ITYC Summit
Innovations in Two-Year College STEM Education

ITYC New Awardee Program: Synthesis of Participant Reflections

Participants in the ITYC New Awardee Program, held in 2026, were asked to reflect on their experience following the final synchronous event. Participants responded to three questions: (1) What did you get out of the program? (2) What did you contribute to the program? (3) What advice would you share with the next cohort of new ITYC awardees? The 42 participant responses received are synthesized here. Participant quotes are in italics below and throughout this report.

> *When I entered the ITYC New Awardee Program, I did not fully anticipate the depth of what the experience would offer. What I found was a dynamic, collegial space designed for exactly the kind of growth I needed: a place to learn, engage, and ask the questions that new investigators rarely feel comfortable raising elsewhere. Participating alongside both new and previously awarded investigators created a cross-generational exchange of knowledge that was, by turns, affirming, eye-opening, and genuinely inspiring.*

Question 1: What did you get out of the New Awardee Program?

Participants expressed a wide variety of benefits from their participation in the program. The most common themes included the value of a peer community, normalizing shared 2YC project challenges, gaining practical grant management strategies and project ideas, and building confidence.

Peer community and overcoming isolation: Being part of a community with other colleagues working on grants in 2YCs was mentioned in many reflections as the most valuable takeaway. The sense of being part of a community helped participants feel less isolated. They realized they knew more than they thought, helping to address impostor syndrome. Multiple participants described feeling isolated on their campuses prior to the program and emphasized how it helped them realize they were no longer operating alone. Learning about peer experiences affirmed for some participants that their existing approach was effective. Being part of a supportive network of 2YC peers boosted their confidence.

> *Whereas I previously felt quite isolated and saddled with 'Lone Ranger syndrome', it is wonderful to now feel part of a community of scientists with similar student populations, goals, and challenges.*
>
> *One of the most valuable things, for me, was shedding the imposter syndrome that came with receiving this grant... I felt MUCH more comfortable about the work we've done and plan to do now that I have been validated by my peers.*
>
> *Another major benefit was the opportunity to expand our professional network. Connecting with other ITYC awardees allowed us to exchange ideas, discuss shared challenges, and learn from institutions at different stages of implementation.*

One of the most valuable takeaways for me was the affirmation that our project is on the right track.

Normalizing shared 2YC project challenges: The recognition that institutional delays, purchasing barriers, and project pivots are common across many 2YCs reduced participant anxiety and reframed obstacles as normal parts of the process; participants from other 2YCs without those issues appreciated the systems in place at their institution. Project challenges can be similar regardless of discipline or institutional context. Participants recognized that change is the norm and that project plans can be modified.

The most valuable thing I got was perspective. Hearing from awardees running very different projects made it clear that we were all running into the same kinds of obstacles. Delays were common, restructuring was common... Seeing that pattern was reassuring.

Another key takeaway from these sessions was that we shouldn't expect our college to be prepared to deal with all the details related to managing a grant.

Hearing that others were navigating similar challenges affirmed that I am not alone in addressing issues such as administrative infrastructure, faculty buy-in, and time management.

Practical grant management strategies and expanding project vision: Participants valued learning about practical grant management strategies such as working effectively with grant evaluators, evaluative thinking, annual report expectations, the option of no-cost extensions, and other strategies shared by panelists and workshop leaders. They also valued learning from other participants, gaining fresh ideas for student recruitment and faculty engagement, creative dissemination strategies, approaches for collaborations with other units on campus and cross-institutional partnerships, and more. Learning about the breadth of projects at other 2YCs inspired participants to re-envision their own work, introduce new activities (e.g., student research showcases, faculty learning communities), and plan for broader dissemination.

A major practical benefit was understanding how to navigate grant administration, specifically demystifying annual reporting, clarifying how to utilize external evaluators, and learning about no-cost extensions.

The evaluation session introduced a structured approach to evaluative thinking, particularly the 'What? So what? Now what?' framework, which I plan to integrate into ongoing project assessment and decision-making.

I enjoyed participating in this New Awardee Program because it helped us move from having a strong funded project idea to having a clearer implementation, evaluation, and dissemination strategy for our proposal.

Participation... has opened me to the vast breadth of projects that have been envisioned by all of the peer institutions. I now have new ideas and a new way of thinking. I am now re-envisioning what can be done at our community college.

Participant confidence and self-efficacy: Some participants reported feeling more confident in their role and ability to use their skills in leading / carrying out their projects. Awardees gained the confidence to navigate institutional or campus systems and ask targeted questions to administrative offices. Understanding reporting expectations reduced anxiety around some administrative tasks including submission of annual reports.The program also provided an opportunity to recalibrate progress on their project. Some awardees entered the program expecting to be behind, only to realize their planning, dissemination, and/or infrastructure were actually ahead of schedule. Hearing peer experiences affirmed for some participants that their existing approach was effective.

