

SPRING 2025 | NEWSLETTER

# MSU FAME Program

*For Alumni & Friends*





◀ The FAME team at the 2024 fall welcome event.

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When we invest in the whole student—not just their academic journey, but their sense of belonging and well-being—students are able to move from surviving to thriving.

- Chiquita Whittington

## LETTER FROM DIRECTOR:

# Chiquita Whittington



Dear Alumni and Friends,

The 2024–2025 academic year has marked a period of tremendous growth and engagement within the FAME (Fostering Academic Mentorship and Excellence) community. Student participation in our core offerings—including coaching, mentoring, and life skills or social events—has more than doubled compared to the previous academic year. This increased engagement is a testament to our commitment to fostering a supportive and empowering environment where students can thrive. A key factor in this growth has been our ability to offer more engagement scholarships, thanks to the continued generosity of our donors. These scholarships have helped remove financial barriers and allowed more students to participate fully in FAME programming and leadership development opportunities.

Our growing community has also led to increased internal capacity. This year, we were pleased to bring on an administrative assistant, a step that has significantly enhanced our ability to serve students efficiently and manage program logistics more effectively. We are also proud to have maintained a fully stocked Care Closet throughout the academic year, providing free access to essential hygiene products and household supplies. This initiative has been a tremendous support to students, ensuring they can focus on their education without the added stress of securing basic necessities. We are deeply grateful to the many supporters—on campus and in the broader community—who have contributed to making this possible.

None of these accomplishments would have been achievable without the ongoing partnership and generosity of our donors, volunteers, and collaborators. Your support continues to make a meaningful difference in the lives of our students and the strength of the FAME program.

Thanks for your continued support of our students and being a part of the FAMEily!  
**#MSUFAME**

*“When we invest in the whole student—not just their academic journey, but their sense of belonging and well-being—students are able to move from surviving to thriving.”*

- Chiquita V. Whittington, LMSW- FAME Director





## STUDENT SPOTLIGHT: Ellery Lemiso

The Michigan State University FAME Program is a resource center designed to provide support and resources to students who have experienced foster care, homelessness, kinship care, first-generation or are independent for various reasons.

Some first-generation college students often struggle to navigate the college experience. Lacking family-provided resources and wisdom can make for an isolating four years.

“I was the first person in my family to go to college,” said Ellery Lemiso, Michigan State University senior and member of the FAME Program. “It was really hard to figure everything out.”

Lemiso, who joined FAME as a freshman, found the program to be an invaluable resource that enriched her college

experience. “It has helped immensely,” she said. “Anytime I have a problem, I go straight to Chiquita, and she helps me every single time — it’s amazing.”

FAME offers a wealth of resources, including full access to its Care Closet, which provides personal care items, household supplies, school materials and food. The program also includes coaching, monthly life skills training, events and mentoring.

Over her four years on campus, Lemiso credits FAME not only with providing resources but also fostering a community of friends and mentors who have shaped her journey.

“I’ve made a lot of good friends in FAME,” said Lemiso. “I have my mentor from FAME who’s helped me out a lot, too. So, I’ve created a support system very quickly.”

Despite FAME being a valuable resource, some students hesitate to join due to the stigma of “being a little embarrassed to identify with that kind of community,” said Lemiso. “I understand it can be difficult, but that’s not what FAME is all about,” she continued. “Definitely join. FAME is so helpful; you don’t have to participate in everything, but you can figure out what you need and curate it to fit your experience.”

If you’re a student who has experienced foster care, homelessness, kinship care, are first-generation or are independent for various reasons, the FAME Program is here to help you succeed. Whether it’s academic resources, mentorship, or a sense of community, FAME offers the tools and support you need to thrive. [Click here](#) to learn more about the FAME Program.

## STUDENT SPOTLIGHT: Maggie Wilson

Founded in 2019, the **MSU FAME Program Speaker’s Bureau** was established to equip FAME students with the skills necessary to tell their stories in meaningful, safe and effective ways.

The bureau provides students with a semester-long, public speaking training program with an emphasis on empowering them to share their stories effectively. “The most rewarding part of being in the FAME Speaker’s Bureau is helping incoming

students discover FAME,” said Magdalyn Wilson, FAME student and senior at MSU. A FAME student since her freshman year, Wilson attributes a large portion of her college success to the program’s vast network of support – including the Speaker’s Bureau.

