Georgia Tech taps 'crowd funding' to pay for research

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By [Kristina Torres](#) - The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Attention geeks, what deserves your money more: honey bees equipped with tiny transmitters or a lumbering Robosaurus?

Folks from around the world can now vote with their dollars about research at Georgia Tech, as one of the state's top institutions launched a website last week tapping into that most basic of Internet Age fundraising: crowd funding.

Nascent projects about everything from walking robots to buzzing bees are up for bid in the effort's initial stage. University officials hope what comes next will set a national example about how to pay for promising areas of study even without lucrative government or corporate-funded grants.

Call it one of academia's first online pledge drives, where someone's $10 financial promise may eventually help fight illness-inducing superbugs, rescue victims of a mudslide or create new land-use rules that promote urban farming.

"Something scientists haven't done a really good job with is explaining their research to the broader community," co-founder Allison Mercer said of the new "Georgia Tech Starter," which can be accessed online at //starter.gatech.edu/. "We're really hoping this can help our scientists engage with the public in a way they haven't before."

According to Fast Company magazine, which first reported the effort Wednesday, a handful of other universities, including Arizona State University, the University of Vermont and the University of Utah, have engaged outside partners to crowd fund projects.

What makes Georgia Tech unique is that it has kept the entire effort in-house. It also vets each potential project upfront through a peer-review process. Only those that pass the test — essentially to confirm each is financially feasible and no conflicts-of-interest exist — are then added to the Tech Starter website.

Seven projects so far are seeking pledges. Tech Starter is nonprofit and fully integrated with the university, so all the money goes to research or research-supporting efforts like site administration and facility upkeep. Researchers are also offering non-monetary perks, depending on how much someone gives. The thank-you's range from a happy email and tax deductible receipt to having your name included as an online definition in the Dictionary 3.0 project currently seeking help through the Tech Starter site.

Jennifer Leavey, a biology instructor, is heading another of the projects, Honey Bees Get Wired, which seeks to glue tiny microchips to bees kept on campus and monitor their travels and the health of their hives. The project sprang from the minds of Tech seniors Jason Morelli-Harlan and Cassidy Swain. All three said such an undergraduate project would not typically qualify for outside grants but could benefit research done at several levels within the university, for scientific and commercial applications. Bees, among other things, can offer a proxy measure about how healthy the environment is.

But even professors well-known in their fields are using Tech Starter. Physics professor Daniel Goldman is heading a team trying to build a robot modeled on dinosaurs. He hopes the effort will not only inform paleontological research but also eventually help build two-legged machines capable of coming to the aid of people in unsafe conditions.

Because the project involves three very distinct fields of study — biology, paleontology and robotics — the team has had trouble winning grants, he said. Now, he hopes through Tech Starter he can convince enough people it's worth a shot.

"There's some level of reputation and vetting that goes on," Goldman said.

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