

## The Scientist: NewsBlog:

New fills for funding gaps

Posted by [Alla Katsnelson](#)

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David Vitrant, a PhD student in genetics at the University of Pittsburgh, thinks he's got a creative idea for alternative schemes to fund research: simply ask the public for money. He recently launched non-profit, called [FundScience](#), that aims to connect researchers with potential donors.

To explain why he started FundScience, Vitrant cited a number well-known to NIH-funded scientists: 42, the average age at which researchers these days receive their first [R01 grants](#). "That's a lot of time, and by the time you get that, are you still going to be a scientist?" he asked.

On the FundScience Web site, researchers will be able to post short abstracts and videos describing their projects, and individuals who log onto the site would be able to scroll through projects and "vote with their money on which projects to fund," Vitrant said. (The posted projects would first undergo some kind of vetting by scientists.) Researchers who receive funding -- the target amount for each grant is \$50,000 -- would then stay in touch with their citizen-funders, providing them with progress reports of their work.

Although the NIH has a few schemes for early stage researchers looking for their first grants, said Vitrant, "there's no broad mechanism for this yet." That's the niche that FundScience would like to fill.

Vitrant sees FundScience as essentially as microphilanthropy for researchers. The model is similar to [Kiva](#), a Web site where individuals, generally from developing countries, post requests for funds to run small business ventures. Potential donors log on, scroll through the list, and choose projects to support.

"I think the main impact of this, and why the public would fund this type of work, is they get direct access to researchers," Vitrant said. "This is not available anywhere else."

How big of a selling point this is remains to be determined. Kiva relies to some extent on empathy -- you read someone's story, something about it strikes a cord in you, and you decide to reach out and help. Will a basic research project on, say, chromatin remodeling, with no obvious or immediate health implications, have a similar effect on the public?

"I wouldn't envision it happening at first," said Vitrant. "This is a very untested marketplace." Initially, he thinks, people will gravitate to projects

that they are familiar with. "Based on our research we anticipate that projects more prevalent in the news will get funded first," he said. Ultimately, if the model takes off, FundScience would expand to research in a number of topics, such as green tech and public health.

FundScience isn't alone in trying to fill the funding [gaps plaguing research](#) these days. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation announced plans yesterday (October 22) to fund 104 projects relating to global health in what the *Wall Street Journal* [refers to](#) as a "Silicon Valley approach" to investment: Rather than offering large-scale grants, the funding scheme, called [Grand Challenges Explorations](#), will award just \$100,000 to pilot high-risk projects that fall "outside current scientific paradigms," according to a Foundation [news release](#). For example, projects include creating nanoparticles to "soak up" viruses, studying the link between HIV resistance and markers for type 2 diabetes, and turning mosquitoes into "flying syringes" that deliver vaccines.

The Foundation received more than 4,000 proposals for the grants, which, unlike the reams of paper required for an NIH grant, consisted of just two online pages. The awards went to researchers at all levels, from first-time grant recipients to Nobel Prize winners, and funded work at universities, non-profit organizations, government agencies and private companies. A handful of the most successful projects will be able to apply for \$1 million grants down the line.

"We were hoping this program would level the playing field so anyone with a transformational idea could more quickly assess its potential for the benefit of global health," said Dr. Tachi Yamada, president of global health at the Gates Foundation, said in the release.

As for FundScience, Vitrant stressed that many of the details for its model still need to be ironed out. For example, will donors be ok with the fact that lots of donations will go to projects that don't work out? And how will the non-profit support itself? The blog [Medical Writing, Editing, and Grantsmanship](#) noted a few other potential issues. For example, is listing your details on a public Web site such a great idea if you're conducting animal experiments?

Next month, the organization will receive funding for its operating costs from a donor Vitrant doesn't want to name just yet. The hope is to start funding the first few research projects in the first quarter of next year. FundScience is still finalizing its plan for how scientists can submit proposals, and Vitrant said that information will be posted on the Web site shortly.

Meanwhile, Vitrant plans to reach out to scientific organizations such as [Epernicus](#) to explore collaborating. The organization also wants input from the scientific community on the FundScience model. "We really need researchers right now," said Vitrant. "We really need researchers to give

us their opinions on what is useful and what isn't -- the more criticism, the better." So go ahead and pop over to FundScience, and tell Vitrant what you think.

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**Great resource for industry/academic collaboration**

by anonymous poster

[Comment posted 2008-10-24 12:08:45]

This could also serve as a means for academics looking for industry partners, and tap into the SBIR/STTR funds. I, for instance, will certainly utilize this site to track down interested academic investigators for potential collaboration. Keep up the good work.

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