



8.10 Site Visits

8.10.1 Motivation

Site visits are, of course, a necessary component of all NSF-sponsored centers. In most centers, Student Leadership Councils (SLCs) significantly assist in the preparation and execution of these reviews. Site visits provide students with opportunities to showcase their research efforts and achievements, as well as network with visiting scholars. Providing the student perspective is critical at these reviews, and the SLC should facilitate this process and help organize the student body of the center.

8.10.2 Summary

Almost all centers have poster exhibitions or competitions and other presentations and demonstrations in conjunction with the site visit. In most cases, the SLC plays some role in the preparation of these presentations. Examples of assistance include providing poster guidelines, templates, materials, and printing facilities. They also play a major role in organizing the poster session and competition, when applicable. Preparations begin anywhere from a few weeks to a few months in advance. Students may only be required to attend a small portion of the site visit, but are strongly encouraged to attend as much as possible in most centers, particularly technical sessions and those which are most closely related to their research. During the site visit at some centers, students also help with other volunteer or assigned jobs such as poster session set-up, transportation, and lab tours.

The other key component of the site visit, from an SLC perspective, is the presentation of SWOT survey results to the NSF and the written SWOT report, which was discussed in [Section 8.9](#).

8.10.3 Multi-University Centers

With regard to site visits, the most significant difference for centers that span several universities is that there seems to be lower participation from partner institutions. Holding events and retreats that bring together students from all institutions garners camaraderie and increased cross-institutional collaborations. It is important to maintain good communication among students from all partners in multi-university centers and be sure to include viewpoints from all institutions within the SWOT document/presentation.

8.10.4 Best Practices and Conclusions

One role of all SLCs is to represent the student body to center administrators and guests. This is particularly important prior to and during site visits. In addition, the SLC needs to assist the entire student body as they prepare for and carry out their duties during the visit.

Preparation

The SLC should work with the administration to determine what is needed and expected from students well in advance of the site visit. Then, the SLC must communicate these expectations to the students and assist them however necessary. Work related to the site visit itself can take a significant amount of time for students and they must account for this in their schedule. The SLC can help by distributing the work as evenly as possible and minimizing the time required to prepare. The SLC should organize the poster session, which is an important opportunity for students to directly present themselves and their work to NSF visitors. Students should be provided with specific instructions on how posters should be designed, what electronic templates or samples are available, and how posters should be printed and mounted. The timeline for reviews and submission deadlines of posters, presentations, and demonstrations should be communicated to the entire student body. SLC leaders should generate and conduct the SWOT survey more than one month in advance of the site visit, so that there is sufficient time to develop a presentation that fully represents the student perspective for the closed-door session with the NSF during the site visit.

Student Participation

Encouraging full participation of students during site visit events can be challenging in many centers and the SLC often assists the administration in this regard. Where students must help with specific tasks and jobs, many centers



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first ask for volunteers. If volunteer positions are not filled, the SLC can help in assigning remaining jobs. Incentives such as food are often used to encourage participation. In addition, some centers mandate participation as a condition of funding, to varying levels of success. Advisors and administrators encourage participation with repeated reminders and sometimes by verifying attendance. One more positive method that has been used to increase student participation is to organize the poster session and/or meals with visitors in a manner that is conducive to networking.

Student Input

Another best practice is for the SLC members and other students to be advocates for student concerns during site visits. For instance, student input regarding scheduling, agendas, session locations, and other issues is important. Advance notification of visitor names, research interests, and affiliations can help students be better prepared for questions they may encounter. It is important for students to be well informed about results from previous site visit reports as well as overall objectives and research thrusts of the center. Having effective communication channels throughout the year is the best way to prepare for site visit reviews. Many centers accomplish this through seminars and lunches that expose students to research areas beyond

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