**Table 3.1**

The results of the Michigan Community Alumni Survey show that attachments are strongly, and approximately equally, rooted in connections to hometowns, colleges and universities, and also the location of residence and employment as adults.

|  |             |           |                    |
|--|-------------|-----------|--------------------|
| Report strong sense of affinity for Michigan hometown  | 81% say yes | 35% Agree | 46% Strongly Agree |
| Feel a strong sense of affinity for Michigan-based college or university                             | 74% say yes | 33% Agree | 41% Strongly Agree |
| Feel a strong sense of affinity for the places they have lived and/or worked in Michigan as an adult | 78% say yes | 39% Agree | 39% Strongly Agree |

In-depth interviews conducted with Michigan expatriates further affirm this sense of affinity. As one interviewee described, “Michigan has always been close to my heart and evokes a sense of family and pride. In fact, I find myself getting defensive when I see the media always providing negative coverage of Michigan and most often Detroit.” Survey data, and that of the key informant interviews, affirms the basis for groups such as Flint Club and Michigan Corps, and signals that there is a basis for community alumni networks in Michigan. Moreover, prior research by Michigan Corps on Michigan alumni demonstrates the wide variety of skills and talents that expatriates are interested in offering local community and economic development efforts for places or institutions with which they feel a sense of affinity or attachment. This list of skill sets and corresponding levels of interest can be found in Appendix I.

Another question remains: what are the common features among the best practice platforms for non-local to local community engagement and entrepreneurial support? Along these lines, the

survey also asked about ways that alumni are keeping connected with the Michigan news that matters to them. Seven options were presented and respondents could select all that apply. 93 of the 99 survey respondents completed this section with the following results:

**Table 3.2**

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| College/University Alumni Networks and/or Publications | 26% |
| News Websites  | 77% |
| Print Publications                                     | 23% |
| Radio or TV  | 20% |
| Friends, Family, Colleagues                            | 63% |
| Twitter  | 14% |
| Facebook   | 55% |

It is clear from this data that expatriates are primarily keeping connected with Michigan news through news websites, personal networks, and online social networks. MLive.com and the Detroit Free Press website were the most cited specific sources in the comments. One key informant interviewee had this to say about how he keeps abreast of issues in Michigan: “I check freep.com daily from Washington D.C. where I live and work. In fact, I read this more than the Washington Post. I don’t know if I’m unusual in that regard, but I and many others still have a strong interest in what’s going on.” This same interviewee describes how he has seen a surge in Facebook posts about Detroit among his Detroit expatriate peer group – young professionals between the ages of 25 – 40. “It seems like more and more like there are positive stories coming out of Detroit. There seems to be more development and interest among a young urban core to live and engage in Detroit. There seem to be a lot of burgeoning opportunities, and my peers are taking note of it and posting on their social media networks.”

Over half of online survey respondents noted the use of Facebook as a way to engage their social media networks. This was affirmed in several key informant interviews as a growing trend among baby boomers that were forming Facebook groups around shared affiliations, most often schools and neighborhoods where they grew up. Another interviewee described a new group he just created on Facebook for a group of Flint expatriates he was meeting while on the East Coast: “We just put together a Flint Facebook page to put good news out there. No more crime statistics, we need positive messaging. So, we post news stories or anecdotes about things we see happening in the community that point to a positive future.” Social media presents a major opportunity for community alumni networks. The role of media, and the potential for effective interventions against common mischaracterizations of Michigan and its cities, is explored later.

**Flint Club: Prototype of a Community Alumni Network**

Flint Club's aspirations depended on building a network and leveraging people power more than

Flint Club's application for 501(c)3 status included the following description: "The purposes for which this corporation is organized are to create a network of individuals and organizations across the United States that have an interest in Flint, Michigan, to foster dialogue about issues that affect the future of Flint, and to promote a spirit of community service, in order to assist with the transformation of the city into a more livable community. By creating channels of action, Flint Club creates opportunities for service and citizenship. Making Flint a truly great community is a desire shared by thousands of people; Flint Club converts this hope into the "energy for transformation" (Flint Club July 2002).

## **Characteristics of Effective Community Alumni Network Platforms**

There are three characteristics of effective community alumni networks that connect people across boundaries. First, they leverage the shared affinity basis of its members to identify new contacts and resources becoming open networks. Second, they have a clear sense of purpose and mission, which may evolve over time as a reflection of their ability to respond to new needs or opportunities. Third, with their dependency on web-based communications, they utilize the most current online tools and features for communication and interaction. In addition, the best practices of community alumni networks are distinguished by the strategic combination of specifying outcomes and making it easy to participate.

### (1) Open Networks

Dedicating time and energy to community alumni networks is done on the assumption that there are human, social, cultural, and economic capital resources that can be identified within a wider network of expatriates than would be available locally through the business and media marketplaces. As one founding member of Michigan Corps, a successful Silicon Valley-based tech entrepreneur described in an interview,

*“When considering what constitutes meaningful engagement among expatriates for individuals like me, I think of creating a set of tools that make it easy to engage my skill set and network to advance a specific segment of issues in Michigan. I think about democratizing access to resources and expertise for local resident entrepreneurs through building a network of Michigan expatriates with a knowledge basis who are engaged as part of a network principally through virtual platforms.”*

Flint Club’s experience has demonstrated that effective community alumni networks are open in the sense that they are designed to attract and involve new people. As an example, Flint Club took a decidedly inclusive and broad notion of identity and membership. It included retired Flint auto workers who were living in Florida, Flint high school graduates who were in college down south, young professionals working in Colorado and California, aspiring actresses and entertainers in New York City, and all stripes of political types in Washington, D.C., just to name a few segments represented in the network. This brought new ideas and energy to the efforts to revitalize Flint and promote a more positive image. At the same time, the organization was also open to local Flint residents who were looking for innovative ways to engage with their community. This model has been followed by Michigan Corps and shows the value of blending local and non-local resources. While the mix may vary across time and based on project needs, the overall value of diversity of members and making new connections is apparent.

### (2) Clear Purpose

Flint Club has had numerous initiatives, which have been successful due to the focus of recruiting around specific purposes including making a financial contribution to the restoration of the downtown arches, collaborating with a photographer to create Flint 360 with photos of key assets, developing a young professionals group around the Flint Cultural Center programs, and tutoring elementary school students. Flint Club also organized one of the earliest city-wide “homecoming events” in 2004. The day-long event brought together a hundred expats and a

hundred local citizens for community service with Habitat for Humanity and an arts and culture performance to highlight Flint talent. The headliner was Jeff Gibbs, the musical producer for Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine*, and Flint-area native who now lives near Traverse City, Michigan.