As a student who spent time in the foster care program, Wilson struggled navigating the college experience. “There was no one to tell me where to get help, or how/when I should be getting research experience, which left me feeling frustrated and alone,” she explained. Understanding firsthand the struggles FAME eligible students face in higher-ed – and how FAME alleviates those struggles almost entirely – Wilson utilizes the Speaker’s Bureau to “share my experience with others so they can experience the joy and support that I have.”

The FAME Program also financially compensates students for completing the training, and for their public speaking engagements. In addition, it grants students the opportunity to meet with donors, alumni and community members, giving them the chance to network and enhance their social skills.

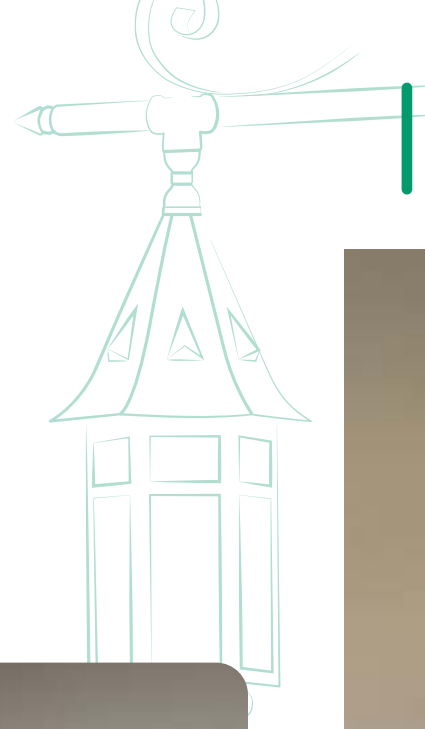
During her first year in the Speaker’s Bureau, Wilson spoke at an

alumni luncheon at the Broad Art Museum. Wilson was able to effectively and powerfully express herself and tell her story in front of donors and alumni. “There were no tears or anything like that,” she said. The Speaker’s Bureau has given Wilson the skills and experience as a public speaker and networker, she explained. It has also “allowed me to gain comfortability in front of large audiences, which is a skill that I will use in my career field and throughout my lifetime.”

The FAME Program has supported Wilson’s growth in many ways since her freshman year, even leading her to find her best friend. “Never have I met someone who got me so quickly,” she said. “It was them who convinced me to actually get involved with FAME and its student activity board.”

Not only did FAME provide Wilson with a community of peers who understood her struggles, they also provided resources like mentoring and coaching -- as well as toiletries and food items that students without support don’t always have the money to purchase on their own. “I’m not being hyperbolic when I say that this program truly changed the trajectory of my college experience and without it, I don’t know who or where I would be,” said Wilson.





## Child Welfare Event

## FAME 2024 Harvest Dinner



*Students, staff and mentors had a great time at the annual FAME Harvest Dinner*



FAME students and Director Chiquita Whittington recently participated in a transformative Speakers Bureau event focused on reshaping the child welfare system through an equity lens. Hosted by the MSU School of Social Work, the event featured national expert and author Dr. Jessica Pryce, whose work challenges traditional models of child welfare and centers lived experience as a driver for systemic change.

FAME students shared their personal stories alongside Child Welfare Fellows, offering powerful insights into how policy, practice, and community support must evolve to better serve youth impacted by care systems. Through this event, FAME students not only amplified their voices but also deepened their leadership in shaping a more equitable future for families and communities.



STUDENT AND MENTOR:

# Emma & Cindy

The MSU FAME Program’s mentoring program matches current FAME students with a volunteer mentor from the community. Mentors serve as social, emotional and professional support for students as they navigate their academic, professional and personal goals on campus. Since its inception, the FAME Mentor Program has paired dozens of students with professionals across various industries, providing both career and personal support.

“I joined the FAME Mentor Program because I wanted to have someone who could help me with employment in my future career field, and someone who can give me other ways of navigating life,” said Emma Elferdink, FAME student and mentee. FAME emphasizes pairing a student with a mentor currently employed in the student’s major or area of professional interest, ensuring meaningful connections that last beyond graduation.

Elferdink was paired with Cindy Hudson, a communications manager at MSU’s Michigan Sea Grant Extension Program: a program dedicated towards fostering healthy Great Lakes coastal ecosystems, communities, and economies. Both Hudson and Elferdink share a strong passion for wildlife preservation and rehabilitation. “One of the first things we ever did together was to go to MSU’s Burke Banding Station where we were able to observe birds being netted, tagged and released,” Hudson said. “It’s fun to share my love of learning about animals with someone who also loves learning about them!”

The biggest goal the two have worked on during their time together has been finding Elferdink a job in her career field.

“One valuable lesson I have learned from Cindy is the value of networking and what it looks like,” Elferdink explained. “I have currently applied to one of her recommended jobs and hope to hear back soon!”

In addition to providing support in the professional development space, mentors provide genuine human connection to the students in need. During her time at MSU, Elferdink dealt with the loss of multiple family members. “Cindy has dealt with losses such as these and has regularly checked in on me, while also sending me cards (not just for my losses),” said Elferdink. “I don’t really get much personal mail due to my small family, but Cindy’s letters have brought a sense of normalcy in my life.”

Being a part of FAME’s Mentor Program has positively influenced Elferdink’s future by providing her “an opportunity to find jobs relevant to what I want my future to be,” she explained. “Cindy will continue to be a part of my future as a mentor and as a friend.”

Interested in learning more about the mentor program? Check out the FAME website. [LEARN MORE](#)

Emma and Cindy playing mini golf together during one of their student-mentor outings. ▼



“

Cindy will continue to be a part of my future as a mentor and as a friend.

- Emma Elferdink



# FAME Mentor Program

The FAME Mentor Program connects current undergraduate FAME students with dedicated volunteer mentors from campus and the larger community. The program focuses on matching students with mentors who are currently employed in fields related to the students’ academic majors or professional interests, fostering relevant and meaningful connections.

Mentors provide critical social, emotional, and professional support, helping students navigate their academic journeys, career development, and personal goals.

Each mentoring relationship is designed to last a minimum of one year, with an average time commitment of four hours per month. Mentors and students connect in person and electronically. Mentors are required to hold at least a bachelor’s

degree, commit to a minimum of four hours monthly, and complete an interview, background checks, reference checks and trainings prior to being matched with a student.

Some examples of FAME Mentor Program events include:

- MSU Dairy Store Ice Cream Social in September
- Harvest Dinner with students in November
- Mentor Appreciation Event at Munn Ice Arena in January

During the 2024-2025 School year there were a total of 29 students matched with a mentor. This includes 20 new matches and 9 new mentors trained and matched.



29 students  
.....  
matched with  
29 mentors



9  
New  
Mentors

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

Contact: [fame@msu.edu](mailto:fame@msu.edu)



## ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT:

# Gigi Damboba

### How did you first become connected with FAME?

"I first connected with FAME through the financial aid office during my freshman year. I learned about additional aid for which I was eligible, and a staff member from the financial aid office gave me some information about FAME. This led me to reach out and attend several events, not realizing at the time that would become my most significant resource throughout my college experience."

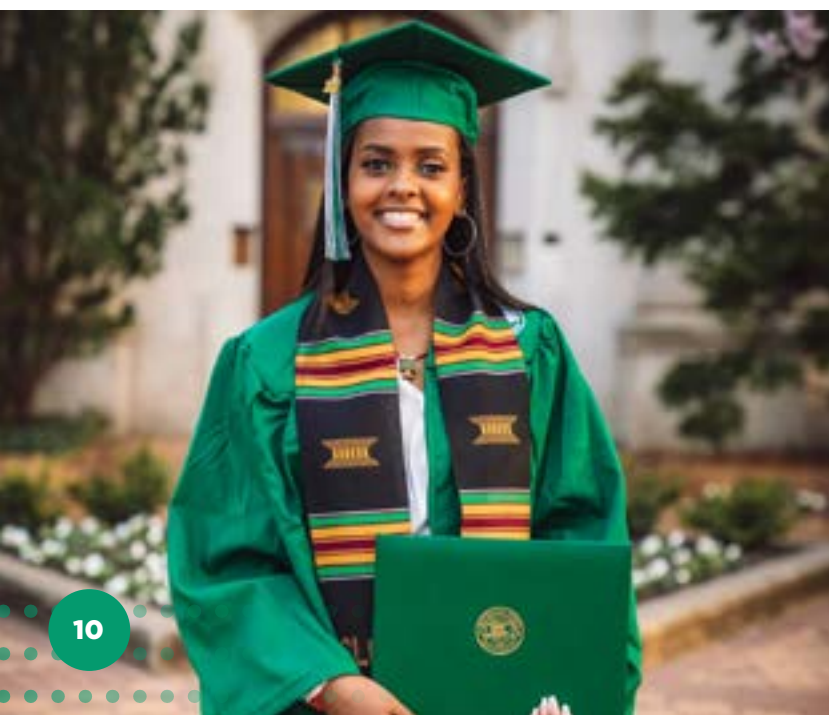
### What services do you recall utilizing through FAME?

"In my freshman and sophomore years, I attended numerous events and connected with many wonderful people. Unfortunately, when COVID-19 struck at the end of my sophomore year, everything changed. I continued to utilize the available resources as much as I could, such as monthly coaching and mentoring sessions, as well as finals week survival kits. However, it was challenging with the campus essentially shut down."

### How was FAME beneficial?

"I truly believe that FAME supported me when I needed it the most. Especially during such formative years of my life, I was growing and learning a lot. The people I met, the resources I received, really helped me get through so much. I also was able to build a great relationship with my mentor and we still stay connected post-graduation. I am so grateful for everything that FAME helped me through and so happy to have been part of such an amazing

Gigi Damboba standing in front of the Beaumont Tower ▼



community."

### What kept you engaged in FAME (with being so busy with academics and other on-campus organizations)?

"What kept me involved with FAME was the support I received! The support I received from Andrea Martineau and Chiquita Whittington was unmatched, they helped me feel accepted and understood. FAME was truly a community; it was a nice feeling to connect with people who shared similar experiences with me. My only wish is that COVID-19 didn't take so much of it. With the pandemic hitting, it did feel like it took away my last two years of undergrad, but I am still grateful for all the experiences I had."

### When did you graduate from MSU?

"I graduated from MSU in the Spring of 2022. Although, COVID-19 was still around, I was still lucky enough to walk across the stage. I am the first to graduate from college in my entire family and a first-generation student, so it was extremely humbling to make my parents proud."

### What has life after graduation looked like? What are you up to now?

"Life after graduation has been interesting to say the least:

- I have traveled to several countries, including Dubai, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Ghana, and went home to visit my family in Ethiopia.
- I decided to go back to school full time, so I am still a Spartan and will be graduating this winter (December 2024) with my MPH!
- I have been working full time as a Clinical Research Specialist at Corewell Health in the Grand Rapids area.
- After graduation this winter, I am hoping to relocate and find a job as an Epidemiologist!

"I am excited for what the future holds and am ready to start the next chapter of my life!"



▲ FAME staff and students were invited to attend the College of Social Science Scholarship and Achievement Luncheon at the Broad Art Museum.

## FAME Scholarships

The FAME Program continues to provide vital financial support to students with lived experience in foster care, helping to ease financial burdens and empower academic success. During the 2024-2025 academic year, FAME awarded a total of \$105,520 in scholarships across 42 awards.

These scholarships not only alleviate financial stress but also affirm our commitment to supporting FAME students' academic journeys and professional development. Whether through assistance with tuition, experiential learning, or internship opportunities, each award helps build a pathway to student success.

## SCHOLARSHIP IMPACT

*Having received these funds, I am able to comfortably complete my final semester of my BASW studies this summer which will allow me to continue on to pursue my MSW this fall with Advanced Standing to fulfill my passion of becoming a child and family therapist. Your support in my goals has made all the difference in my future. Thank you!*

”

2024 - 2025

# \$105K

**TOTAL FUNDS GIVEN:** 42 SCHOLARSHIPS AWARDED

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

Contact Rachel Schmidt: [rschmidt@msu.edu](mailto:rschmidt@msu.edu)

# Zach Constan



**What inspired you to become a mentor in the FAME program?**

“I met a mentoring advocate at church who encouraged me!”

**Can you describe your first meeting with your mentee?**

“I leapt at the chance to bond with a fellow science nerd. We have a lot in common! It was also kind of a thrill to see MSU from the perspective of a student again.”

**What are some goals you and your mentee have worked toward together?**

“Exploring research/career paths for sure. Plus, I’m so happy to see him keep music in his life as a hobby and a way to de-stress.”

