GUIDANCE for students and trainees: Crowdsourcing funding — requesting research support from the online public

The purpose of this guidance is to clarify responsibilities for students and trainees when soliciting individual research funding through crowdsourcing websites. At this time, only students and trainees should utilize this new way of requesting and obtaining relatively small amounts of research support for thesis/dissertation or pilot projects. Students and trainees are requesting research support on their own behalf and not as agents of VCU. The student/trainee should ensure that their faculty mentor/PI is aware of an intention to request this type of funding before posting on a crowdfunding site.

There are a variety of crowdfunding funding sites available. Ensure that you understand your rights and obligations under the site’s terms and conditions, as well as the rights and obligations of your potential donors (for example, is there personal tax liability?).

Development of your individual crowdfunding request

- Include your VCU role on the cover page for the study. Suggested language: “The funding I am seeking is for a research project I am conducting as a student/trainee in [a VCU department/School].” Your VCU faculty mentor or PI should not be named on the crowdfunding cover page.
- Do not use any VCU brand logos. Remember, this funding request is about you and your research, not VCU. Use “I” versus “we” so there is no confusion that this request is your initiative.
- Requested funding is to be used for your direct conduct, analysis, or presentation of the research. Be specific about the use of donated funds. Language should not suggest that the funds will be used by or paid to any VCU entity.

For crowdfunding requests involving human subjects research:

- A crowdfunding request does not require IRB review and approval if the project description is informational ONLY; that is, NO recruitment language or suggestion of recruitment. If you have any doubts, please contact the Office of Research Subject Protections before posting.
- Even though the crowdfunding request itself does not need IRB approval, the IRB does need to know that crowdfunding has been requested or received. The crowdfunding funding (and site) should be indicated in the RAMS-IRB protocol – give URL. Although the crowdfunding title will likely be simpler than the IRB protocol title, the description of the research on the crowdfunding site should conform to the protocol, including numbers of actual or anticipated enrolled participants, procedures, schedule of activities, etc. The IRB reviewer will very likely compare the online crowdfunding request with the protocol for consistency. Any inconsistencies must be addressed and may delay protocol approval.
- If crowdfunding is requested and/or obtained AFTER initial protocol approval, an amendment to your protocol should reference the crowdfunding request and/or receipt of crowdfunding funding.

Who may be your donors?

- Since there is no university mechanism to assess for conflict of interests (COI) via crowdfunding, individual donors with whom a COI is, or can be perceived as, present should not be accepted. Make sure the crowdfunding website rules allow you to decline donors.
- Donors should not make stipulations for how the research is to be conducted or how study results are reported.
- Donors should not also be participants in the research or vice versa.

To keep in mind:

- Donated funds are to be spent as per your described budget. Maintain impeccable records of how the donated funds are spent. The crowdfunding company may require an accounting. Any leftover funds are NOT to be moved to VCU accounts.
- Posting preliminary findings or final results is a courtesy to donors. Ensure that posting of results or presentations poses no publication, copyright, or intellectual property violations and seek prior permission from all collaborators and contributors to the findings or results. Posting of findings should be discussed with your faculty mentor/PI.
- Your crowdfunding request and level of success is a permanent record on the website. It can be accessed long after your requested funds have been used. Make sure you represent yourself and VCU appropriately.

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