In contrast to the success of focused initiatives, Flint Club's board wrestled on a regular basis with the challenge of recruiting dues-paying, or contributing, members for the club's general purposes. While every nonprofit organization needs to have a base of financial support, the pattern across community alumni networks is that by nature of their affinity with their local community and institutions, expats already identify as members and aren't motivated to pay for inclusion unless there is a specific event or initiative that warrants resources. This creates a challenge of fundraising for administrative costs and organizational infrastructure. Similarly, Michigan Corps has explored the notion of a membership fee model to create a sustained stream of revenue since the organization's initial funding had been exhausted, but found a more successful strategy to be that of raising funds among expatriates around a specific call to action (such as crowdsourcing contributions for an entrepreneurial prize), and to then take an administrative fee on funds raised to help sustain the organization. Nonetheless, funding the organization's activities has proven challenging and has been accomplished through time spent, by dedicated staff, fundraising within the business, philanthropic, and government sectors.

The value of online social networks is apparent from this perspective. Time-intensive, online social networks are capable of being managed with little to no financial costs and are proven to be effective. A recent business attraction effort was successful in downtown Linden through a targeted campaign on Facebook called "Grow Linden." Grow Linden was designed by board members in the local chamber of commerce who convened 40 business owners in 2013, many of whom had not been engaged with local economic development efforts beyond their own businesses. The purpose was to promote the available storefronts and also advertise the existing businesses in downtown Linden. Photos of new products and projects are being posted daily. Nine new businesses opened last year along with four more this year, including a new dental practice started by a Linden High School graduate who went away for college. The dentist's motivation was to give back to Linden and be part of the community's growth. This is an example of how local and non-local engagement and marketing efforts intersect for a particular purpose, in this case downtown Linden small business growth.

### (3) Evolving Technologies

One important dimension of network building is communication and particularly in the Internet era, staying current on the latest tools. Unlike other communities such as Youngstown and Cleveland, that organized their alumni networks through social media and blogs, Flint Club relied on its website and email, which limited the scope of the network.

Social media and blogs require substantial commitments of time. Sustaining communications over time is a challenge of its own for community alumni networks. Consider the experience of GLUE, the Great Lakes Urban Exchange. GLUE created a website, Facebook page, and blog to allow for multiple means of online interaction so that people from "rustbelt" cities could contribute to the movement for a renaissance through membership, stories, and to "cross-

pollinate and replicate good ideas.” The underlying idea was to create “sticky” cities where people wanted to stay, invest, and connect—instead of leave. The effort was sustained by central organizers and liaisons in numerous cities such as Pittsburgh for approximately three years until 2011.

Michigan Corps built on the lessons that were emerging from the first decade of mainstream Internet usage and deployed a new website in the web 2.0 mode. The website is image-driven with clear links to Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and YouTube. Perhaps of greater notoriety is the organization’s effort to partner with a number of platforms to grow impact, rather than building new platforms. For example, in 2010, Michigan Corps partnered with Kiva.org, the world’s most prominent loan crowdfunding website, to create the nation’s first community-organized and led online microfinance initiative in Detroit. Michigan Corps partners with Kiva, a San Francisco based organization, to engage a network of Michigan expatriates as online supports of and lenders to small businesses in Detroit and Flint.

Michigan Corps membership is continuing to expand from approximately 250 in 2012 to over 550 in 2014. Michigan Corps also maintains an email listserv that has grown to approximately 2,500 contacts. At the same time, Michigan Corps discovered that to effectively engage a wide pool of alumni, a broad range of options ranging from low-touch social media engagements (such as liking or sharing a story online), to hands-on activities (such as making a loan online or serving as a judge in an entrepreneurial competition) should be offered. Once engaged, there is a preference toward higher levels of proactive engagement and hands-on volunteering through talent matching, skill sharing, and mentoring among members. This highlights the importance of providing the wide spectrum of engagement and investment opportunities examined in the next section on platforms for investment.

### **Barriers and Best Practices**

Building community alumni networks are not without their complications and barriers. The most often-voiced is that a person will express motivation to give back, but also concerns about not making a meaningful impact. For this reason, the REI Community Alumni Survey asked a question about what words are evoked when hearing “Michigan.” The top three answers were family, sentimental, and stagnant, in descending order. The top two signify that the connections to Michigan for alumni are personal. The third highest at 45% of those who responded indicates a perception of being stuck and hard to change. At the same time, 35% stated that Michigan evokes the word potential. The scales are tipped in the negative direction.

The clearly personal aspects of alumni’s connection to Michigan are also complicated according to the survey comments and the interviews. For a number of people there are concerns about class and race changes to their former neighborhoods or schools. In many cases alumni who have gone away for their college and careers see little or insufficient hope for the communities that they left behind. The socioeconomic challenges affecting Michigan and its urban areas are well known and roundly debated so suffice it to say here that those various viewpoints on the problems and solutions—and likelihood of any solutions being effective—appear to be mirrored by those engaged in this examination.

Nevertheless, there are best practices that bring together the strengths of alumni networks and community leaders despite the barriers. One of the most promising is an online participatory oral



documentary initiative, which was a collaborative of Flint Club and the University of Michigan-Flint. A University of Michigan-Flint faculty member conducted a service learning course that involved interviews and analysis of individuals who were either longtime residents or change agents. The university's resources greatly added to the capacity of Flint Club to produce high quality media. The project is online at [www.FlintVoices.org](http://www.FlintVoices.org). Flint Voices promotes the city's strengths and opportunities but is also honest about the community's struggles and divisions. *Flint Voices* is authentic and is a good foundation from which to build better communities, whether that activity is undertaken by expatriate alumni, local residents, or any combination thereof.

## **PLATFORMS: DESIGNING OPPORTUNITIES FOR INVESTMENT**

Economic transformation is going to take an infusion of various forms of capital to counteract the deeply ingrained patterns of decline and disinvestment, and to fuel a positive cycle of opportunity and prosperity in communities across Michigan. Community alumni networks represent a vast array of financial and human capital and resources and once they become reconnected to their Michigan communities, their desire to give back and contribute is activated. In the University of Michigan Ross Business School survey for Michigan Corps, 83% of survey respondents indicated a sense of personal obligation to give back to Michigan as a primary motivator for their engagement with a platform like Michigan Corps. In research conducted for this paper, several interviewees affirmed this notion by describing a willingness to make charitable contributions back at home. As one interviewee described:

*“Expats definitely want to give back to those landmark institutions back at home, or to those places that were influential in getting us to where we are today. I joined Michigan Corps’ Detroit4Detroit initiative to fundraise money for DAPCEP, a community organization that exposed me to engineering and set me on the career path where I am today. It was the easiest fundraiser I’ve ever participated in. Other expats gave to my campaign without hesitation.”*

Detroit4Detroit was an initiative led by Michigan Corps in partnership with an online donation site called *Citizen Effect*. The program gave local and expatriate Detroit residents an opportunity to “adopt a cause” of a local non-profit and raised over \$80,000 for various projects.

In the same Michigan Corps survey, 74% of respondents indicated they were interested in getting involved with projects related to entrepreneurship, education, and/or community-building. As it was described in the preceding chapter, being able to focus alumni interest and effort is one of the characteristics necessary for successful engagement. The same interviewee expressed, “I’d love to see mentorship opportunities come up for us expatriate Detroiters in DC. Some of the most successful people leave the state [of Michigan], and that removes intellectual exchange and mentorship. I think being able to engage in that way would allow expats to feel as though they are making a meaningful contribution.”

Efforts are underway around the State, especially in college towns, to find new ways to link with accomplished alumni in the business sector in order to create local job opportunities for students and graduates. These initiatives have the added benefit of retaining more of Michigan's young

professional talent in state. For example, the City of Houghton, Michigan Technological University, and the MTEC SmartZone worked together with alumni executives to locate an office of GE Aviation in Houghton. The partnership supplies GE Aviation with engineering talent and the company provides what more than 60% of Michigan Tech students say they want—a job in Houghton.

Looking at Michigan community alumni as a whole, there are strong proclivities toward assisting students, engaging youth, and promoting entrepreneurship as these were the top three responses to various investment opportunities assessed in Michigan Corps’ Ross Survey.

**Table 4.1**

| <b>Investment Opportunity</b>  | <b>Interested</b> | <b>Very Interested</b> | <b>Total</b> |
|--|-------------------|------------------------|--------------|
| Working with students to generate ideas for community change                         | 43%               | 36%                    | 79%          |
| Voting on youth ideas for social change projects in their communities                | 50%               | 25%                    | 75%          |
| Judging entrepreneurship youth contests  | 43%               | 32%                    | 75%          |
| Lending money to an entrepreneur on Kiva   | 46%               | 21%                    | 67%          |
| Nominating a Michigan-based entrepreneur for a microloan                             | 50%               | 14%                    | 64%          |
| Connecting with other Corps members online to discuss project ideas for the state    | 32%               | 29%                    | 61%          |
| Connecting via the internet in order to participate in community projects            | 36%               | 25%                    | 61%          |
| Signing a social change-related petition online                                      | 43%               | 11%                    | 54%          |
| Mentoring a social impact entrepreneur in Michigan                                   | 29%               | 25%                    | 54%          |
| Connecting with a local nonprofit for volunteer opportunities                        | 41%               | 11%                    | 52%          |
| Helping other social change organizations enter Michigan                             | 48%               | 4%                     | 52%          |
| Submitting a concept for a social-impact driven idea for the state                   | 22%               | 19%                    | 41%          |
| Hosting an event for other Corps members to connect and respond to a call to service | 33%               | 4%                     | 37%          |
| Fundraising for a Detroit-based non profit   | 26%               | 7%                     | 33%          |

|  |     |    |     |
|--|-----|----|-----|
| Donating school materials to classrooms throughout the state | 25% | 7% | 32% |
|--|-----|----|-----|

**Michigan Corps: Innovation and Impact with Community Alumni Networks**

As the only statewide community alumni network platform in Michigan, Michigan Corps has a unique perspective and has put a great deal of effort into analyzing data and experimenting with different engagement and investment opportunities among Michigan alumni. Michigan Corps’ experience offers an indicator of alumni interest in making financial investments in Michigan’s future. The organization was seeded with capital from individuals outside of Michigan, who were compelled by the vision of a platform designed to harness new capital to invest in cutting edge innovation across Michigan. These individuals, dubbed the “Founding Corps,” include: Dr. Eric Schmidt, Chairman and CEO of Google Inc; Dick Enberg, Emmy Award-winning Sports Broadcaster; Dr. Sanjay Gupta, Chief Medical Correspondent, CNN; Jeffrey Eugenides, Pulitzer Prize-Winning Author; Jay Adelson, Former CEO of Digg; Dr. Larry Brilliant, President, Skoll Global Threats Fund and Scott McNealy, Founder and Former CEO, Sun Microsystems.

Rooted in Detroit and influenced by the once-in-a-century convergence of creativity, commitment, and experimentation, entrepreneurs are shaping the future of Michigan’s largest city. New kinds of social innovation and civic entrepreneurship are spreading. A group of lawyers used Wordpress to build “Hatch Detroit,” the country’s first citywide retail entrepreneurship contest. A group of young technologists founded Loveland Technologies, which brings new transparency to the city’s property ownership processes, including the option to buy plots in the city. Other initiatives include the business incubator TechTown, entrepreneur accelerator Bizdom, the Green Garage location for social business start-ups, and the tech hub at the Madison Building. Last year BMe launched as the country’s first social innovation network for black male leaders with foundations providing seed grants for twenty community improvement initiatives in Detroit (and also Philadelphia). Local media companies, including the Detroit Free Press and The Huffington Post, launched the “Urban Innovation Exchange,” a learning network for Detroit and Grand Rapids-based social entrepreneurs.

In this context, Michigan Corps has developed a series of platforms for promoting social entrepreneurship, and attracting new resources from community alumni to catalyze economic transformation. Detroit’s convergence of issues and astounding media coverage is making waves among community alumni. One young professional in D.C. expressed it in this way: “For the first time, I’m seeing other expat friends consider moving back to Michigan, and it’s because they want to be part of the ‘comeback story’ of Detroit.”

In a 2012 speech, Governor Snyder charged the Michigan Economic Development Corporation and Michigan Corps with developing the nation’s first statewide social entrepreneurship competition. The competition aimed to, stated Governor Snyder, “bring together the best innovative minds to design sustainable solutions to address unemployment.” The expectation was that Michigan corps would receive 50 business plan submissions, but the response was overwhelming. By the time the competition chose winners, nearly 300 people had registered for the competition and 150 business plans had been submitted. The level of interest in Michigan’s

first statewide social entrepreneurship competition indicated the promise of new, relevant and cutting-edge platforms for generating community solutions. Even the country is starting to take note as the competition was recognized in Forbes this year as a promising solution to end poverty (Tafel, 2014).

### **Dimensions of Effective Platforms for Community Alumni Investments**

Michigan is well positioned to raise resources from a national and global community of Michiganders to make high-impact investments in the state's economic ecosystem. There are multiple dimensions of effective platforms for community alumni investments that may be combined in various ways.

#### **Prize Competitions**

The economics of return on investment for successful prize competitions are impressive. For a fraction of the full costs of implementation, economic development and innovation initiatives can be launched. The Michigan Social Entrepreneurship Challenge in 2013 described above illustrates this point. In the first year, \$93,000 in grants was awarded to ten social entrepreneurs. Michigan Corps, with its intellectual capital, brought this initiative up to a statewide scale and brought Michigan the accolades of being the first state to conduct such a competition. In 2014, the efforts of alumni further expanded the scope of the challenge. A Flint expatriate and alum of Michigan State University, who currently serves as Vice President at a NY-based global financial services firm, teamed up with Michigan Corps to crowdsource a cash prize specifically for the Flint community. The Drive Flint Prize will recognize the next great entrepreneur that emerges from Flint in the 2014 Michigan Social Entrepreneurship Challenge. This additional effort has linked contributions of time, expertise, and networking to bring positive attention, interest, and financial investment to the Flint region.

#### **Talent Matching**

Michigan Corps has sought to build a community for members in such a way that taps their social, physical and intellectual assets for Michigan, and has seen a positive response. In 2013, nearly a dozen expatriates were engaged in evaluating business plans for the Social Entrepreneurship Challenge. As Michigan seeks to attract and nourish entrepreneurs that can play a key role in the state's economic transformation, the capital market is not sufficiently equipped to spur the development and scale of such entrepreneurs. After Michigan Corps completed the 2013 Social Entrepreneurship Challenge, it was evident that ending everything with a prize awarded through the competition would not do much to scale much-needed innovation in our local communities. Therefore, after the winners received their prizes, Michigan Corps launched a training institute to prepare them for investment.

One of the state's most famous philanthropists and investors seeded a program to provide follow-on coaching to prepare winners to approach investors. For the four months following the competition, coaches helped the winners identify gaps in their business models and prepared them to pitch their ideas at a "meet the investor" event. At this event, a group of social impact investors met these social entrepreneurs at a pitch event held in Detroit— where winners had to articulate both a measurable social impact and financial return. One business leader flew in from Washington, D.C. to hear the investment pitches. Today, 8 of the 10 winners have commitments for investment in process—more than \$1 million in commitments, with a good portion of the

investment from out of state. This is an unprecedented scale of financial impact for Michigan's community alumni and it grew out of the personal commitment of time assisting rising entrepreneurs.

### **Existing Online Platforms**

Michigan Corps collaborated with the Knight Foundation to launch the first US domestic portal of the international micro-investment platform [www.Kiva.org](http://www.Kiva.org). Nearly two years later with expansion to Flint and statewide, over \$100,000 has been lent, 720 unique Kiva lender-borrower connections have been made, and 318 online conversations exchanged on a variety of topics between local entrepreneurs and expatriate investors. Connections made between borrowers and lenders on Kiva provide insight into both the emotional and pragmatic connection that can be made between expatriates and local entrepreneurs. One Kiva-funded business in Detroit is a hair salon, called Social Club Grooming Co. that recycles 100% of cut hair and has launched a series of programs for artists in the community. One Toronto-based lender to this business wrote the following on the entrepreneur's online Kiva profile: "As a native Detroiter who attended Wayne State in 1969 (!!), I'm thrilled to help out such an engaging, committed young man!" Another Flint-based entrepreneur is a home-based graphic design business who, through a connection with an expatriate lender, accessed a new portfolio of work in Paris, France. This demonstrates the value of inserting Michigan alumni initiatives into existing online platforms and similar efforts are easily envisioned for successive new technologies.

### **Leveraging Traditional Networks**

Universities have historically been the greatest generators of economic and social innovation in Michigan; however capital investment opportunities lag significantly behind California, New York, and Massachusetts. With this in mind, two Michigan natives, University of Michigan MBAs and alumni of the Ross Zell Lurie Institute for Entrepreneurial Studies formed the Resonant Venture Partners, an emerging venture capital firm that makes seed-stage investments in regional startups across a variety of technology sectors. They propose that returns on investment can be as much as 45% higher than the leading technology states because there is less investor competition and lower initial valuations. Their approach illustrates the opportunity of achieving a greater scale of impact through alliances with established institutions and their assets.

The same principle can be applied to downtown housing developers, main street business creditors, and social innovators. Looking across Michigan's communities, there exists an exciting opportunity to leverage financial investment for the under-resourced heroes fighting daily battles to transform Michigan. Nevertheless, outside of prominent crowdfunding platforms such as IndieGoGo and Kiva, there appears to be a low level of knowledge or engagement among a broad alumni network in such investment opportunities. As one interviewee, a Detroit expatriate in his early 30's stated: "I can see a compelling story around why someone would invest in emerging businesses in Detroit or Flint, but I don't see people doing that. My peers think more about charitable giving. Maybe it's because we just don't know how." A well-connected alumni network could imagine and pursue longer-term, game-changing transformations alongside investments made in a broad array of civic and social projects and businesses.

## **Barriers and Best Practices**

The primary barrier to the investment of time, talent and money by alumni are the reality and perceptions of public corruption and a divisive political climate. Former Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick's conviction on two dozen charges and sentence of 28 years behind bars epitomizes what many Michigan community alumni fear most: corruption. As the New York Times reported, “

ideology instead of pragmatism. As an example, MLive recently explored what was called “Michigan's millennial question: Should I stay or should I go?” One of the guest columnists argued that the current political climate drives away young, college-educated individuals (Sweeney, 2014). Next to this was another guest column with another young professional encouraged by the “small winds of change” (Meredith, 2014). The author notes two examples that he has found heartening and one is the Detroit SOUP initiative that has also engaged social entrepreneurs and been supported by Michigan Corps staff and members. This illustrates that there are emerging best practices for designing investment opportunities that attract, engage and leverage Michigan's community alumni.

Some interviews have also pointed to Michigan's entrepreneurial culture as a barrier to innovation and investment. Several interviewees cited a perception that counter to environments like Silicon Valley, cities like Detroit and Flint that have for decades been characterized as reliant on a single industry for economic prosperity, do not present the conditions conducive to risk-taking for purposes of entrepreneurial innovation. For alumni who are used to operating on the coasts, Michigan can “prove to be a frustrating experience as an investor or as someone trying to help new companies get off the ground”, stated one expatriate tech entrepreneur. This same interviewee describes that this climate can be an asset to investment.

*“...in the rest of the tech community, there is a readiness to embrace failure. In Detroit, what failure means is different. The stakes are higher because people are trying to prove the skeptics wrong in Detroit and get a win. So not only does it make economic sense to work on a start-up in Detroit, but people also have more tolerance for pivoting and are hardworking. This is very appealing to an investor. The odd thing is, I still feel like its locals helping locals. But once there's a big win, I think things will take off and start to turn heads out here [in California].”*

## **PLACES: RESHAPING MICHIGAN'S IMAGE**

Just as physical blight and “broken windows” are signs that deter prospective investors in a commercial district or neighborhood, a negative media image is a mark against a community's

potential to attract investment. One of the clear values of a community alumni network is that it lifts up success stories—often from unsung local heroes who are innovating in the marketplace and the civic sphere. The pre-study research and assessments conducted for this co-learning project identified media and Michigan’s image as having a dramatic influence among community alumni’s perception of the region and consequently, perceived interest in contributing or engaging in various ways. The survey and interviews affirm this. Therefore the third principle question is of substantial significance is: What types of engagement opportunities, local community features, and marketing strategies are effective for attracting and sustaining alumni investment and engagement? It is also important to understand how this varies across the three Michigan cities of Detroit, Flint, and Houghton. Successfully building and engaging Michigan alumni networks necessitates the development of thoughtfully crafted messaging that appeals to both the emotional and pragmatic interests of alumni in Michigan’s current and future state of affairs. A great many resources have been dedicated in recent years to building Michigan’s image as a hub for travel tourism. Pure Michigan, the state’s advertising campaign launched in 2006 by the State of Michigan, aims to market the state of Michigan as a travel destination. The brand began to receive state and international attention beginning in 2008 when an unprecedented budget was approved to launch a national Pure Michigan campaign. ‘Pure Michigan’ has since been dubbed one of the most successful tourism and branding campaigns in the country. Furthermore, local branding campaigns, such as [Michigan’s Top of the World](#), are also being used to promote the attractions of Michigan’s local communities, often related to natural beauty.