**How has being a mentor impacted you personally and professionally?**

“As an educator, a Christian, and a father, helping Tom is incredibly satisfying. I really appreciate having a mentee who’s also a friend.”

**What is one memorable experience you’ve had with your mentee?**

“Meeting in a coffee shop and finding out neither of us wanted coffee, only hot chocolate! I just knew we would get along after that.”

**What advice would you give to someone considering becoming a mentor?**

“Don’t be intimidated. Mentoring isn’t necessarily easy, but it’s not scary. You really can help others and may find it incredibly rewarding!”

**How do you see your role in helping your mentee navigate challenges?**

“I’m just an extra brain to help come up with ideas and make suggestions. My experiences can be a great resource for a young person!”

**What have you learned from your mentee throughout this experience?**

“I’ve learned so much about neuroscience and the research going on at MSU!”

**How do you hope this mentorship relationship will continue beyond the program?**

“I will always want to check in with Tom to see what he’s doing next. His steps after graduation will be in very new territory, so I hope to help him at every stage!”



I’m just **an extra brain** to help come up with ideas and make suggestions. My experiences can be a great resource for a young person!

- Zach Constan

# Sean Pitcher



For Sean Pitcher, the path to becoming a future physician started with a phone call. In the summer of 2018—just a month before beginning his freshman year at MSU—he received an unexpected message from the FAME Program. At first, he wasn’t sure it applied to him. “For some odd reason I thought it wasn’t meant for me and ended up ignoring the email,” Sean recalled. But after a conversation with a FAME life skills coach, he was reassured that he belonged. “I am so thankful for that phone call since I can’t even imagine a time at MSU where I wasn’t participating in FAME.”

Sean immersed himself in every aspect of the program—from one-on-one coaching to student leadership roles. He utilized workshops, mentorship, the care closet, and even writing support for graduate school applications. “FAME is one of the reasons for who and where I am today,” he said. Amid academic challenges and personal hardships—especially during his freshman year when his father was diagnosed with a brain tumor—FAME was a lifeline. “The meetings I had with my coach gave me a place where I could be vulnerable but also gave me life skills that I still utilize to this day.”

His leadership extended into his role on the FAME Student Activities Board, where he served as Secretary and President. “Being involved...was very beneficial as I saw myself growing as a leader and developed more confidence in hosting meetings, setting agendas and public speaking,” he said.

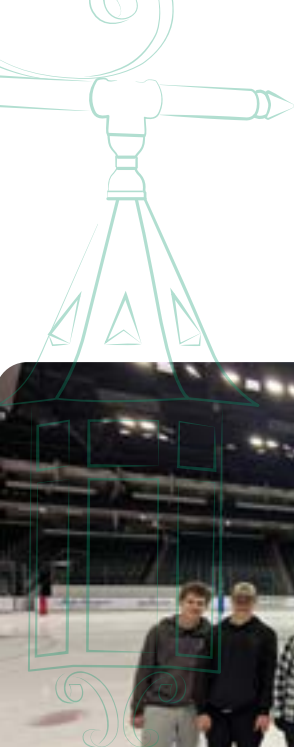
Sean graduated from MSU in Spring 2022 and gained clinical experience working as a phlebotomist with the Red Cross and as a dialysis technician with Davita. In July 2024, he began his master’s in biomedical sciences at Western Michigan University’s Homer Stryker M.D. School of Medicine. He’ll begin medical school there in 2025. “I have wanted to become a doctor since the age of 12,” Sean shared. “I truly believe that FAME gave me all the resources I needed to succeed and achieve my goals.”

He ended with deep gratitude: “Special thanks to Ashley, Andrea and Chiquita, for always believing in me and giving me a place that felt like a home away from home.”



I have wanted to become a doctor since the age of 12. I truly believe that **FAME gave me all the resources I needed to succeed** and achieve my goals.

- Sean Pitcher



FAME mentors and students. ▲

## Annual Mentor Appreciation Event

To kick off the new year and celebrate National Mentoring Month, the FAME Program hosted its annual Mentor Appreciation Event this January at Munn Ice Arena. The event is a beloved tradition designed to recognize and honor the commitment of FAME mentors who play a vital role in supporting students throughout their college journey.

