

Scientists experiment with a new way to fund their research

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Times are tough for scientists with the decimation of the NIH and NSF's budgets and the looming threat of the dreaded sequestration, which could further demolish two of the largest funding sources for most scientific research in the US. With paylines of less than 10% for some grants, more and more scientists are looking outside the box at a new way to fund their research: crowdfunding.

What is crowdfunding? It is soliciting donations from the "crowd" (aka the general population) for a specific cause. Even in the shadow of the Great Recession, crowdfunding has been a huge success for many artists and entrepreneurs. But can it work for scientists?

That's what Ethan Perlstein wants to find out. [He wants to raise \\$25,000 to fund his meth lab](#). No, not a trailer to cook meth like in *Breaking Bad*, but an actual research enterprise that will study how amphetamines accumulate in neurons. Perlstein knows how far \$25,000 can go since he's been analyzing how his lab spends money (as I mentioned in a previous [post](#) about lab websites). If Perlstein reaches his goal, he says he will be able to support a Master's level research scientist for three months as well as three months' worth of supplies. And herein lies one of the challenges of crowdfunding for research: science is expensive and probably way more expensive than your average lay person imagines. The key to funding science in this way will be successfully communicating to the public what the research is, why it is important, and what the money will be used for.

This fact is highlighted by another website: the [SciFund Challenge](#). The SciFund Challenge is a support network for scientists who want to raise money via crowdfunding. It offers resources for successfully communicating the goals of a project to the public (especially through video). In the last round, 75 SciFund projects raised a total of more than \$100,000 (you can see the projects [here](#)). For example, [Kristina Killgrove](#) raised \$10,171 (her goal was \$6000) to study ancient Roman DNA.

Crowdfunding is in its infancy, and there are some open questions that will need to be addressed: Are some projects just too large to be successfully crowdfunded? Are there some projects that are too esoteric for the public to want to fund (but still vitally important for the overall research enterprise)? How do we evaluate outcomes? How will Universities use the money (i.e. will they take a cut for overhead)? How much time does it take to advertise these projects (more or less than grantwriting)?

I, for one, am excited by this new model for funding science. It may not be the answer for all our money woes, but it has the added bonus of increasing public engagement with science. Maybe if more people understand the value of

scientific research and see scientists as real people who need money to do their jobs, they will also be more likely to both open their wallets to directly fund science and to push their congresspeople to support federal funding for the research that can't be funded in this way.