



8.12 Building a Student Community

8.12.1 Motivation

Social activities relate to several motivations and goals of SLCs. One of the main missions of SLCs is to represent the student body. In order to do this effectively, the SLC must frequently interact with members of the student body in social settings. In addition, the SLC should facilitate communication between students, faculty, staff, NSF reviewers, and industry partners of the center. Social activities also enhance student life, build community, and add to the center experience. Students at NSF-sponsored centers should benefit from a broader range of experiences than typical university research assistants, including multi-disciplinary interactions and opportunities to network with a wide variety of science and engineering professionals. Finally, NSF-sponsored centers have service obligations to educate the public and the next generation of engineers with regard to the research they conduct. This service function can be fulfilled through outreach activities that are also enjoyable for center students who participate.

8.12.2 Overview of Social Activities

In addition to helping to fulfill some of the main mission elements of SLCs, social activities provide a wide variety of benefits for students, including:

- Provide a forum for multi-disciplinary interaction
- Encourage informal interaction between individuals in different center roles (undergraduates, graduate students, faculty, staff, etc.)
- Enhance research relationships
- Build community and a sense of belonging
- Reward students and staff
- Provide a fun break from work.

The type and frequency of social events at different centers varies widely. Based on results of a survey of SLCs taken in 2002, most centers have between four and six events per year. Activities include:

Activity Type	# of Centers Approx	# of Participants
Barbeques and picnics	5	45
Banquets	2	93
Meals with visitors	2	8
Food-based socials (holiday parties, ice cream socials)	4	45
Activity-based socials (bowling, trivia/games, Halloween)	4	45
Sports outings or intramural teams (does not count large #s of non-center students)	4	20
Research or outreach-based field trips	2	12
Seminars	4	35

Some centers use weekly or bi-weekly social meetings and lunches to share specific areas of research with students and staff from throughout the center. This helps everyone to be more informed about everything that is going on at the center, but falls more into the realm of communication than purely social activities.



Other idea for events and activities include:

- Going out to lunch
- Holiday themed parties
- Seminars followed by potlucks
- University partner-specific events vs whole-center events

Social activities are generally planned by the SLC, but they are sometimes assisted by the Education Director or other staff members. There are also opportunities to partner with other research groups or professional organizations at the university. Almost all centers fund their social activities through the SLC or Education budgets. Another possible funding source is through the university. One center chartered itself as a university organization in order to qualify for reimbursement through departments or groups such as student government. This typically involves paperwork and annual renewal forms, but often these groups have more money to distribute than what is requested by student organizations. Restrictions may exist on the type of activities that can be funded in this way (such as not paying for food or events where alcohol is served, etc.). Students can be asked to pay all or a portion of the costs for certain types of events, particularly tickets to sports events or events where non-center students are also invited to participate. This may discourage some students from attending.

8.12.3 Involving Partner Institutions of Multi-University Centers

All ERCs encompass one or more core partner institutions in addition to the lead institution. Social activities are especially important for bringing together students, faculty, and staff from multi-university centers whose participating institutions are located in different geographic regions. Depending on the proximity of the participating institutions, these centers might have relatively few cross-center events during the year. It is customary that centers without major geographical restrictions schedule at least one annual retreat, during which high attendance rates are expected. However, centers in which the participating institutions are located in widely dispersed geographic regions should plan quarterly or bi-annual events to foster enhanced communication among researchers within the center. The responsibility of hosting these events should also be alternated among the participating institutions. An additional cost of social events at multi-university centers is travel, which must be budgeted for and funded.

Suggestions on how to more effectively organize events are:

- Keep location in mind
 - Certain locations can be more appealing to students
 - Alternate locations for different events
 - Pick an activity that is relevant to the location
- Have each school's SLC reps organize local events
- Plan whole center events around the center's annual meeting
 - Team building events: scavenger hunt, outdoor education (zip-lining, rock-climbing)
 - Interactive seminar or training sessions (public speaking, diversity); "alternative teaching"

"Student Day" -- The Student Day retreat, a 2-3 day event held annually or bi-annually at each major ERC partner university, can provide ERC students with opportunities to:

- Visit labs at other ERC campuses
- Get up to speed on projects outside of their major research focus
- Network with other ERC students and faculty
- Instill a sense of pride in being an ERC student
- Participate in and lead professional development efforts
- Conduct the "Perfect Pitch" Contest to select a center-wide winner to represent the center at the ERC Program's biennial meeting
- Exercise skills in leadership by defining and organizing the event activities
- Perform the center SWOT analysis

The Student Day can be further used to conduct a poster session (where every student presents their research in the form of a poster) as well as to provide time for different SLC leadership teams to work on other ERC



initiatives e.g. ERC Newsletter, outreach strategies, the SLC's website, and professional development opportunities.

At the end of every Student Day, SLC leadership surveys the participants to make sure that each Student Day is better than the last. The biggest impact of these events comes from the friendships and professional relationships that are forged among the students; Partnerships emerge across universities at the student level, students become aware of the big picture, and they feel accountable for the success of the center.

8.12.4 Best Practices and Conclusions

Personal interaction and interpersonal communication is one of the best ways to understand student concerns, perspectives, and desires. When the SLC plans social events, several best practices will help to ensure success:

- Survey students for ideas on the types of activities they prefer and which previous activities they enjoyed most.
- Advertise well in advance of the event, through a variety of methods (email, text and Twitter; flyers in the workspace, particularly near doors and elevators; the SLC website).
- Personally invite students, faculty, and staff through word-of-mouth, including announcements at meetings.
- Send multiple reminders as the date of the event approaches.
- Require or recommend an RSVP, particularly when resources such as expensive meals or advance-sale tickets are required.
- Provide incentives to increase participation, such as food, prizes, entertaining activities, or the price of admission to special events.
- Even when RSVPs are used, expect more participants than just those who respond, including last-minute requests to attend.
- Enlist the help of staff members or administrators such as the Education Director, when needed.
- Always thank everyone who participates and publicly recognize volunteers who help to plan social events or other center activities.
- Help organize transportation such as car-pooling (use dropbox or google docs to facilitate), provide public transportation, or allocate additional travel expense.

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