Mentors and their mentees laced up their skates and hit the ice for a fun-filled evening, followed by a cozy hot chocolate bar and a catered dinner. The atmosphere was warm and joyful as students and mentors alike took time to connect, reflect, and celebrate their growth together.

This gathering is a meaningful reminder of the power of relationships in higher education and the role mentorship plays in helping FAME students feel seen, supported, and empowered.

The FAME team extends heartfelt thanks to all mentors for their continued dedication and impact.

## Speaker's Bureau *at a Glance:*

### MISSION

To equip FAME students with the skills and tools necessary to tell their story in ways that are meaningful, effective and safe.

### PURPOSE

Train students with lived experience in foster care and out-of-home placements to safely and strategically share their expertise. Connect students with paid opportunities, honor diverse backgrounds, and guide reflective storytelling for personal and community impact.

### BENEFITS

- Leadership and public speaking skill development
- Paid speaking opportunities
- Recognition for sharing lived experiences
- Networking with alumni, donors, and community leaders

### STUDENT VIEW:

## Antonice Russaw

Antonice Russaw is a fourth-year student in psychology in the College of Social Science. She is a transfer student and a member of several student organizations.

I transferred from a community college and then a university and then to MSU. It was just a lot of moving around and getting used to everything coming to MSU from a smaller kind of university. It was a lot different for me.

The hardest thing for me being a transfer student, was trying to figure out my credits and getting everything situated in making sure my grades were up to date and that the stuff I needed was actually correct.

After my first year here, however, I would say that I really found my community within all of my different organizations that I am a part of. I'm involved in the Dow STEM Scholars Program, the Office of Cultural and Academic Transitions, TRIO Student Support Services and the Transfer Student Advisory Board. The TSAB advisers, Dr. Charles and Mr. Ashley, have personally helped me through many challenges here at MSU from helping to advocate for me with different offices to supporting me through finals week and being a listening ear. I'm also in FAME. Being part of FAME has given me the opportunity to be a voice for other students by being on the student speakers bureau and sharing my experiences with donors, current students and future students. The program director has also been a big part in helping me through challenges here at MSU as well.

At MSU, it's about creating that village and having those people in your corner. For me, it is being part of my different organizations and different support groups within MSU.

I also serve on the executive board for Successful Black Women of Michigan State University. Our mission includes helping other Black women build their community here at a PWI (predominantly white institution) like MSU and increase the graduation rates. Being a Black woman at a Big Ten PWI like MSU has come with several challenges, whether it be within different offices of the institution, facility and staff, other students or the institution itself. Oftentimes it's due to a simple lack of empathy, understanding and poor comprehension skills. Having the amazing village I do have has helped me find my voice and not be afraid to be the "problem student." Although sitting through long meetings can get frustrating, I often find peace knowing the impact it could have for others like me who may face a similar issue. I also see it as a chance to educate others and provide input to creating a more inclusive environment for everyone at MSU.

Being a Spartan to me is about empowering others and making sure that you have your village. With that is also being able to give back and/or help directly those people who maybe don't have that village yet. We're all here to create something better for ourselves or families and for some of us we are that change for our families. Throughout this journey it is very important to also take care of yourself because it starts with you, so make sure YOU are happy and healthy first which is where the importance of your own village comes in.

MSU is super big, so it's about those things that make it feel a little more personal and homey that make you feel safe and want to claim yourself as a Spartan.



Antonice Russaw. Courtesy photo. ▲

“

Being part of FAME has given me the opportunity to **be a voice for other students** by being on the student speakers bureau and sharing my experiences with donors, current students and future students. The program director has also been a big part in helping me through challenges here at MSU as well.

- Antonice Russaw

# Our mission and how to give

FAME is a resource center for foster youth alumni attending MSU as well as for youth who were in kinship care, have experienced homelessness, or are otherwise independent. FAME exists to provide support and resources to these students during their time at MSU to help them be successful during their collegiate experience on MSU's campus and during their transition to becoming MSU alumni.

## GIVING INFORMATION

For more information on how to support students and programs at MSU FAME, please contact:

### **Rachel Schmidt**

Associate Director of Development  
College of Social Science  
[rschmidt@msu.edu](mailto:rschmidt@msu.edu)



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OUR SCIENCE **TRANSFORMS THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE**  
AND INSPIRES LEADERS