ASTC 2026 Annual Conference
Call for Proposals

The Association of Science and Technology Centers (ASTC) Annual Conference is one of the premier annual events for science-engagement professionals across North America and around the world. Each year, this event brings together nearly 1,700 professionals working in science and technology centers and museums and allied organizations. This includes not only experts and practitioners in informal science education, but also science communication, STEM learning, public engagement, and the broader intersections between science, technology, and society.

This Year's Conference

ASTC 2026 will be an incredible experience because of our community. This is a can't-miss event where we learn, network, and build new ideas—together.

With a wide range of session types, networking opportunities, and experiences at science centers, museums, and cultural organizations in the greater Phoenix area, ASTC 2026 will energize, educate, inform, and inspire our community.

Our 2026 theme, **Forward**, encourages all of us to learn and share with an eye toward the future. As we navigate an ever-shifting landscape and confront new challenges, ASTC 2026 will provide an opportunity to collectively build an ambitious, relevant path forward for our field. **Forward** is inspired by a vision of the future that is grounded in the past, and responds to the current moment through collective reimagining, bridging divides, and challenging narratives. More inspiration on this year's theme, topics of special interest for 2026, and tips on session type and format are described in the "Topical Areas" section of this Call for Proposals.

Dates

This year's conference will be held Wednesday, September 16 through Saturday, September 19 with optional events on Wednesday, September 16 and opening events on the morning of Thursday, September 17.

Location

The 2026 ASTC Annual Conference will take place at the Phoenix Convention Center in Phoenix, Arizona and is hosted by the Arizona Science Center (ASC). Multiple events and learning opportunities will also take place at the Arizona Science Center and other cultural organizations in the greater Phoenix area. "Forward" is inspired by Phoenix, whose vibrant downtown transformation is a testament to investment in community, cultural institutions, new models and ways of thinking. As a rapidly growing technology hub with world-class STEM focused research

institutions and universities, Phoenix blends the cutting edge with a deep cultural history and Indigenous heritage. Against the backdrop of a desert metropolis, and alongside our host partner ASC, ASTC 2026 will convene national partners, integrate Indigenous perspectives, and provide opportunities to discover Phoenix beyond the convention center—illuminating all that it has to offer.

Proposal Types

The [ASTC Conference Program Planning Committee](#) (CPPC) will develop a program based upon proposals submitted in response to this call and additional topical and timely content curated by the CPPC and ASTC staff and other committees. Session types include:

- **Concurrent Sessions:** This session type is designed for topics that feature an array of presenters from diverse perspectives, generally from multiple organizations. Concurrent sessions are 60 minutes in length and should generally have no more than 5 presenters. Accepted sessions will be scheduled for September 17–19.
- **Lightning Sessions**: This format is ideal for when proposers have a story to share, but not a complete concurrent session proposal with multiple perspectives. Lightning presentations are short oral talks or discussions of 10-15 minutes that will be combined with other, similar Lightning presentations. The presentations will be presented during one Concurrent session slot to be scheduled for September 17–19. A Conference Program Planning Committee member or ASTC staff member will work with presenters to organize the final session. Lightning proposals are limited to 1-2 presenters.
- **Posters**: Posters are the ideal way to share a project or idea with a wide audience outside of the session format. Share your program, research, or ideas graphically and engage with attendees during a Poster Palooza designated time slot ; posters will also be available in the Exhibit Hall during all open hours on September 17-18. At least one poster author is expected to attend the conference in-person, but you may include additional authors who will not be present.
- **Extended Sessions and Expeditions**: Participatory and highly-interactive experiences that may include:
  - Scheduled for Wednesday, September 16 for a duration between 1.5-4 hours in the morning or afternoon, these sessions are on a single topic, including a diverse collection of presenters and facilitators, that offer a deep dive into a particular topic and are expected to result in tangible learning outcomes, tools, and/or resources for attendees.
  - Offsite visits, tours, and/or interactive experiences at locations in the greater Phoenix area.

  These experiences may take place at the Phoenix Convention Center or other locations in the area; proposals for sessions outside of the convention center should include a discussion of transportation needs. These sessions will generally require advance registration and an additional registration fee for participants as determined by ASTC.
- **Experimental Experiences**: This year's **Forward** theme requires us to think boldly and ambitiously. Leaning into this theme, ASTC is creating a new engagement opportunity that asks the question*:* How can we open our conference space to meet the needs and harness the creativity of our community? Proposers are encouraged to go beyond standard

session types and reimagine physical locations (including but not limited to the Exhibit Hall, the convention center lobby and hallways, outside the conference facilities, and beyond!) as learning and community spaces. Think: co-created builds, hands-on activities and demonstrations, community-building activities, and whatever else you can imagine and bring to life. Proposals of this type should describe their space and equipment needs, as well as the intended duration. ASTC staff will follow up with proposers on scheduling and space needs, and activities are subject to space availability, facilities rules, and overall program considerations for the final description in the conference program. Proposers will be responsible for all materials and facilities costs associated with the experience.

