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Metro

'Crowdfunding' effort pays off for BU student

Struggling but innovative, a BU student turns to 'crowdfunding' site to raise money for tuition and fees

By **Matt Rocheleau** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT NOVEMBER 13, 2013

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BARRY CHIN/GLOBE STAFF

Alexis-Brianna Felix was overwhelmed when she surpassed her goal of raising \$5,000 in the first 27 hours of using a “crowdfunding” site.

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Just weeks ago, Alexis-Brianna Felix feared her dream of graduating from Boston University was doomed. Halfway toward earning a bachelor’s degree, the 19-year-old, who had come so far from the poor Bronx neighborhood where she grew up, said she had no way to pay for next semester, never mind the two years after that.

So Felix turned to “crowdfunding,” a movement that has fueled business start-ups and is now making inroads on college campuses. Through a website, she asked family, friends, and even strangers for help covering her tuition and fees.

“If you choose to give in any amount, I’d like you to consider it an investment rather than a donation,” she wrote on the [GoFundMe.com](http://www.gofundme.com) page she created Oct. 18. “If you invest in me, I have no doubt that I will be successful. I will not let you down.”

Soon after, donations — often in such amounts as \$10 and \$25 — began pouring in. Within 27 hours, she

had eclipsed her goal of \$5,000, enough to stay at BU through the spring and to keep pace to become the first in her family to earn a degree.

Her mother, Monica Felix, recalled the tearful phone calls with her daughter as they watched the stream of contributions roll in.

"It was just so overwhelming," she said. "The generosity was amazing."

In recent years, crowdfunding has become an increasingly popular way for people to fund startups, to help individuals recover from disasters and illnesses, and to pay for personal aspirations. Now, with many students struggling to pay for soaring college costs, Internet solicitations are helping to fund research projects and study-abroad trips, in addition to college tuition.

Crowdfunding generally carries some costs. GoFundMe, for example, deducts a 5 percent fee from each donation, according to information posted on its website.

Specialists on college savings say that paying for college through crowdfunding is still rare. But, "it's not a surprise because a lot of philanthropy is being crowdsourced nowadays, so why not college tuition?" said Mike Wasserman, executive director of Bottom Line, a Boston nonprofit that helps local low-income, first-generation students get into and graduate from college. "It's one of those trends we've started to hear about."

For Felix, crowdfunding was a last resort. After accounting for financial aid and federal loans, she must come up with about \$10,000 toward her annual college expenses, she said. BU charges \$58,530 per year, according to its website.

Felix said she got the crowdfunding idea when she saw another college student Tweet a link to a GoFundMe page seeking donations for a study-abroad trip.

Before making her own page, Felix consulted with her best friend from high school, Sarah Santana, a sophomore at Georgetown University who visited BU over Columbus Day weekend.

Felix, Santana said, "didn't want to feel like she was begging for the money. A lot of people might think she took an easy road out. But Alexis is a really hard worker and for her this was not easy at all."

Felix said she warmed to the idea when Santana told her to think of it as asking for "an investment in my



future, not charity.”

Many donations came from friends Felix made at the Horace Mann School, a prestigious private college preparatory school in the affluent Riverdale section of the Bronx she was able to attend due to good grades and generous financial aid. Others came from alumni of the high school and BU, and from strangers.

One \$5 donation carried this message: “We don’t know each other, but I was touched by your courage, tenacity, and perseverance.”

“To hear people say they were inspired by me was just amazing,” Felix said this week in an interview.

As of Tuesday , 25 days after launching the effort, Felix had received 203 donations totaling \$8,856, according to the website.

She said she is confident the investments in her will pay off.

“I’m good at what I do, I take full advantage of the opportunities I get, and I work really, really hard,” she said. “I’m not going to be modest about that.”

Felix is majoring in public relations and minoring in sociology, posting a 3.78 grade-point average last semester. She works a paid job tutoring children at a Roxbury school and another doing research for a consulting firm. At BU, she is also a member of the Latin music dance team.

During the summer, she conducts paid research for her high school’s diversity office. Just recently, she said, she secured a spring internship working at a public relations startup in Boston.

Felix said the challenges she faced growing up have only motivated her. She refused to give in to pressures from a neighborhood where many of her peers got into trouble and did not graduate from high school. She did not lose hope when her older sister dropped out of Fordham University her sophomore year when she ran out of money.

Now, Felix hopes she can inspire her younger sisters, 5 and 11, who emptied their piggy banks to help chip in to pay for Felix’s studies at BU.

Felix said she wants to be successful enough to help them when it is their turn to go to college, “so they won’t have to struggle financially like I do.”

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