The most important thing I got out of this program was confidence.

I learned that I was further along than I believed... I arrived thinking I was behind the curve; I left understanding I had already built significant momentum. That recalibration of self-perception was invaluable.

Writing the reports feels a little intimidating, but the discussion took some of the nervousness out of the process.

These workshops confirmed … that I really can do the work.

I left more confident in my abilities, more grounded in the outcomes and impacts of my program, and more connected to a national network of peers who are navigating the same terrain.

Other themes: These themes include leadership and strategic mindsets, project expansion, and post-grant sustainability. The leadership and strategic mindset theme centers on moving beyond day-to-day grant survival toward institutional navigation, team management, and long-term sustainability. For some awardees, this theme manifested as an *identity shift*. They described transitioning from a purely "discipline-centered practitioner" or "collaborator" into an active project leader capable of delegating duties, managing team dynamics, and setting long-term goals. Participants also applied strategic mindsets to build project support—such as presenting to their college's Board of Trustees, engaging campus allies, or connecting with regional community college consortia.

These sessions forced me to think about the big picture on a regular basis. Now, thinking about the big picture is a habit.

The barriers to change and essential strategies for the 4 types of leadership were particularly informative because it introduces a problem-solving approach.

[It was]...a valuable opportunity for me to step back from the day-to-day work of implementing our project and think more about the big picture factors: leadership, sustainability, student outcomes, and institutional change.

Individual responses illustrated differing perspectives based on experience level, grant role/institutional context, and the extent of the networking experience.

- Experience level: For example, learning about no-cost extensions and the role of external evaluators was especially valuable for new awardees. New awardees now understand evaluators act as ongoing strategic partners in both design and implementation. Some awardees realized that their experiences from prior grants made their current project management smoother.
- Different roles/institutional contexts: Participants with different roles wrote about different takeaways: e.g., addressing workload balance, effective PI/evaluator collaborations, cross-divisional initiatives, support of PIs through leadership transitions.
- Most attendees felt their network expanded significantly. A few participants noted that because breakout groups were randomized every session, they experienced broad exposure to many people but lacked sustained, repeated interaction with specific peers, making individual networking more challenging.

In response to the question about what participants got out of the New Awardee Program, participants gained a community of peers who shared the context of working in 2YCs on ITYC projects. The program provided validation of their work, offered practical advice regarding grant management, and built confidence.

> *Overall, I left the program with new connections, increased confidence about our current progress, practical ideas for our project (particularly as it relates to our connection with the external evaluator) and a stronger sense of belonging within this grant community.*

Question 2. What did you contribute to the New Awardee Program?

> *Although we felt that we gained more from the experience than we contributed, we were very engaged throughout the program and genuinely interested in learning about the other projects.*

Participants expressed that they learned more than they contributed. In the reflections, they identified ways their participation enriched the workshop experience including their active participation in discussions, practical strategies and research, peer problem-solving, and sharing different professional and institutional perspectives. They also contributed via their curiosity.

- **Active participation and community building.** Participants strengthened discussions by asking questions, listening to colleagues' experiences, offering feedback, facilitating breakout groups, and serving as reporters or panelists. Several also brought project team members into the program, including evaluators, coordinators, and former student researchers, extending the benefits of participation beyond the individual PI.
- **Practical strategies and resources.** Participants shared project models, dissemination strategies, technology tools, and approaches to implementation that colleagues could adapt to their own

projects. Their examples included Faculty Learning Communities, student research showcases, lab design workshops, Canvas resources, LibGuides, and approaches to documenting and promoting project activities. Participants also shared strategies that had not worked as planned, providing examples of both successes and challenges.

- **Peer problem-solving and sharing lessons learned.** Participants drew on their prior grant and institutional experience to help colleagues navigate procurement, budgeting, release time, evaluation contracts, and other administrative challenges. Sharing setbacks and project pivots also helped them understand the challenges of grant implementation and provided reassurance to newer PIs that challenges are a common part of leading funded projects.
- **Different professional and institutional perspectives.** Department chairs, administrators, evaluators, student services professionals, and other team members brought perspectives that extended beyond the traditional PI role. These contributions helped participants consider their projects within broader institutional contexts and identify opportunities for collaboration across organizational roles.
- **Curiosity.** Participants frequently framed curiosity as a tangible value they brought to both individual learning and peer-to-peer exchange throughout the workshop. Participants actively used questions, listening, and exploration to understand colleagues' projects, successes, and challenges, making curiosity a meaningful contribution to group learning. Their curiosity encouraged participants to look beyond their own disciplines and institutional contexts, introducing them to approaches and ideas they could adapt to their own projects. As one participant commented, "*I brought a sense of curiosity, collaboration, and willingness to share openly with the [breakout groups].*"

I asked in depth questions of others to understand their experiences and their struggles.

