Education

TV show converts funny into funding

The popularity of the US television sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* has translated into big bucks for its stars, with several now reportedly banking $1m per episode. The show, which has recently completed its eight season, focuses on two brilliant physicists – Leonard and Sheldon – who are totally absorbed by science but unfortunately lack the social skills to connect with their non-academic contemporaries. Indeed, the series has even been attributed by some to a resurgence of interest in physics in popular culture. Warner Bros Television and the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) have now decided to exploit that renewed fascination by setting up The Big Bang Theory Scholarship Endowment. This will fund low-income undergraduate students pursuing careers in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM).

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More bang for your buck
Stars behind the hit TV show *The Big Bang Theory*, which is giving its name to an endowment that will provide scholarships for STEM students.

The fund has already received some $4m in donations, with the endowment initially supporting 20 STEM students in 2015–2016 and then five students each year thereafter. Initial donations have come from the Chuck Lorre Family Foundation and gifts from nearly 50 people associated with the show, including stars Johnny Galecki (who plays Leonard), Jim Parsons (Sheldon), Kaley Cuoco-Sweeting (Penny), Simon Helberg (Howard), Kunal Nayyar (Raj), Mayim Bialik (Amy), Melissa Rauch (Bernadette) as well as executive producers Bill Prady and Steven Molaro and other members of the crew. Warner Bros Television and the US network CBS have also contributed.

"We have all been given a gift with *The Big Bang Theory*, a show that's not only based in the scientific community, but also enthusiastically supported by that same community. This is our opportunity to give back," says the show's co-creator and executive producer Chuck Lorre. "In that spirit, [we have] made a meaningful contribution, and together we'll share in the support of these future scholars, scientists and leaders."

Although many of the show's characters work at the Californian Institute of Technology (Caltech), UCLA has connections to the show. David Saltzberg, who has been its science consultant since the first season aired in 2007, is a particle physicist at UCLA, while Mayim Bialik, who plays neuroscientist Amy Farrah Fowler, earned two degrees from UCLA including a PhD in neuroscience before settling on a career in acting.

"At UCLA, we pride ourselves on providing opportunities for students from all economic backgrounds," says UCLA chancellor Gene Block. "UCLA attracts the very best students from around the world, and admission is very competitive. We are grateful for The Big Bang Theory Scholarship Endowment, whose contributors agree with us that economic standing should not hinder a deserving student's shot at a degree from a university of UCLA's calibre."

Jacquelean Gilliam, who runs the scholarships programme at UCLA, says that the endowment will be part of UCLA's Centennial Campaign to raise $4.2bn for students by 2019 – the university's 100th anniversary. "Students accepted to UCLA typically have also been accepted to many other top public and private universities around the country, and an important factor in their enrolment decisions is the level of scholarship support offered to them," Gilliam told *Physics World*. "The Big Bang Theory Scholarship Endowment provides an essential recruitment tool so that we can continue to attract the very best students in STEM fields who deserve an opportunity for a high-quality university degree regardless of their financial circumstances."

Nick Thomas
Montgomery, AL

Sidebands

Max Planck opens optics centre

The Max Planck Society and the University of Ottawa have established a new centre for photonics and optics. Called the Max Planck–University of Ottawa Centre for Extreme and Quantum Photonics, the new hub will be located at the University of Ottawa and will develop new high-intensity laser sources, optical methods for quantum information and the construction of devices for use in classical and quantum photonics. The co-operation will also result in exchanges of students between the new centre and the Max Planck Institute for the Science of Light in Erlangen, Germany. There are currently 14 Max Planck centres around the world and the Ottawa hub will be the second in Canada following the opening of the Max Planck–UBC Center for Quantum Materials in Vancouver in 2010.

Deal for Horizon 2020 cuts

The European Parliament has announced that Horizon2020 – the European Union's €74bn research and innovation programme that will run until 2020 – will be cut by €2.2bn to help fund an economic stimulus plan called the European Fund for Strategic Investments (EFSI). European Commission president Jean-Claude Juncker originally proposed to slash €2.7bn from Horizon2020 to fund the EFSI, but has now announced that €500m will be found from elsewhere. The European Research Council and the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions, which provides grants for doctoral students, postdocs and researchers, will be saved from cuts as will the Spreading Excellence and Widening Participation programme that helps member states with poor research performance. As *Physics World* went to press, the deal was expected to be formally approved by the European Parliament.

First light for dark-energy camera

A new €3.5m camera installed on the William Herschel Telescope in the Canary Islands that will study the accelerating expansion of the universe received first light on 3 June. The instrument – called the Physics of the Accelerating Universe (PAU) – consists of 46 different coloured filters that are used to measure the redshift of galaxies. The filters allow researchers to measure the distance of galaxies with improved precision and to obtain low-resolution spectra of 30 000 to 50 000 objects simultaneously in one night. The instrument will be calibrated this year and is expected to be used for around 100 hours in both 2016 and 2017.