There have also emerged a number of efforts in recent years aimed at matchmaking talent for Michigan-based jobs, and to promoting Michigan as a place of economic opportunity. Programs such as Michigan Talent Connect are led principally by the state’s economic development corporation and have emerged as platforms aimed at branding Michigan as a central hub for talent, employers and educators. [Michigan Talent Connect’s site](#) offers information and statistics designed to promote an image of Michigan as a place where employers can develop their talent base, and job seekers can find a home. The [Pure Michigan Dream Job Fair](#) was recently announced and brought Michigan employers to alumni in major hubs such as New York and Chicago with the aim of leveraging their connections to Michigan as a reason to draw them to the state for unfilled jobs.

### **Michigan’s image among alumni**

The community alumni survey also asked respondents to choose among 18 words describing a variety of sensations evoked by Michigan’s image (respondents could choose all that applied for them). Among the 99 respondents, over half chose the words ‘Family’ and ‘Sentimental’, and over 40% chose ‘Down to Earth’ and ‘Stagnant’. While just over 33% chose to describe Michigan as evoking a sense of ‘Potential’, fewer than 10% chose ‘Innovative’, ‘Aggressive’ and ‘Enterprising.’

When asked about perceived effectiveness of Michigan’s current branding campaigns, such as Pure Michigan, in impacting the state’s image, 54.8% of survey respondents indicate a perception that recent efforts in promoting the Pure Michigan brand have indeed had an impact on Michigan’s image external to the state. Response commentary point to a few core themes related to Michigan image among alumni.

First, alumni perceive Michigan to be, by and large, a wonderful vacation destination of growing recognition nationwide. The natural beauty of the state is largely praised. In several cases, survey respondents indicated their perception of Michigan's branding campaigns as trying to, as cited in one response, "play up the natural beauty and atmosphere of Michigan as a recreation and vacation destination that Michiganders have always enjoyed."

A second theme that emerged was the distinction between Michigan's 'Great Lakes Tourism,' or natural beauty, and struggling inland cities, namely Detroit and Flint. Several respondents shared anecdotal comments along the lines of the following: campaigns like Pure Michigan have impacted Michigan's image "with the exception of cities. The vacation spots are beautiful, and never hit hard times like the cities." This comment points to a clear difference in perception between Michigan as a whole, and cities where individuals may have grown up or developed a connection to. Such negative perception of cities such as Detroit or Flint may have emerged from personal difficulties such as job layoff, or from media. As one respondent indicated, "[Branding efforts like Pure Michigan] help counteract all the negative press that Detroit and Flint typically get. Far too many Michigan residents remain skeptical, and even pessimistic about the state due to the struggling economy."

A third theme that emerged in the survey included a possible distinction to be made between Michigan's image and perception of the state's economic situation. While these two factors are certainly intertwined, there appears to be a clear distinction in the minds of many alumni between the aspects of Michigan's image that evoke a sense of natural beauty, family, and sentimentalism or nostalgia, and factors that represent a healthy thriving economy and quality of life. As one respondent articulated "Michigan has an economic problem, not an image problem. Solve the economic issues and you won't need PR to mask the problems."

### **Media channels shaping Michigan's image**

When considering Michigan's image among alumni, it is important to understand the key communication channels shaping that image. The authors' online survey presented a variety of communication channels and asked alumni to share the ways they stay connected with Michigan news and updates that matter to them. 77.4% indicated news websites as a way to stay connected with Michigan and among the publications most frequently cited were: Mlive.com, Detroitnews.com, freep.com and Michigan.org. Also of note was that nearly 55% of respondents use Facebook to stay connected with Michigan news that matters. In one interview of a Michigan alumni now leading education and arts consulting engagements in Boston, Facebook was described as a tool that readily evokes a sense of nostalgia for Michigan alumni. As the interviewee describes, she "joined a Facebook community for the Detroit neighborhood where I grew up (North Rosedale Park)...I love following the old stories about my neighborhood. There's also a Northland Facebook group. I joined that as well. I see my friends joining groups for their elementary and high schools in Michigan as well and as long as the conversation threads stay interesting, they're completely engaged."

In-depth interviews with Michigan alumni have yielded a growing sensitivity around alternative media channels aimed at highlighting new efforts underway that are aimed principally at urban revitalization in Michigan communities. As one alumnus interviewee describes: "I've started to



read a publication called Model D because I like how it shows that there's a lot of new energy coming into communities like Detroit." Model D is a publication of Issue Media Group, an Inc. 5000 Detroit-based media company that, according to their website "publishes online magazines about growth, investment, and the people leading communities into the new economy in 21 regions across the U.S. and Canada."<sup>3</sup> It's important to consider the ways such media channels, alongside mainstream publications such as the NY Times and Wall Street Journal, are painting a certain image of cities like Detroit as catering to a 'young, pioneering class of creatives and entrepreneurs.' Another alumnus interviewee stated: "I think it [Detroit] is a place for 20-somethings. It's affordable and anything new is going to work. It's a place for experimentation, low cost, new ideas. Anything that people have the energy to try.... Detroit is open to it."

### **Complications surrounding Michigan's image among alumni**

Both online survey responses and in-depth interviews with alumni conducted as part of this research point to two principal impediments in shaping a positive image of Michigan among alumni.

The first potential impediment lays in a perception that Michigan is lacking economic opportunity. While the state may be praised for its natural beauty, few alumni are drawing a link between the state's physical beauty or assets, and career opportunities. Rather, communities like Detroit and Flint are described as something to be left to a certain group of, mostly young, enterprising individuals. As one interviewee described "Detroit has an appeal to a certain type of individual, especially the urban pioneering individual. People have to be attracted to potential given the bar being so low." While 55.4% of online survey respondents reported that they like to read stories of entrepreneurship and innovation in Michigan, only 15% reported that Michigan evokes a sense of 'opportunity'. There is an apparent disconnect between a romantic sense of Michigan as a place of 'possibility for someone else', and a place of 'personal opportunity'. As one interviewee described: "For those that are more established in their careers, I don't know or hear enough about opportunities with companies in Michigan. If you found a job that fit your career aspirations, I think Michigan is a place where you can have a great quality of life. But that's an *if*." The perceived lack of opportunity in Michigan may stem from a sense of corruption and/or poor business or political climate in Michigan. Among online survey respondents, 50% reported that they believe 'Michigan's core cities are filled with corruption', and 35% reported that they believe Michigan 'has a poor business climate'.

