Historic $12.7 million gift headed to MSU College of Engineering and BEACON Center

The Michigan State University College of Engineering has received its largest individual gift in the history of the college.

A $10.7 million bequest from a California entrepreneur joins a previous cash gift of $2 million, bringing his total giving to $12.7 million to support the college and the BEACON Center for the Study of Evolution in Action, one of the National Science Foundation’s Science and Technology Centers.

The commitment is from computer scientist John R. Koza, who is considered the “father of genetic programming.”

The $10.7 million bequest will fund two endowed faculty positions to attract eminent scholars for the development of computational tools inspired by nature. New endowments also will advance genetic programming and evolutionary computation through endowed prizes, fellowships and programs to attract top graduate students and an increasingly strong pool of faculty members, said engineering Dean Leo Kempel.

“The creation of two new faculty endowments joining a third endowed chair, as well as endowed prizes and graduate student support, is unprecedented in the College of Engineering,” Kempel said. “We are very grateful to Dr. Koza for the advances our faculty will achieve and the students we will serve as a result of this extraordinary gift.

“With this gift,” Kempel continued, “and the previous investment by the National Science Foundation in the BEACON Center, Michigan State University will be the leading institution for transformational research and education in this important field of scholarship.”

Koza said he is delighted to make the investment in the BEACON Center and the College of Engineering and believes
they are the best place to carry forward his life’s work.

“The mix of private support, NSF support, and backing from MSU, under the guidance of my good friend and colleague, Erik Goodman, means the BEACON Center and its ground breaking work will continue for many years to come,” Koza said. “My personal connections to BEACON, MSU and the partner institutions have been very gratifying and I look forward to what we can do together.”

MSU President Lou Anna K. Simon said the gift will create a hub of expertise and excellence in a demanding and promising field.

“John Koza’s continued generosity will empower us to build on his pioneering work. We are thankful for his vision and investment in the research and learning being done at Michigan State, which will resonate far into the future.”

Koza’s $2 million cash gift was received in 2014 and created the John R. Koza Endowed Chair in Genetic Programming. In August 2016, MSU welcomed renowned specialist in genetic programming and evolutionary computation Wolfgang Banzhaf as the Koza endowed chair.

Koza is a computer scientist and pioneer in the use of genetic programming, or GP. For much of his career, he was a consulting professor at Stanford University, teaching classes about evolutionary computation and genetic programming while conducting his research in that field.

“He ideas have helped to push back the horizon of what we believe computers can do now and in the future,” said Erik Goodman, director of the BEACON Center for the Study of Evolution in Action. The BEACON Center unites those who study natural evolutionary processes with computer scientists and engineers to solve real-world problems.

Goodman, who has been friends with Koza since they were graduate students in the 1960s and 1970s, called Koza a brilliant computer scientist.

“John Koza is frequently called the father of GP. His publication of four gigantic books introducing genetic programming to the world, beginning in 1992, helped to earn him this accolade,” Goodman explained. “In his books, he introduces the concepts of automated programming of computers by evolutionary processes.”

Goodman said Koza’s early work also included organizing a series of international conferences on Genetic Programming, which he and Goodman helped later to merge into a broader conference series on evolutionary computation, the Genetic and Evolutionary Computation Conferences.

“All of us owe some of our inspiration to the successes achieved by Koza,” Goodman added. “In the end, there may be few of us whose lives are not touched in some way or another by John Koza’s work.”

Endowed gifts to the College of Engineering

Stephen Bates, senior director of development and alumni relations, reminded that endowment gifts, such as Koza’s, allow the college to provide continual funding to specific programs and projects. The gift’s principal is invested and a portion of the annual earnings is used for annual program support.

“John has applied a very thoughtful and visionary approach to his philanthropy,” Bates said. “We’ve crafted John’s giving using three specific gifting techniques – a charitable bequest, gift annuities, and cash – to secure a lasting investment in evolutionary computation and genetic programming at MSU.”

The gifts support Empower Extraordinary, the $1.5 billion campaign for MSU that launched publicly in October 2014. To date, the College of Engineering has raised more than $76 million of its $80 million campaign goal.
$12.7 million gift
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