

2026 NSF Science & Technology Centers Directors' Meeting

Day 1 Breakout Sessions

Tuesday, August 25, 2026 | Virtual via Zoom

Purpose

These breakout sessions are designed as working conversations. The goal is to learn from one another, identify practices that can strengthen STCs, and bring ideas back to the full group.

How the breakout sessions will work

- Choose the session where your experience or interests will allow you to contribute most.
- Select a facilitator to keep the discussion moving and a recorder/reporter to capture key ideas.
- Use the questions as prompts rather than a checklist. Focus on the issues that generate the most useful discussion.
- Share specific examples—including approaches that did not work as expected and what you learned from them.
- Reserve the final 10 minutes to identify the group's most useful takeaways and recommendations for the report-out.

Report-out

Each group should be prepared to share a brief report focused on:

- 2–3 practices, insights, or lessons that other STCs could use.
- 1–2 recommendations or actions worth considering.
- An issue, tool, or resource that would benefit from continued sharing across the STC community.

BREAKOUT SESSION 1 | Center Management

Running an Effective Center | STC Management Practices Worth Sharing

SESSION GOAL: Share practical approaches for managing complex, multi-institutional centers and identify systems, processes, and lessons that can help STCs operate more strategically and effectively.

Managing resources

- How do centers make funding and reallocation decisions?
- What approaches help connect budgets to scientific and strategic priorities?
- How do centers address underperforming projects or changing priorities?

Managing across institutions

- How do you maintain accountability across institutions without creating excessive bureaucracy?
- What processes help surface problems early?
- What practices make it easier to coordinate expectations, timelines, and responsibilities across partner institutions?

Running the center

- What management systems, meeting structures, or other tools have made a significant difference?
- What activities have you stopped doing because they were not adding enough value?
- What processes do you wish you had established when your center began?

What to bring back to the full group

- Management practices that other STCs should consider.
- One process, tool, template, or resource that could be shared across centers.
- One persistent management challenge where additional peer discussion would be valuable.

BREAKOUT SESSION 2 | Culture & Identity

Making the Center More Than the Sum of Its Parts

SESSION GOAL: Identify strategies that create connection, trust, scientific integration, and a shared center identity among researchers, trainees, and staff distributed across institutions.

Building center identity and engagement

- What has helped people think of themselves as members of the STC rather than simply members of their home institution or research group?
- What activities successfully build relationships across institutions?
- How do you engage people who participate only peripherally in center activities?
- How do you integrate new members into an established center and maintain culture as people turn over?

Creating meaningful collaboration

- How do you create meaningful scientific collaboration across institutions rather than simply funding parallel projects?
- How do you recognize and measure collaboration?
- How do you bring less-engaged investigators back into the center?
- What approaches have failed, and what did you learn from them?

What to bring back to the full group

- Three practices that strengthen center identity, engagement, or cross-institutional collaboration.
- One useful way to recognize or demonstrate collaboration.
- One approach that did not work as expected and the lesson learned.

BREAKOUT SESSION 3 | Knowledge Transfer

Moving From Discovery to Impact

SESSION GOAL: Share effective approaches for moving STC discoveries beyond the center through patents, licensing, industry partnerships, startups, and other forms of knowledge transfer, with particular attention to the challenges of multi-institutional centers.

Multi-institutional challenges

- How do centers navigate IP ownership, patent decisions, licensing, and commercialization when discoveries involve researchers from multiple institutions?
- What practices or agreements help prevent delays or confusion when multiple institutions are involved?

Industry engagement

- What approaches have been effective in developing relationships with companies?
- What helps move an initial industry connection toward a meaningful partnership, license, technology adoption, or startup?

Beyond patents

- What other forms of knowledge transfer should STCs capture—for example software, datasets, research tools, standards, methods, shared facilities, technical expertise, or movement of trained people into industry?
- How can centers better recognize pathways to impact that do not result in a patent or license?

Measuring and sharing impact

- What should centers track to demonstrate successful knowledge transfer?
- Are patents and licenses sufficient, or should centers document other pathways from discovery to use?
- What tools, processes, agreements, or approaches have worked particularly well and could be adapted by other STCs?

What to bring back to the full group

- Three knowledge-transfer practices that other STCs could adapt.
- Metrics or evidence that better capture knowledge-transfer impact.
- One tool, agreement, process, or resource that would be useful to share across centers.

BREAKOUT SESSION 4 | Education & Outreach

Strategies for Raising Awareness of the Science

SESSION GOAL: Identify education and outreach approaches that advance the center's mission, engage learners and broader audiences, and increase the visibility and reach of STC science.

Programs and approaches

- Which education or outreach activities have produced meaningful results?
- How are centers integrating STC science into courses, undergraduate research, K–12 programs, or other educational activities?
- What approaches have successfully reached audiences beyond the center's existing scientific community?

Partnerships and reach

- What partnerships—with schools, museums, professional societies, conferences, industry, or other organizations—have significantly expanded reach?
- How are centers leveraging conferences and professional meetings to raise awareness of their science and engage new audiences?
- Which successful approaches could realistically be adapted by other STCs?

Understanding impact

- How are you determining whether programs are having an impact?
- What measures are more meaningful than participation numbers alone?
- What have you tried that did not work as expected, and what did you learn?

What to bring back to the full group

- Three education or outreach practices that other STCs could replicate or adapt.
- One effective partnership or strategy for expanding the reach of center science.
- One useful approach for assessing impact.