During the review process, the CPPC may recommend that a proposed session be accepted as another proposal type (for example, if a submitted Concurrent session features only one presenter but is a topic of merit, it may be accepted as a Lightning session). The proposer will be notified of the suggested change before the proposal is officially accepted.

Conference sessions are intended to provide a space for learning, sharing, and discussing topics and issues relevant to our field and are expected to be educational in nature. As such, proposals should not promote or sell specific products, services, brands, or companies.[1] Please contact exhibits@astc.org for more information about exhibitor and sponsorship opportunities.

Topical Areas

Submissions may address **any topic relevant to science and technology centers and museums and the broader fields of informal science learning and public engagement with science.** We especially encourage you to think about current circumstances, capabilities, and priorities in the field.Proposals are also encouraged (but not required) to respond to the theme of **Forward.** Together, we have an opportunity to not only respond to the current circumstances of our field and world, but also actively shape the roles that science and technology play in society. Forward goes beyond acknowledgment that we must keep moving. It is an invitation for more: that we must boldly respond to challenges and change; that we must set a course equipped with lessons learned and grounded in the unique needs of our communities; that we go further, faster, together. In reviewing proposals this year, the CPPC will prioritize those that look *forward,* but effectively draw on lessons learned and knowledge of effective science engagement practices. Simply put, we are interested in proposals and session topics that help us move the field **forward**.

ASTC 2025 attendees suggested topics, formats, and engagement types that they would be especially interested in seeing at future conferences. Please feel free to use these topics as inspiration for developing your idea and responding to the stated needs of the field:

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[1] For inquiries about the potential for sponsored content, please contact us at exhibits@astc.org.

Format and engagement:
- **Foundational knowledge.** Attendees are looking for more sessions that focus on fundamental best practices in this field, tell stories that demonstrate impact, and feature the real experiences of experts.
- **Practical takeaways.** Attendees want practical takeaways—including insights, resources, and tools—that they can apply to their work right away.
- **Integration of research and evaluation.** More results- and impact-focused sessions are wanted, especially those that have true stories drawn from practice.

Specific topics. These topics were especially called out in feedback from the 2025 ASTC Annual Conference evaluation as being of particular interest and are intended to be inspiring suggestions rather than limiting factors in designing your proposal. The final program will include sessions in all of the eight conference tracks listed below.

- **AI and Advanced Technology**: Exploration of AI technologies as tools for organizational operations, and as a critical topic for public engagement – both helping build public literacy around AI and creating meaningful pathways for public input into AI research, development, and regulation. Sessions may address new engagement models, navigating cross-sector partnerships, building staff capacity, ethical considerations, and extending approaches to other advanced technologies.
- **Exhibits**: Focus on exhibit planning, development, and design, including more "nitty gritty" sessions, real-world examples of exhibit creation and content, foundational exhibit development skills, and exhibit development core practices.
- **Fundraising, Revenue Generation, and Financial Stability**: Discussions on securing funding, developing business plans, alternative operational models, financial management, and development strategies for diverse organizations of all sizes.
- **Natural History Settings:** Building on the 2025 conference launch of the Natural History Network, the 2026 Annual Conference will feature a dedicated strand of sessions that address topics and challenges identified by the Network, such as approaches to working with communities on collection practices, making research and collection policy transparent, engaging visitors and learners with real and digitized objects and artifacts, and on how AI is and could be used in natural history settings, e.g. Proposers with roles in collections, exhibits, science and learning research, and other natural history-specific areas are encouraged to apply.
- **Sustainability and Planetary Health**: Insights and examples that invite visitors and communities to take action to improve community and planetary health, and how to make a positive impact through museum operations and facilities decisions.
- **Visitor Experience, Guest Services, and Operations**: Focus on guest relations, visitor experience, operations, and front-line staff and volunteer management; and the challenges in implementing technologies and strategies related to these topics.

You may also wish to draw on recent ASTC resources for inspiration for your proposal. These resources reflect trends and knowledge within the field:

- [Advocacy Foundations Toolkit:](#) a repository of tools, case studies and resources to help institutions embed advocacy into their annual operations.
- The [Civic Engagement & Policymaking Toolkit](#) provides ways of engaging with communities to advance civic priorities.
- [Global Trends Framework](#): produced by ASTC's Global Trends Committee, this framework identifies five trends informing practice and impacting the science engagement field.
- The [Framing Planetary Health](#) guide from ASTC's Seeding Action initiative summarizes communication strategies for inviting action that improves community and planetary health.
- [Professional Pathways in Informal STEM Learning](#): this set of tools supports anyone working in any role in ISL to understand, plan, and advance their skills and capacities.
- [Seeding Action Members' Strategies, Goals, Challenges, and Opportunities](#): Insights from the 2025 Seeding Action Institutional Assessment provides an overview of planetary health efforts and interests across the field.

