

On University of Texas at Dallas' growing campus, meal-delivering robots make splashy debut

January 2 2020, by Melissa Repko, The Dallas Morning News

Topped with a ball cap and sporting six wheels, one of the newest members of the University of Texas at Dallas introduced itself to students and staff at the campus' annual fashion show.

"We put a hat on it and let it strut the runway," said Pam Stanley, UTD's interim director of food and retail service.

The cooler-shaped [autonomous robot](#) from Starship Technologies has become something of a [campus](#) celebrity. It has appeared in the homecoming parade and posed for hundreds of selfies with students at a late night breakfast. It has taken part in a holiday scavenger hunt. And it inspired the design of a T-shirt—featuring robots pulling Santa's sleigh.

When students spot the [robot](#), some take out their phones to shoot video or spread the word on social media. Some liken it to Wall-E, the endearing Pixar movie character.

"We see it as being this little friendly character that's delivering your food rather than just mechanics," said Eric Aaberg, a sophomore who's studying entrepreneurship and marketing. "It's kind of like your childhood movie coming to life."

The robot, which takes up the width of a human on the sidewalk and is the height of a medium-size dog, pays no mind to the attention. It whirs

through campus, delivering snacks and meals to students. When it drops off food, it has little time for conversation. Sometimes it says "thank you" or "happy holidays" before returning to work.

UTD is one of the latest college campuses to get a fleet of meal-delivering robots from Starship. The San Francisco-based company's robots operate on seven campuses, including UTD and the University of Houston. The company's robots launched at George Mason University in Fairfax, Va., in February.

Starship was founded in 2014 by Ahti Heinla and Janus Friis, two co-founders of Skype, a video chat and voice call app that was acquired by Microsoft. Its robots deliver groceries in neighborhoods in the United Kingdom and Estonia and operate on some corporate campuses.

But Henry Harris-Burland, the company's vice president of marketing, said Starship is especially focused on college campuses. It plans to grow to 100 campuses by August 2021, he said.

"It's all about convenience and saving time for customers," Harris-Burland said. "College campuses is the area that's pushing our business forward. The demand is overwhelming."

On UTD's fast-growing campus, the fleet of 30 electric-powered robots is a new way to add vibrancy and feed more people. UTD's student body has more than doubled in the last 12 years to about 29,500 students. The number of students living on or near campus has nearly tripled. And its campus restaurants have quintupled—from five to 25. It has invested about \$1.7 billion in new and renovated buildings and planted about 7,000 trees, said Calvin Jamison, vice president for facilities and economic development.

"The robots are the natural next horizon in the evolution of UT-Dallas,"

Jamison said. "We are a very creative, high-tech young university celebrating 50 years, and this service as we see it will continue to enhance the faculty, staff and student experience."

And, he added, it's easier for robots to navigate the campus since many of its sidewalks are new.

Aaberg, who helped design a T-shirt that features the robots, said they're a great fit at a university with many tech-inclined students. For example, he added, UTD has a team for esports, but not for football.

"We're kind of living in this more futuristic age," he said. "We're playing video games, the sports of the future, and now we're ordering the food of the future."

UTD's official mascot is a muscular Comet in human form with a mischievous grin and flame orange hair. He's called Temoc—Comet backwards. Its unofficial mascot is the campus' ever-present construction crane, Enarc—Crane backwards. So when students met the robot, they quickly gave it a name, too: Tobor.

Starship signed a contract with Chartwells Higher Education, a food service division of Compass Group that has a contract with UTD. The companies declined to release details of the contract, but Harris-Burland said Starship owns the robots and keeps the delivery fees.

The fleet of robots began making deliveries Dec. 3. The two companies decided to start them during a quieter time of the school year, as the semester wound down and students prepared for finals.

The robots have averaged 240 deliveries per day and that number is expected to pick up in the spring semester when the [student](#) population returns in full force. Students can order from 10 different campus

restaurants.

Students, staff and faculty order through a smartphone app. The robots, stationed at different spots around campus, roll to the restaurant, pick up the order and guide themselves to the customer's nearest outdoor location. Each has an orange flag that lights up to alert cars and pedestrians. Inside the robots, there are cup holders and insulation so items arrive at the right temperature and without spills. The customer unlocks the lid of the robot with a button in the app.

Each delivery costs \$1.99, in addition to the cost of the food or beverage. The robots travel at up to 4 mph. Deliveries take an average of 30 minutes, Harris-Burland said.

And if people try to pick up the robot or steal it, a loud alarm goes off, he said.

The robots can navigate through snow, wind and rain. They find their way with software, 360-degree cameras and radars that can see up to 600 feet ahead.

Though the robots operate autonomously, they've required extra manpower. Chartwells hired 12 students to load the robots and handle an uptick in orders, said Nick Norris, director of dining services for Chartwells at UTD. Starship hired five students who manage the robots and plug them in at night, Harris-Burland said.

One campus eatery, Papa John's, has especially needed extra staff. With the robots on campus, Norris said late-night pizza orders have spiked.

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Citation: On University of Texas at Dallas' growing campus, meal-delivering robots make splashy debut (2020, January 2) retrieved 20 June 2024 from

<https://techxplore.com/news/2020-01-university-texas-dallas-campus-meal-delivering.html>

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