

Technology of future delivers doughnuts of today on campus

January 23 2019, by Matthew Barakat



A Starship robot stands by at George Mason University campus in Fairfax, Va., Wednesday, Jan. 23, 2019. A fleet of high-tech robots is now deployed at the northern Virginia university to serve the noble purpose of delivering pizza, doughnuts and coffee on demand to students who summon them. (AP Photo/Matthew Barakat)

A fleet of high-tech robots has deployed at a northern Virginia university

for the noble purpose of delivering pizza, doughnuts and coffee on demand to students.

More than 25 knee-high, cooler-shaped robots began delivery duty Tuesday at George Mason University in Fairfax.

Ryan Tuohy, senior vice president for business development at San Francisco-based Starship Technologies, which makes the robots, said hundreds of delivery orders were placed on the service's first day.

The company's partnership with Sodexo, which holds the catering contract at George Mason, means students can get deliveries from Blaze Pizza, Starbucks and Dunkin for a \$1.99 fee. A convenience store is also participating and more vendors are expected to join the program later.

The six-wheeled robots can climb curbs and hold up to 20 pounds (9 kilograms) of cargo.

The robots drew smiles and bemused looks from students who stopped to take pictures as they plodded along campus Wednesday making lunch deliveries.

Justin Plassmeyer, a senior computer science major, got a pizza delivery Wednesday as his friends watched and took photos. The robot took about eight minutes to make a delivery that a person walking briskly might have done in five. The robots are slowed a little by the need to use ramps instead of stairs.

"It's not the fastest thing in the world," Plassmeyer said. "If you're really hungry, it's probably faster to walk and get your food yourself. But if you're just a little bit hungry, it's perfect," he said. He also said he appreciates the novelty of "having a little robot bring your food."

Tuohy said college campuses are an ideal setting for Starship robots to operate: college students are interested in technology and innovation, and campus grounds are generally pedestrian friendly. The robots can't go up and down steps, but campuses are required to be wheelchair accessible under the Americans with Disabilities Act, Tuohy said, "so there's going to be a ramp somewhere."

The robots are learning the fastest routes to navigate the campus, and will eventually learn to avoid heavy trafficked pedestrian routes, willing to travel a longer distance if they can save time by moving more quickly on a less-traveled path.

The robots are "super deferential" and will stop if they detect pedestrians to avoid collisions, Tuohy said.

Starship says its rollout is the largest implementation of autonomous robot food-delivery services on a college campus. A similar service launched earlier this month by a different technology company at the University of the Pacific in Stockton, California.

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