

Power to the professors: A bold, new way to fund research begins at U-Michigan

May 14 2012, By Nicole Casal Moore



MCubed, the University of Michigan's new real-time research funding initiative, was spearheaded by three engineering faculty members: Mark Burns, chair of chemical engineering; Thomas Zurbuchen, associate dean for entrepreneurial programs, and Alec Gallimore, associate dean for research and graduate education. Credit: Laura Rudich, U-M College of Engineering

A first-of-its-kind, real-time research funding initiative at the University of Michigan puts \$15 million into the hands of professors to jumpstart new projects they believe in.

To qualify, three researchers from different disciplines just need to come up with an idea and agree to work together.

A modern alternative to the traditional year-long [government grant](#) review process, the new MCubed program puts university professors in

charge of divvying research dollars in a pure form of peer review.

MCubed is designed to encourage bold research at the interfaces of academic fields, where big breakthroughs tend to happen, according to the designers of the grassroots program.

"The world has changed and yet higher education's funding model is the same. With the speed at which people communicate and share information today, we see an opportunity to do things in a very different way. This is a totally new model that could turn things upside down," said Mark Burns, professor and chair of chemical engineering. Burns spearheaded this effort along with professors Alec Gallimore and Thomas Zurbuchen, both associate deans in the College of Engineering.

Beginning this fall, departments, schools and colleges will allot a \$20,000 token to each participating faculty member. Once three researchers decide to "cube," they register the project online on a first-come, first served basis. They immediately receive \$60,000 to hire one graduate student, undergraduate student, or postdoctoral researcher, and work can begin.

Projects can grow, cube by cube. If 30 faculty members coalesce around one idea, for example, they could open a new large-scale research center with 10 funded positions overnight.

MCubed, a two-year pilot itself, aims to fund pilot studies that could eventually lead to larger traditional grants. It will give researchers new opportunities to follow their instincts, program designers say.

"In the traditional system, faculty are often forced to do research based on what will get funded, as opposed to what's the best idea or what is most important for society," Burns said. "Today those decisions are being made by external parties, and not by the best scientists in the

world. MCubed will change that."

U-M is home to 95 top-ranked programs across the university.

"This program leverages the broad excellence of the University of Michigan. It unleashes some of the most brilliant minds in the world to pursue their most innovative ideas. You can think of it as smart crowdsourcing," said U-M Provost Phil Hanlon.

The provost's office has committed \$5 million toward MCubed. Schools, colleges, and investigators must match that 2 to 1, making MCubed a \$15 million program. A total of 250 projects will be funded in this pilot phase. Funded projects will present findings next year at an innovation showcase symposium.

"This is about making it big," said Thomas Zurbuchen, associate dean of entrepreneurial programs at the College of Engineering. "And sometimes that will mean failing big. It's about swinging for the fence, and we want to send the message that it's OK to miss."

A website where researchers can post and browse project ideas will launch this summer. As part of future phases of the program, the university is considering letting alumni or members of the public contribute directly to a project or submit new project ideas for researchers to consider.

"I can't wait to see the ideas that spring from this exciting initiative," said U-M President Mary Sue Coleman. "MCubed will give researchers new freedom and funding to act on their inspirations."

MCubed is the first program of U-M's Third Century Initiative, a \$50 million, five-year plan to develop innovative, multidisciplinary teaching and scholarship.

The University of Michigan's \$1.24 billion research budget is one of the largest in the nation. U-M is frequently first on the National Science Foundation's annual research spending rankings, most recently in 2010.

Provided by University of Michigan

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