Dear MSU Board of Trustees,

We are writing to follow up on former Chairperson Brian Breslin’s response (see attached) concerning the Reclaim MSU policy proposal endorsed by the Faculty Senate. Although the response was written by the previous Board and addressed to the Faculty Senate, as authors of the proposal, Reclaim MSU and the Roosevelt Institute believe it would be helpful for us to respond to clarify key points. We have also attached a letter and short publications from Professors Judith Wilde and James Finkelstein, recognized experts on presidential searches. Thank you for the opportunity to address the Board’s questions about our proposal.

Former Chairperson Breslin asked for clarification in reference “to the intended purpose of the proposed University Board.” Specifically: “Is the University Board intended as a restructuring of the existing Board of Trustees or as a new board to work collaboratively with and in an advisory capacity to the Board of Trustees?” The intended purpose of the University Board is to be a board that surrounds the BOT without taking away their constitutional power. All committees at MSU are advisory to the BOT. However, the new University Board would help provide fundamental cultural transformation at the highest level of governance. The two faculty members and two students (elected respectively by faculty and students) would each have a voice and a vote on all decisions coming to the BOT. We did not delineate specifics in our proposal so that we could discuss with the BOT how this could work. One practical option would be for the University Board to be present prior to all BOT meetings, to discuss and vote on all matters that the BOT is considering, after which the BOT will make their separate vote. This would facilitate accountable, transparent discussion between faculty, students and Board members, while retaining the BOT’s constitutional authority. In this way, student and faculty representative positions will be clear to the Trustees. In addition, the ways that the Board responds to faculty and student positions will be clear to the wider community.

In reference to the part of our proposal that addresses the presidential search, former Chairperson Breslin states: “We believe these concerns have subsequently been addressed as reflected in the composition of the Presidential Search Committee and the inclusive and transparent process the Committee has followed.” Respectfully, we do not believe the BOT has addressed our concerns.

First, we have asked for the Board to adopt new bylaws outlining an inclusive search process for the presidential search. Such bylaws have not been adopted.

Second, we do not believe that the process of selecting the Presidential Search Committee has been inclusive. There are many problems with the search committee and the process that have been signaled not only by Reclaim but also by members of Faculty Senate and University Council. Faculty and students have repeatedly asked for transparency and inclusiveness and have put forward motions in response to the current search process to ask the BOT to resolve these problems.

Third, although the community was invited to provide guidance on our needs and wants in a new president through listening sessions, that is the only part of the process that has been inclusive. The search has since been closed completely. Our proposal specifically asks for members of the MSU
community to be able to engage with top candidates in open forums. While we acknowledge that the recent trend in searches for university presidents has been that they be closed, MSU is not just any institution of higher education. The failures of our institution have made it absolutely necessary for us to have transparency and to have full community engagement with top candidates. In support of this position, we have attached a letter and Chronicle of Higher Education articles from Professors Judith Wilde and James Finkelstein which make clear that there is no empirical evidence to support search firms’ claims that it will not be possible to secure the best candidates with a search that includes community engagement of finalists. Wilde and Finkelstein also note that, while closed searches benefit search firms and candidates, they may not meet the needs of the MSU community or serve the public interest.

Fourth, we have also proposed that you modify the BOT bylaws so that “if two thirds of the members of the Academic Congress should oppose the selected candidate for President, the Board of Trustees should not be able to select this candidate as President of our university.” It is shocking that the Board could choose to force the faculty to accept a bad choice for president through a bad process, especially when a substantial majority disagrees with this choice. And yet this is exactly what has happened in the BOT’s decision on the previous president and interim president.

Finally, in reference to the proposed constitutional amendments, we are aware that this is, as you state, “outside the authority of the Board of Trustees,” and we acknowledge that “these changes would impact other educational institutions that should have an equal opportunity to contribute to the discussion around these issues.” We hope that we can count on you, in addition to our own efforts, to help us in such discussions with other institutions.

We thank you for this opportunity to respond. We acknowledge that the attached response was sent by the former Chairperson of a previous Board. We now have a new BOT, and we are hopeful that this new BOT is moving us in a new direction.

We ask that the new BOT consider our proposal, and we urge you to adopt the bylaws changes at your next BOT meeting, both as concerns the University Board and the presidential search. This proposal, written by students, faculty and staff members, was endorsed by the Faculty Senate and more than 1000 others, including Trustees Scott and Tebay. It addresses, as we have explained, some fundamental issues of shared governance and transparency through policies that you can easily adopt. These are urgent and necessary first steps, and we believe they are critical ones to take at this juncture.

Respectfully,

Reclaim MSU

Roosevelt Institute