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STEM Education for the 21st Century

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School of Computing and Engineering breaks ground on new \$32 million research center

Students flew drones above and demonstrated robotics around steel bridges and racing buggies outside of the University of Missouri-Kansas City Student Union Theater. These prize-winning innovations gave guests just a glimpse of the talent that comes out of the UMKC School of Computing and Engineering as they filed into the theater to celebrate the long-awaited groundbreaking Sept. 20 of the school's new research and laboratory building.

The name of the new \$32 million building was revealed at the event: The Robert W. Plaster Free Enterprise and Research Center.

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The 57,800-square-foot building will provide leading-edge, high-tech research and development capabilities for both the campus and the Kansas City community at large. As home to the campus' Free Enterprise Center, a maker space with industry grade equipment available for anyone to use, this building will serve a much broader audience than just the UMKC community when it opens in 2020.

“The efforts of our faculty and staff – under the leadership of Dean Kevin Truman – have led to a rapid increase in student enrollment over the past 10 years at the School of Computing and Engineering. The new education and research center will increase both classroom space and faculty research capabilities for the school, both of which play a key role in maintaining and enhancing Kansas City and Missouri’s ability to compete in a high-tech 21st century global economy.”

-UMKC Chancellor C. Maui Agrawal



Photos by Brandon Parigo, Strategic Marketing & Communications

Switching up from the traditional dirt-and-shovel groundbreaking events, and directly in line with UMKC’s leadership in drone technology, Agrawal and School of Computing and Engineering Dean Kevin Z. Truman led the audience through a virtual groundbreaking experience and multimedia

visual of the building.

“This building gives us the ability to perform world-class research in fields such as nanomaterials, unpiloted aircraft, renewable energy and Big Data. Our students will be thrilled to continue their in-depth participation in scholarly research, now taking place in a new, modern, enhanced facility.”

-Kevin Z. Truman, dean of the UMKC School of Computing and Engineering

High-tech capabilities in the Robert W. Plaster Free Enterprise and Research Center will include:

- \$3 million worth of new virtual reality and augmented reality equipment
- A clean room and scanning electron microscope, which can allow for the development of nanotechnology, robotics, biomedical applications, mechatronics and other technologies
- Research-grade 3-D printing equipment
- A high-bay structural lab that will power research and development for, and prepare the workforce for, Kansas City’s large and growing civil engineering and construction sector
- “Big data” analytics labs that will replicate major data centers, preparing students for jobs at local tech firms such as Cerner and Garmin as well as major national and international employers such as Google, Microsoft and Facebook
- An energy learning and research facility that will address topics ranging from renewable energy and traditional high-voltage transmission to the creation of batteries small enough to power tiny monitors being used in medical research and healthcare.

Though only a freshman, Ruby Rios’ relationship with the UMKC School of Computing and Engineering extends back to her middle school days when she first became involved with the UMKC School of Computing and Engineering-founded KC STEM Alliance. Rios said it was her involvement with KC STEM Alliance that sparked her interest in connecting more with the Kansas City tech community. Attending UMKC was a natural fit for her as she’d already spent time on campus, and Flarsheim Hall – the current home of the School of Computing and Engineering – through various summer programs and tech camps for girls.



“Today, I feel very fortunate that I’m able to return to Flarsheim Hall as a Computer Science freshman. I think the new building represents how seriously UMKC is taking its role as a leader in STEM education in our region. I’m excited to see that the School of Computing and Engineering is growing right alongside the rest of our tech community.”

-Ruby Rios, freshman at the UMKC School of Computing and Engineering

Though many of the attendees there to celebrate the groundbreaking each came with a unique perspective, the shared excitement among them was that the future of STEM research and education is as bright as ever.

“As one of the first corporate supporters of this project, I couldn’t be prouder. And as one of the first personal supporters of this project, I’m even happier. What you will do here will move your students forward, it will move Kansas City forward.”

-Greg Graves, retired CEO of Burns & McDonnell



Construction of the Robert W. Plaster Free Enterprise and Research Center will begin immediately. The technical consultant team on the project is PGAV Architects, Odimo, Branch Pattern, KH Engineering Group and SK Design. The design-build team is Whiting-Turner Contracting Company, HOK, Ross & Baruzzini, Antella Engineering Consultants, Alper Audi Inc., Taliaferro and Browne Inc. and Colin Gordon Associates.

The UMKC School of Computing and Engineering recognized major donors to the building project:

- The Sunderland Foundation
- The Robert W. Plaster Foundation
- The Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation
- The Hall Family Foundation
- The Illig Family Foundation
- SS&C – formerly DST Systems
- The Economic Development Administration
- The Jack and Glenna Wiley Foundation
- The National Science Foundation
- KCP&L
- Black & Veatch
- Burns & McDonnell
- Paul DeBruce

The building is named for Robert W. Plaster of the Robert W. Plaster Foundation. Plaster was a successful Missouri businessman as well as a co-founder and active supporter of Enactus, at that time known as Students in Free Enterprise, and was a member of its executive board until the time of his death in 2008.

| Article by [Kelsey Haynes](#), Strategic Marketing and Communications

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