I shared strategies on how to motivate students and help them to become more independent researchers.

I feel like I was able to be a good listener and ask questions to help others think about their projects. It was great to see how excited people are about their projects, and I enjoyed helping them refine their thinking.

Question 3. What advice would you share with the next cohort of new ITYC awardees?

When asked what advice they would give to the next cohort, participants shared both general advice about being a PI and specific advice for getting the most out of a program like the New Awardee Program. They emphasized the value of active and intentional participation, and they encouraged projects to have more than one project team member in the program.

Advice that applies more generally to being a PI centered on **being proactive and flexible in implementing projects**. Ways to be proactive include developing early and strong relationships with your institutional business and grants offices as well as others on campus who could be natural allies; this approach can help identify institutional requirements and prevent avoidable delays. Participants

also recommended establishing early communication with Program Officers and evaluators so that questions could be addressed before they became significant challenges. Participants recognized that not every aspect of a project will proceed as planned. Delays, administrative challenges, and project pivots are a normal part of grant implementation and should be approached as opportunities to adapt rather than as indicators of failure. A key takeaway is to expect that successful grant implementation will require flexibility and occasional pivots. Strengthen communication pathways within your project team and reach out beyond your campus to others who can support your work or be a sounding board.

The cohort also provided the following advice to new awardees about getting the most out of a program like the New Awardee workshop.

Embrace an open and active learner mindset. Participants encouraged future awardees to bring both successes and challenges to the program, ask questions—even questions they might consider basic—and be willing to acknowledge when they need help. They noted that some of the most valuable conversations occurred when participants openly discussed problems they had not yet solved and discovered that colleagues were experiencing similar challenges. Rather than viewing vulnerability as a weakness, participants came to see it as an important condition for learning and building confidence. As one participant advised, *"Come ready to share both successes and unfinished challenges, since the most helpful conversations often come from realizing others are facing similar issues."* Another suggested, *"Enter each session with a sense of curiosity because in each session you learn more than just the topic of the week."*

Safeguard their time. Participants recommended blocking workshop dates on calendars well in advance and making attendance an integral part of grant implementation, not as an optional add-on. They also encouraged participants to make time for informal conversations before and after scheduled sessions**.** These informal interactions were particularly valuable for building relationships and connections that could continue beyond the program.

Build professional networks. Participants encouraged new awardees to exchange contact information, stay connected with cohort members, reach out to previous awardees, and use peers as sounding boards when questions or challenges arise. They identified informal post-session conversations and direct peer-to-peer communication as important opportunities for developing relationships that could provide ongoing support, resources, and ideas.

Involve members of your project teams. Find ways to share information with co-PIs, project coordinators, evaluators, or department chairs who may not have been able to attend the workshop. As one participant put it, *"Do not come alone. The program is rich with professional development for the PI, but its value multiplies when you bring your team with you."*

The advice by the participants reflects a shift in mindset that they experienced through the program: new PIs do not have to navigate the challenges of grant leadership alone, nor are they expected to know everything from the outset. By approaching the program as a space for learning, openly sharing challenges, protecting time for reflection and connection, and intentionally building relationships with

peers and institutional partners, future cohorts can maximize both the immediate value of the New Awardee Program and the longer-term support of the ITYC community.

> *One of the most important pieces of advice we would share is to remain flexible and adaptable, as no project develops exactly as originally planned. Building strong relationships, maintaining open communication, and being willing to adjust processes are essential to long-term success.*
>
> *Take good notes from the sessions! I kept a log of all the important things, and even took screenshots and copy/pasted things into a digital notebook. I have looked back at these notes and will continue to look back at these notes throughout my grant. One thing I wish I had done was to form more partnerships with the participants. Next time around, I will work on being more social and getting in contact with fellow participants right away.*
>
> *Engage with the community! The more you put into it the more you get out of it. You have the expertise and drive to do any projects you want, so be curious and brave.*

How to cite this report: McDaris, J.R., Zuber, S.L., Macdonald, R.H., Iverson, E.R., & Baer, E.M.D. (2026). ITYC New Awardee Program: Synthesis of Participant Reflections https://doi.org/10.67165/7pcjpr78





This work is supported by the National Science Foundation (NSF) Division of Undergraduate Education grants #2523686 and #2523687. Disclaimer: Any opinions, findings, conclusions or recommendations expressed in this website are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation.