The #SciFund Challenge: Science Funding Through Crowdsourcing

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AsianScientist (Nov. 15, 2011) - Most scientists know the drill. In order to do research, they need funding. To get funding, they need to apply for grants, usually from government agencies like the National Science Foundation (NSF) or the National Institutes of Health (NIH), and sometimes from private foundations.

However, two main problems arise from this traditional venue of funding:

One, these agencies provide funding through taxpayer dollars, meaning that many people are already funding scientific research, but they don't know exactly what research their money goes to; and two, it has become increasingly hard to receive funding through this method.

This is where the #SciFund Challenge steps in.

#SciFund proposes crowdsource funding (or simply crowdfunding) – an alternate venue of funding that has worked for the microfinance sector and the arts, yet remains largely untried in the sciences. Crowdfunding describes the collection of money from individual sponsors toward a specific organization or cause.

Under the Challenge, scientists launch their own crowdfunding campaigns by laying out their proposals and research to the public and letting the public decide which projects to donate to.

This method serves a dual purpose: it provides for project funding and at the same time allows for the direct involvement of the public in science. Not only does it let people see exactly where their money goes, but also it engages the public in current scientific research, appealing to their interests or fascinations.

Examples include:

> Social networking to deliver vaccines in rural Tanzania? Interesting!
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> Using plants as biofuel? Cool! And…
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> Explosive duck erections? Definitely weird enough to check out.

But how viable is crowdfunding in the future of science?

Some see it as a plausible alternative, especially for funding smaller research in which "a little goes a long way."

Others see traditional funding as more fair and less reliant on the public. Yet as U.S. government science spending starts to diminish while spending in Asia continues to grow, will its impact become more significant with time?

Furthermore, will crowdfunding be able to overcome some of the major obstacles – such as advertising its projects to the public, as Dr. Shermin de Silva (whose elephant coexistence project, also part of #SciFund, also referred to in this previous Asian Scientist article) points out on the #SciFund blog?

The first real step to answering these questions relies on the success of #SciFund, which ends on December 15.

For more information, visit the #SciFund Challenge website and check out its sponsored projects.

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