

Good afternoon. My name is Carolyn Rodz, Founder of Circular Board, a virtual accelerator for high-growth female founders. I am here today to advocate on behalf of our nation's leading innovators, entrepreneurs and influencers, and specifically for one of the largest untapped economic and social opportunities in our country: women entrepreneurs. If women and men participated equally in the entrepreneurial ecosystem, the United States' GDP could rise by \$30 billion. Yet in spite of this, less than 5% of venture capital goes to female founders, and when we start to look at minorities, the numbers are significantly lower.

The current startup ecosystem is built upon a process that funnels information from a small group of people, predominantly white males in Silicon Valley and other dense startup cities, to their personal social networks and trusted colleagues. When you consider that venture capitalists invested \$58.2 billion in companies with all-male founders in 2016, and just \$1.46 billion in all female teams, in spite of the fact that all-women and diverse leadership teams provide stronger financial returns, it becomes apparent that our system for funneling capital into companies solely based on financial opportunity is flawed. In 2016, 5,839 male-founded companies got venture capital funding, compared to just 359 female-founded companies -- in other words, companies run by men got more than 16 times more funding than companies run by women.

And to think: 2016 was a good year, with women-led companies making up 4.95% of all venture capital deals in 2016, the highest percentage over the past decade, and representing just 2.19% of dollars invested.

Which brings me to the rationale for the startup accelerator, which is, at its core, an advocacy group for founders with the intention of connecting them with the experts, investors, media and processes surrounding the art of the startup. Think of the accelerator as a liaison between a founder, who likely knows much about how to operate their business and succeed within their industry, but often little about how to raise capital, get covered by the media, build support within their local community and get the endorsement of the most influential minds in the startup ecosystem.

At Circular Board, our most important job is to understand the innovation landscape, so that we can share this expertise with our founders, who are heads down building businesses that are impacting the world around us, creating jobs, and driving our economy forward. It is our responsibility, as their guides, to ensure that their time is spent wisely, that their business models will resonate with potential funders, and that, most importantly, they gain a voice within the relatively small, and relatively homogenous, startup world.

At Circular Board, we lead companies through a 12-week, 100% virtual accelerator that attracts founders from places like Lake Oswego, Oregon, or El Paso, Texas, and connects them with the intellectual capital that resides nationwide. When these founders are armed with a network of experts, introduced to early stage investors, and supported by a community of unique perspectives and varied experiences, they are better prepared to overcome the dismal statistics that currently define female founders. Take

Suuchi Ramesh, for example, an Indian immigrant in New Jersey who has created nearly 50 jobs for women on welfare and generated over \$1mm in revenues in her first 18 months of business. Or Adrienne Weir of Medolac, who has reduced pre-term infant mortality rates by over 50% through fortified human breast milk, and is currently raising her Series C with an estimated valuation of \$45 million. Overall, Circular Board founders have raised over \$26 million in funding, and have created over 162 jobs.

Overwhelmingly, our founders cite the relationships they built as the turning points within their respective businesses.

It is true, that accelerators are popping up all over the country, but what is important to recognize is that each of those accelerators tackles a unique segment of founders, from industry verticals to marginalized audiences to impact centered hubs, attracting expertise that can support the specific problems facing these groups of founders.

Accelerators like Circular Board bring more than mentorship, they bring energy to the startup landscape, forging connections and bridging the gap between enterprise, government, foundations and more. They are a loud, organized and consistent voice for founders, and a pipeline for opportunities presented by organizations like the Small Business Administration, Kauffman Foundation, Case Foundation and more.

Through our five cohorts, we've learned that resource connectivity is the greatest value we can provide to a founder, which is why we are pouring all of our resources into building a global artificial intelligence platform that will support women at all stages of growth, and connect them to the tools, experts, content and events relevant to their real-

time needs and unique company profile. There is an incredible demand for startup accelerators, and it is our mission at Circular Board to avail every entrepreneur, regardless of gender, ethnicity, geography, capital resources or cultural constraint, the opportunity to engage the right support to scale their business, all with the end goal of solving our world's most pressing problems and creating sustainable, meaningful impact.

I urge each of you today to actively engage with accelerators in need of your expertise. As policymakers, there are significant opportunities to support these accelerators, not only through government funded programs like the SBA's Small Business Growth Accelerator Fund, which we are grateful to be recipients of, but also by supporting trade agreements that open new markets for businesses of all sizes, streamlining the process of registering businesses and applying for government resources, particularly when working with strategic offices such as the Patent & Trademark Office, the Department of Commerce, the Small Business Administration and the Federal Drug Administration, and enabling access to broadband in all parts of our country.

Engaging with accelerators will allow you to better understand how founders are supporting our country through innovation and economic development, and to see for yourself how the accelerator is a model not only promoting business success, but also national leadership and economic prosperity. I thank you for taking the time today to put a spotlight on what I believe to be one of the greatest economic opportunities of our time.