

How to Sponsor Research at the School of Design

The School of Design has a successful history of collaborations with businesses, nonprofits, and other academic partners through classroom-based projects and/or broader research initiatives. We are always open to developing relationships with organizations who may be interested in sponsoring work with our talented faculty and students.

Projects that are ideal for collaboration with the School of Design are:

- Open-ended, enabling students to frame the opportunity
- Future-focused
- Flexible, allowing yet-to-be defined solutions to emerge
- Not overly constrained by business (time and money) concerns

Client-sponsors find that our students bring fresh perspectives and frequently generate innovative, unexpected solutions. Our sponsors tell us that they are invigorated and challenged in new ways through their interaction with our faculty students.

What Makes for a Good Research Collaboration?

Good collaborations hinge on open, fluid communication among everyone on the team—students, faculty, and project sponsor. We strongly recommend that project sponsors assign one or two dedicated liaisons from their organization to interact with students, provide guidance, and answer questions. We also recommend that project liaisons make commitments to attend key project milestones, critiques, and final presentations.

Once faculty members meet with a research sponsor to define the nature of the proposed research, they work to match the right group of students to the project. Important factors in making that match include:

- The complexity or sophistication of the subject matter
- The type of the challenge posed by the sponsor
- Sponsor requirements such as the expected level of project reporting or similar concerns
- The potential for repeat sponsorships and future collaborations
- The expected duration of the collaboration
- How the project fits our educational mission and curriculum and that of the particular class that will work on the project
- Other collaborations scheduled for the same timeframe
- The type of experience we expect students to gain from working on the project
- The amount of the grant the project sponsor has committed to the School of Design for the collaboration

Collaboration Parameters

Sponsored research projects can range in length from part of a semester (3 to 7 weeks) to a full semester (15 weeks)—and, in some cases, a full year or multiple years.

An entire class of 15 to 25 students may be engaged in a single project. In other cases, multiple sponsored projects will run in parallel within a single class, with a small team of students working with each of the sponsors. Still other projects are best suited for independent studies involving small numbers of students and faculty members working outside the classroom format.

Collaborations with Commercial and Business Sponsors

Companies such as Microsoft, IBM, Motorola, and General Electric regularly sponsor classroom research. We encourage commercial and business sponsors to fund research in the form of “gifts” or grants, which provide greater flexibility in covering project-related costs. Sponsored projects are considered to be research, as opposed to “work for hire.” They constitute opportunities for companies to think in more ambitious timeframes, to gain new insights about their products, processes and ideas, and to respond to the challenges of working with bright, motivated students. Research funding is negotiated on a case-by-case basis.

Collaborations with Nonprofit Organizations

Organizations like the Heinz Endowments, the Carnegie Museums of Pittsburgh, and the Mattress Factory also regularly sponsor research with our students. Our collaborations with nonprofits have the potential to produce rich and fulfilling results for both parties. We understand that nonprofits have budget considerations that are more challenging than those of our corporate clients. We work hard to tailor research parameters that fit both parties, and we carefully estimate costs, travel and parking, and other expenses to meet nonprofit budgets.

Intellectual Property

Intellectual property developed during the course of sponsored research belongs to the students of the School of Design. Sponsored projects are an important component of student portfolios, so students need to maintain the rights to show their work. Organizations often negotiate with our students to transfer intellectual property and work directly with the students to arrive at an agreement.

Timing

Since our courses are defined one or two semesters ahead of time, we recommend that discussions about sponsoring classroom research begin eight-twelve months in advance. Timing always depends on the nature of the project, so we are happy to enter into preliminary or speculative conversations about sponsored research at any time.

Contact Us

If you have questions about sponsoring research, or would like to set up a meeting to discuss these and other opportunities, please contact us at design-research@design.cmu.edu.