A second potential impediment to growing a positive image of Michigan lays in a persistent nostalgia for the past. As one alumnus interviewee shared, "one thing that has bothered me is that there is more nostalgia for Michigan rather than what Michigan is and can become. And that manifests in all sorts of ways. There's a pro and con to this. The brands that are powerful in Michigan are brands that are nostalgic brands, they are linked to the past rather than brands linked to future. But we continue to be bogged down by Michigan's past, rather than focusing on future possibilities and that makes it hard for me to see a role for myself to play there." One interviewee likened Michigan to a museum, full of artifacts of the past and creating nothing new. Another interviewee stated the following: "I was reading a blog for Flint expatriates and found it full of artifacts for the past. I felt like everyone was bogged down with this notion that 'Flint was once great, and never will be again'. I think this is very dangerous thinking. I mean, the jobs aren't coming back. Get over it! Let's figure out a way to reinvent our future and build on what

we have to be great again. Let's figure out how we want to brand ourselves [in Flint], and make it incredibly successful.” There appears to be a hunger among alumni to emphasize “possibility over past”, as one interviewee described, but a sense of confusion as to what their role may be in making that happen.

### **Opportunities to shape Michigan's image**

The authors' research point to three key emerging—or untapped—opportunities that can be used to shape a positive image of Michigan among its alumni.

#### (1) Leverage the state's current assets.

Research for this paper has led the authors to consider how to identify Michigan's core assets and how the state might build upon those, rather than try to become something different.

Surveys and interviews have all pointed to the notion that alumni perceive Michigan to be 'environmentally beautiful,' with natural assets that could be capitalized on but are so far untapped. As one interviewee described, “For example, how many cities have a riverfront that is as underdeveloped as Detroit's? That's an asset that has never been fully utilized.”

In an era where locally sourced food and a healthy lifestyle are gaining more attention, Michigan's offerings are abundant. Several interviews referenced the opportunity for Michigan to be branded as a 'healthy living state'. Outdoor activity, abundant land for agricultural production, and abundant waterways were all referenced as tremendous assets. Alumni, by and large, seem to believe that Michigan has not made a conscientious effort to maximize these resources.

#### (2) Modernize Michigan's historical greatness.

In the same way, Michigan can be true to its origins without being nostalgic about them, and use the state's heritage as a basis for moving forward. Consider the success of new companies such as Detroit-based Shinola. One interviewee recounted a time when she was at a party in Boston and found someone else wearing a Shinola watch. Both struck up a conversation about their origins in metro Detroit and felt a mutual sense of pride and connection. This is not unusual. In fact, 71.6% of online survey respondents reported that they 'like to talk about Michigan with others.' Shinola links traditional manufacturing with a modern sensibility. As one interviewee articulated: “What I find interesting about Shinola is that it is a business based on the values and craftsmanship in the past but is an expression of modernity in the future.” In essence, Michigan may be poised to leverage the timelessness of its past, but with modern expression.

#### (3) Capitalize on growing perception of Michigan's growing business and investment climate

While online survey results do not point to entrepreneurship as a core element of Michigan's image among alumni, it was referenced in several interviews with Michigan alumni and in-state leaders. Alumni spoke to two core business opportunities they perceive to be untapped in Michigan: new manufacturing as well as food and agriculture. “Of course Michigan is known for manufacturing because of the auto industry”, stated one alumnus that runs a venture capital firm. “Michigan has always claimed manufacturing as a core competency... but are we doing anything to create pockets of small manufacturing? Are there enterprise zones or capital finance? I'm not aware of any.” Similarly, another interviewee based in Silicon Valley comments: “the

cheapest and most profitable place on earth right now to do manufacturing is Michigan. If that's not true, it SHOULD BE, so make that true and then make that the message worldwide. Every time I walk into an airport anywhere, and I travel globally, there should be a billboard that says 'Michigan - we know manufacturing'.

An interview with the director of student and community engagement at a major university's entrepreneurship center describes getting calls from alumni daily with requests for support to start and capitalize a business. Activities point to a growing interest in agriculture and new manufacturing. There's been a reported surge in these types of inquiries in the last two years, pointing to what the interviewee believes is a growth in venture capital opportunities. Yet this surge in alumni interest is not easily maximized. "We can hardly keep up with the calls and often have to refer out because of limited capacity", stated an interviewee. "If we had increased capacity, we'd love to put together an accelerator for students and alumni. We would want to engage alumni as donors and as mentors for aspiring student entrepreneurs. We just haven't been able to secure the resources to make that happen yet."

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Michigan's economic ecosystem requires significant support and attention. Where there is both a need for capital and opportunities for investment, alumni can play a crucial role in making catalytic investments in the state's economic ecosystem. Bringing Michigan expatriates—whether born in Michigan or having attended school in the region—together with key local business leaders, investors and home-grown talent to generate opportunities for new investment and reshaping of communities has demonstrated value across the realms of financial gain, local economic growth, social mobility, and improvement in quality of life across Michigan's communities.

At the same time, strategies around engaging community alumni are in a nascent stage. Further data collection, research, and experimentation are necessary. The original research and examination of emerging practices conducted for this co-learning plan point toward two areas around which engagement with community alumni is most likely to yield results: innovative financial capital strategies and social capital development. Moreover, engaging alumni in new investment opportunities is most significant when entrepreneurial and economic development activities are connected with community benefit. Subsequently, communications have a disproportionate influence given that the potential community alumni investors are physically distant from a given local community and depend on general media for information in the absence of customized information and personal encounters. Finally, then, generating and promoting authentic and compelling stories and messages of Michigan's economic transformation—particularly among those change agents not featured in prominent media channels—is important.

This research points to the notion that Michigan alumni are, on the whole, very interested in playing a meaningful role in the state's future prosperity. Authors have developed insight around recommended opportunities for maximizing alumni engagement to contribute to local communities' and the state's economic, social and cultural prosperity.

## **Recommendations for local organizations**

Organizations that engage in local community and economic development have a number of opportunities to link with alumni and benefit from their financial and social capital as well as their personal and professional networks. Higher education institutions, chambers of commerce, community development corporations, entrepreneurship support organizations, and individual businesses and organizations are able to leverage expatriates by building their own networks, developing means of investment, and promoting positive media content. In addition to the promising practices and lessons presented in each of the proceeding chapters, there are additional specific recommendations:

### **(1) Engage Alumni Social Capital**

It is important that local leaders adopt a mindset that recognizes that alumni investment opportunities go beyond fundraising and financial relationships. By engaging alumni's social capital and building productive connections with local community assets, there will be opportunities for Michigan's community alumni to serve on nonprofit boards, encourage business collaborations, and even volunteer service hours when in Michigan.

Flint's early effort to have a homecoming weekend is an example of this combination of charitable community service and professional development activities. The upcoming Crain's Detroit Homecoming's<sup>4</sup> level of success will be an indicator of the scale of impact that can be achieved when public, private and media entities work together to engage Michigan's alumni in such a homecoming-themed event. Such events leverage a sense of community pride, and present an opportunity to expose alumni to a variety of business, civic, and social activities that may resonate on a personal level and convert into some form(s) of customized engagement with mutually beneficial outcomes. It may be worthwhile for higher education and business leaders to collaborate on similar events in Michigan's cities such as Kalamazoo, Mt. Pleasant, Ypsilanti, and Marquette with Western, Central, Eastern and Northern Michigan Universities serving as hubs for convening leaders across sectors. Two critical factors for success of such events include the development of a 'prospectus,' or menu of specific opportunities for alumni to contribute to a given community's development and the presence of dedicated individuals committed to following up with attendees around items alumni express interest/commitment to for future engagement.

### **(2) Create a Michigan Alumni Ambassadors Program**

The authors recommend creating a network of community alumni ambassadors who can positively message opportunities for business and innovation within their networks and in speaking engagements around the world. As one key informant interviewee stated: "If people have an affinity for Michigan, what they can likely bring more than business deals is marketing for the region about how it makes sense to do business in Michigan." Ambassadors should be equipped with content for talks and social media, which would reference real and consistent data about the cost and benefits of doing business in Michigan and the assets and opportunities in their individual local communities.

The authors recommend creating an Ambassadors Program that:

- Is intelligently branded, fostering a sense of pride and personal responsibility for those labeled an ‘ambassador;’
- Leverages virtual platforms such as LinkedIn to create a sense of community and provide real-time & up-to-date information;
- Recognizes outstanding achievements and contributions among ambassadors through an annual ‘Ambassador of the Year’ program. Such recognition leverages the affinity for Michigan that authors found to be extremely high among alumni, while further serving to brand Michigan as a place that prominent individuals feel invested in and proud to be affiliated with.

**(3) Invest in professionally staffed organization(s) and program(s) to engage alumni.**

This research has offered a peek into numerous community organizations, which, even when in regular contact with alumni, express a sense of inability to thoughtfully engage alumni due to a lack of resources and dedicated personnel. Investing resources and staff to allow for dedicated, consistent engagement and follow-up with community alumni could arguably be most important step to boosting alumni engagement. Combined survey data and key informant interviews have pointed to the conclusion that while there is, by and large, an interest among alumni in doing something for the state, there rarely exist the resources and competencies within local institutions to mobilize resources and organize meaningful engagement opportunities for alumni. Flint Club and Michigan Corps have reached a small portion of alumni with minimal staff and have yet to achieve a plan for financial sustainability. Michigan universities are often siloed in their approach to broader engagement opportunities across the civic and social spheres. Events such as Crain’s Homecoming 2.0 are being led by volunteers and may not entail the kind of thoughtful follow-up engagement necessary to capitalize on alumni interest in investing or contributing the region’s growth. Organizational infrastructure needs to be in place to make progress around sponsorship recruitment, event management, and prospect research within the overall resource development, advancement, or fundraising divisions.

From the review of the current state of practice of alumni engagement, the authors strongly recommend that a statewide capacity be developed that has the ability to generate a greater scale of engagement and efficiency. Three key recommendations and associated strategies for statewide action are as follows:

(I) Invest in developing new platforms and programs to engage community alumni’s knowledge base to advance industry, entrepreneurship, civic and social innovation across Michigan.

- A. Identify and cultivate a network of prominent C-level executives in high-growth industries who are affiliated with Michigan communities and institutions of higher education.
  - a. Such research should begin in close coordination with major university alumni affairs’ offices and existing alumni engagement platforms such as Flint Club and Michigan Corps.
- B. Develop software that facilitates the matchmaking of alumni with specific areas of opportunity and expertise with Michigan’s entrepreneurs and innovators.

- a. The authors envision software similar to [Quora](#). Such a platform would allow for a sophisticated forum where alumni and local leaders can ask questions and exchange resources.
  - C. Match emerging entrepreneurs with successful out-of-state mentors.
    - a. As entrepreneurship is on the rise in Michigan, existing university alumni affairs offices and economic development agencies appear to welcome the opportunity to engage alumni in meaningful mentorship opportunities with local entrepreneurs. Such matchmaking should be done on a thoughtful basis and could begin with an effort to increase the level of alumni engagement with existing business plan competition such as Accelerate MI, GLEQ and the Michigan Social Entrepreneurship Challenge.
  - D. Utilize national service programs in creative ways to link alumni with community needs.
    - a. Cities like Detroit have done an excellent job in leveraging service fellowship programs such as Venture for America, Challenge Detroit and the Detroit Revitalization Fellows Program to attract young, civic-minded talent to Detroit. As service continues to play a prominent role on a national stage, Michigan can thoughtfully leverage existing perception of hard-hit cities in our state as places where individuals of all ages can make a meaningful contribution. Doing so requires dedicated personnel who will search for, recruit, and place volunteers using existing platforms and programs such as [Kiwanis](#) and [VolunteerMatch](#).
- (II) Create an alumni fund focused on civic and social innovation through a major statewide nonprofit organization with a national profile such as the United Way:
- E. Design a mechanism to facilitate investment into social enterprises and community projects that address social challenges in places where expatriates feel a sense of personal affinity and interest.
  - F. Drive greater accountability with quantitative assessments of triple bottom line impact.
  - G. Leverage federal resources such as the Social Innovation Fund within the Corporation for National and Community Service and create partnerships with national and global social investment funds.
  - H. Expand the number and size of prizes made available through efforts such as the Michigan Social Entrepreneurship Challenge.
- (III) Create a media strategy centered on stories of positive, forward-thinking innovation across Michigan.
- I. Spotlight the cohort of change agents working to better their communities across the state.
  - J. Utilized existing media channels such as freep.com and mlive.com to leverage positive stories and alter perceptions.
  - K. Market to community alumni with advertising on social media around their ability to engage and make a meaningful contribution in the state.

The authors of this plan acknowledge that while there is promising indication of an enthusiasm and pool of resources that could be effectively leveraged among alumni to improve social and economic outcomes across Michigan, there are also challenges that must be carefully navigated to ensure success. Three challenges that have arisen in this research and recommended strategies to address them include:

(1) A sense of possible resistance among conventional economic development organizations and universities to this new economic development strategy.