Finally, ASTC members are highly encouraged to share and find inspiration, ideas, and find co-presenters in **ASTC's online community forums**. Many of the topics listed above have dedicated forums—including ASTC's Natural History Network and AI Community of Practice—while the General Forum serves as an entree to thousands of other science engagement professionals to be your collaborators and co-presenters.

We will ask you to assign your proposal to one of eight tracks that have been restructured from past years to help attendees in navigating the conference:

Track	Description
Audience and Inclusion	Topics related to engaging both broad and specific audiences, increasing access, and ensuring inclusive environments for all audiences.
Business Models, Operations, and Development	Business and financial topics such as fundraising, guest services, marketing, membership, and administration.
Community and Partnerships	Informal and formal collaborations, community relationships, and external partnerships.
Education and Events	Theory, practice, and design of public programs, educational experiences, and events.
Facility and Exhibit Design	Topics related to the design, fabrication, construction, and renovation of exhibits, learning spaces, and building facilities.
Leadership and Management	Topics of interest to chief executives and other senior leaders, such as leadership practices, organizational strategy, and advocacy.
Organizational Culture and Workforce	Topics related to staff development, volunteer engagement, human resources, and internal practices.
Trends and Innovation	Research and evaluation, current trends, and field-wide innovation.

The final program will reflect all the tracks above; however, ASTC especially encourages proposals submitted to the **Business Models, Operations, and Development**, **Facility and Exhibit Design,** and **Organizational Culture and Workforce** tracks based on attendee feedback and historical submissions.

Session Format

All concurrent sessions are expected to take advantage of the in-person nature of the conference. We encourage you to think creatively about how to involve and engage all the participants in the room in ways that effectively convey session content. This may be through facilitated discussion and share-outs, or a more interactive format.

As part of your submission for Concurrent and Lightning sessions, you will be asked to identify the primary format for your session:

Engagement Tag	Description
Panel	Moderated discussion between presenters
Group Discussion	Moderated discussion where attendees are full participants
Experiential	Hands-on experience where attendees actively participate in an activity or practical skill share
Solution Lab	Facilitated working session where attendees work together toward a goal (e.g., develop resources, ideas, or solutions)

By the nature of their format, posters allow the opportunity for one-on-one and small group discussions. Lightning proposals may not fit into the engagement categories above, but may include some interactivity. Proposers are highly encouraged to thoughtfully consider the engagement strategy used in their session—attendees value sessions that balance interactivity with knowledge-sharing.

ASTC Welcomes All to Submit

Affiliation with an ASTC-member organization is *not* required to submit a session proposal nor to be a presenter. We welcome—and encourage—submissions from those at all career stages and in all job roles.

We especially welcome first-time submissions and proposals from people who have not previously attended an ASTC conference.

ASTC is dedicated to including people of all races, colors, religions, political affiliations, sexual orientations, genders, ages, familial histories of education, physical and cognitive abilities,

languages used, Indigenous status, and countries of origin, and we encourage submissions from all.

CPPC members are available to support you in proposal development, including connecting you with other possible presenters.

Commitment to Engaging Diverse Perspectives

ASTC is committed to incorporating a wide range of perspectives within each session and across the entire conference. You will be asked to provide up to two short statements (depending on session type) that describe how your session represents a wide range of perspectives, individually and organizationally. There is no single way to address this requirement, but consider the following dimensions:

- ❖ Organizations of all types, sizes, and geographies
- ❖ Variety of perspectives and topical viewpoints
- ❖ Range of personal backgrounds, career stages, and job roles
- ❖ Content explicitly focused on belonging, accessibility, inclusion, and equity

Your proposal should clearly describe how the presenters are well-positioned to facilitate the session topic.

Your session's articulated commitment to incorporating a wide range of perspectives will be considered during the review process.

Quick Guide to Submitting

The ASTC Conference Program Planning Committee, along with the ASTC staff, evaluates all proposals submitted for the conference. The information you include in your submission will be used for the review process, to help ASTC organize the conference, and to help promote your session. As part of the online submission process, you will be asked to provide some descriptive phrases that will help ASTC staff effectively develop a conference program that is easy for attendees to navigate.

Proposals must be submitted via the online portal by **Tuesday, December 23, 2025**. You will need to begin your proposal by clicking "Join Now" to create your ASTC 2026 account on the submission portal. (You must create a new account for 2026 even if you submitted a session proposal for previous conferences.)

Please note that due to the limited number of sessions, a **speaker is generally limited to presenting at two sessions** during the 2026 Annual Conference. In addition, **concurrent session proposals should have a maximum of five presenters**. You will be updated on the status of your proposal by the end of May 2026.