To address this challenge, authors recommend the following steps:

- Convene university alumni affairs departments and economic development agencies to share a proposed strategy and tools (i.e. Software platforms etc.) for alumni engagement
- Invite institutions to make this proposal a core part of their agenda, resulting in enhanced offerings for alumni and/or local communities, and a new proposal for funding to local foundations, corporations etc.

(2) A lack of organization and follow through on the part of local leaders/organizations involved with alumni engagement efforts.

To address this challenge, authors recommend the following steps:

- Make alumni engagement a core part of the state's economic development agency
- Identify a group of core funders within the foundation and corporate communities; educate them around the proposed opportunities, costs, and benefits related to alumni engagement.

(3) Wavering levels of commitment and follow through on the part of alumni with engagement opportunities;

To address this challenge, authors recommend the following steps:

- Build tools to survey and effectively gauge alumni interests as part of the development of new software platforms
- Create open online networks for alumni that regularly showcase and champion efforts of alumni in Michigan, in order to foster a sense of accomplishment and engagement.

## CONCLUSION

This co-learning plan seeks to explore the key opportunities, challenges, and recommended strategies for leveraging community alumni as a powerful resource to advance economic transformation across Michigan. While strategies to engage community alumni have traditionally been left to universities, there is a growing interest in possibilities to expand the notion of alumni to include those individuals with a connection place, namely communities within our state. Such individuals bring tremendous resources and networks—financial, social, and intellectual—to bear. Gleaning from historical research the experience of two non-conventional platforms, Flint Club and Michigan Corps, and numerous interviews with Michigan alumni and local leaders, this co-learning plan offers critical insights around strategies to build communities of alumni, activate such communities through tangible opportunities to invest in economic, civic, and social

welfare, and to catalyze engagement through branding and story-telling that re-shapes Michigan's image among alumni.

In summary, this co-learning plan shows there is tremendous potential to leverage alumni affinity to create meaningful outcomes for local communities through alumni networks and resources. While there exist many barriers with regard to alumni perception of the state and lack of resources and coordinated efforts locally, the authors have presented a variety of recommended strategies to make alumni engagement a core part of Michigan's economic development agenda.



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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Full Michigan Corps Survey Results Available Online:  
<http://www.scribd.com/doc/225048970/Michigan-Corps-Ross-Survey-Findings>

<sup>2</sup> *The Flint Journal*, editorial, June 27, 2006. No longer available online or in print.

<sup>3</sup> More information about this group is available online at:  
<http://www.issuemediagroup.com/about/issue-media-group-about.aspx>

<sup>4</sup> See [crainsdetroit.com/homecoming](http://crainsdetroit.com/homecoming)

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## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX I

#### **Skill Sets Michigan Corps Members Self-report as Eager to Contribute**

- 1 Advertising/PR 19%
- 2 Blogwriting 27%
- 3 Connecting to other nonprofits 50%
- 4 Fundraising 19%
- 5 Grant writing 15%
- 6 Social media 38%
- 7 Website design 23%
- 8 Event Planning 31%
- 9 Recruiting new Corps members 31%
- 10 Mentoring youth 65%
- 11 Promoting projects in my network 62%
- 12 Mentoring social entrepreneurs 38%

### APPENDIX II

#### **Online Survey Questions and Results**

Available Online: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/michiganalumni>

### APPENDIX III

#### **Interview Questions and Results**

##### **Leaders: Non-Michigan Residents**

|  |
|--|
| Tell me how you are connected to Michigan (may include specific community or institution).   |
| What in your view attracts people to (your community), Michigan? To Live?  |
| What in your view attracts people to (your community), Michigan? To Work?  |
| What in your view attracts people to (your community), Michigan? To Play?  |
| What/who do you perceive to be 3-5 key institutions or anchors in (your community)?  |
| Do you see (your community)/Michigan as having a community alumni network, meaning people who don't live in the community who are investing in businesses or supporting local community initiatives? |

|   |
|---|
| Think of yourself/your alumni/your expatriate friends. What do you think are the top one or two ways they would like to get (re)engaged with Michigan?                              |
| What stor(ies) do you think we need to tell, or language we could use, to help alumni feel they can engage in supporting entrepreneurship, civic and social innovation in Michigan? |
| What types of platforms or communication channels do you think would best engage a network of alumni in efforts across Michigan?  |
| Who are other individuals we should connect with for an interview, group session or online survey feedback?   |

**Leaders: Michigan Residents**

|  |
|--|
| What leadership role do you play in Michigan   |
| What in your view attracts people to (your community), Michigan? To Live?  |
| What in your view attracts people to (your community), Michigan? To Work?  |
| What in your view attracts people to (your community), Michigan? To Play?  |
| What/who do you perceive to be 3-5 key institutions or anchors in (your community)?  |
| Do you see (your community)/Michigan as having a community alumni network, meaning people who don't live in the community who are investing in businesses or supporting local community initiatives? |
| In what ways do you work with Michigan alumni? (if at all)   |
| What do you perceive to be the biggest barriers alumni face when looking to re-connect and make a contribution at home?  |
| What stor(ies) do you think we need to tell, or language we could use, to help alumni feel they can engage in supporting entrepreneurship, civic and social innovation in Michigan?                  |
| What types of platforms or communication channels do you think would best engage a network of alumni in efforts across Michigan?   |

**Alumni Leaders in Other States**

**Media Leaders**

**APPENDIX IV**

**List of Interviewees**

**Michigan Expatriates**

|              |                                     |
|--------------|-------------------------------------|
| Erik Floden  | Co-founder Flint Club               |
| Gordon Young | Creator and author FlintExpats Blog |

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|                    |                                 |
|--------------------|---------------------------------|
| Edward Marshall    | Vice President at Credit-Suisse |
| Beth Schill        | Partnership for Public Service  |
| Clarence Wardell   | TinyGive                        |
| Jay Adelson        | Opsmatic                        |
| Rishi Jaitly       | Twitter India                   |
| Scott Flood        | Lakeland Venture Partners       |
| Cathleen Cavanaugh | Cavanaugh Associates            |
| David Schon        | Nixon Peabody                   |

### **Michigan Leaders**

|                        |   |
|------------------------|---|
| David Lossing          | Director of Government Affairs for UM-Flint and Mayor of Linden |
| Arnold Weinfeld        | Michigan Municipal League and Prima Civitas Foundation          |
| Doug Rothwell          | Business Leaders for Michigan                                   |
| Jocelyn Benson         | Wayne State Law School Dean                                     |
| Mayor George Heartwell | Grand Rapids  |
| Neal Hegarty           | VP for CS Mott Foundation                                       |
| Paul Jacques           | Director of Community and Student Engagement                    |
| Patricia Farrell       | President's Council State Universities of Michigan              |
| Brenda Rudiger         | Michigan Tech   |
| Marjory Raymer         | Mlive   |