

Sparkathon 2026 Application Process

Topic: Enhancing Cellular Therapies with Next-generation IO Molecules

Participants apply by completing an electronic application. **Applications are due by November 17, 2025, at 12pm PT.** A dedicated review committee will select participants on a competitive basis. The selection process aims to recruit early career scientists and physicians (PhD and/or MD) planning to transition to an independent position within academia, government or industry in the next 2-3 years. Twelve emerging leaders in the field will be selected as the 2026 “Sparkies”. Applicants must demonstrate a strong background on the topic of *Enhancing Cellular Therapies with Next-generation IO Molecules as well as their commitment to studying this topic in their future, independent position.* We encourage applicants with varied scientific backgrounds to apply.

Program goals/outcomes:

- **Leadership.** Development of leadership skills to direct a research or clinical team within academia, government, or industry.
- **Communication.** Enhancement of scientific writing and presentation skills.
- **Mentorship.** Establishment of mentorship from world-renowned faculty and peers.
- **Science.** Design and implementation of innovative projects that address an unmet need in the field of ***Enhancing Cellular Therapies with Next-generation IO Molecules.***
- **Job search.** Preparation for an academic, government, and industry job search.
- **Running a Research Group.** Understanding of the challenges and responsibilities that new independent scientists face.
- **Research Collaboration.** Opportunity to form organic collaborations with peers and faculty to work cross-institutionally to efficiently create outcomes to enhance the field.
- **Networking.** SITC Sparkathon participants and alumni will develop affinity amongst their peers and the senior faculty.
- **Engagement.** Emerging leaders may receive more visible leadership opportunities within SITC.

Eligibility Requirements

- Participants must plan to transition from their mentored position to a full-time independent role in academia, government or industry within the next 2-3 years.
- It is desirable for applicants to have had some involvement with SITC, for example, applicants can have: received a SITC award or fellowship; presented a poster or given an oral presentation at a SITC annual or Spring Scientific meeting, attended a SITC educational event such as Advances in Cancer Immunotherapy (ACI), SITC Cancer Immunotherapy Winter School, SITC Clinical Immuno-Oncology Network (SCION) Workshop, or participation on the discussion board on the SITC CONNECT website.
- Applicants should exhibit dedication and research related to the 2026 Sparkathon topic: Enhancing Cellular Therapies with Next-generation IO Molecules.
- Participants must be available to attend the two-and-a-half-day in-person retreat from **March 23-25 in Tucson, AZ** and **the one-day program at the 2026 SITC Annual Meeting in Phoenix, AZ.**
 - *Accepted applicants will receive complimentary registration for the Sparkathon programs along with lodging reimbursement for the programs.*
- Past Sparkathon participants are not eligible to apply.

Application Requirements

- Participants must submit a completed application by **November 17, 2025, at 12pm PT**. Complete applications will consist of:
 - A one-page cover letter including:
 - Current stage of training (postdoc, fellow, etc.)
 - A statement of prior and current training/expertise on the topic of Enhancing Cellular Therapies with Next-generation IO Molecules
 - A statement of future commitment to the topic of Enhancing Cellular Therapies with Next-generation IO Molecules
 - Brief career development plan during their remaining training period to prepare them for independence
 - Letter of recommendation from mentor
 - A one-page NIH-formatted Specific Aims Page
 - Applicant's NIH biosketch

Please review the complete application requirements and criteria at the end of this document.

Participation Requirements

- Accepted applicants are required to attend the full 2.5- and 1-day programs, including all meals and networking opportunities.
- Accepted applicants will give a 10-minute presentation on their current science and future directions.
- Accepted applicants will write a perspective paper with their fellow Class of 2026 participants as an outcome of the program.
- Accepted applicants are strongly encouraged to attend and submit an abstract to the SITC Spring Scientific program, Enhancing Cellular Therapies with Next-generation IO Molecules, which takes place March 25-27, 2026, immediately following the Sparkathon program and also at the El Conquistador Tucson, a Hilton Resort, in Tucson, AZ.
 - *Accepted applicants will receive complimentary registration to the Spring Scientific.*
- At the Annual Meeting, participants are strongly encouraged to attend the Early Career Scientist (ECS) activities at SITC 2026 such as the Grant Writing Workshop, Meet the Expert Lunch, Speed Mentoring, ECS and Sparkathon Receptions. The Sparkathon Reception is solely for Sparkathon Alumni.
 - *Accepted applicants do not receive complimentary registration for the SITC Annual Meeting or Pre-Conference Programs.*
- Professional, responsible, and ethical behavior is expected from participants throughout the Sparkathon 2026 program. This includes full and uninterrupted active participation, meeting submission deadlines, being respectful and supportive of fellow members, adhering to a general code of ethics, and adhering to [SITC's Meeting Code of Conduct](#). Failure to adhere to the highest ethical standards and other program requirements can result in possible termination from the project. Participants are required to be present for all program sessions, meals and activities.

All scientific data and educational materials presented at the Sparkathon meeting are strictly confidential and may not be shared, posted, or discussed without prior authorization from their respective owners.

SITC Sparkathon Alumni Network

After participation in the Sparkathon 2026 program, emerging leaders will come together to create an

alumnus network to further their work, make new and strengthen existing connections, and serve as a resource for subsequent classes. This network will facilitate collaborations among members and faculty. Members may be considered for future society leadership opportunities, including committees and Board service.

Application Requirements and Review Criteria. All components below must be uploaded to the electronic application system.

I. Cover Letter (1-page)

- i. This document should state briefly:
 - Current stage of training (postdoc, fellow, etc.)
 - A statement of prior and current training / expertise on the topic of Enhancing Cellular Therapies with Next-generation IO Molecules
 - A statement of future commitment to the topic of Enhancing Cellular Therapies with Next-generation IO Molecules
 - Why are you interested in participating in the Sparkathon 2026 program: *Enhancing Cellular Therapies with Next-generation IO Molecules*.
 - Your involvement with SITC and/or the field of cancer immunotherapy (such as through a committee; receipt of a Presidential Travel Award or the Presidential Award; awardee of a SITC fellowship; submission of an abstract; attending a SITC educational event such as an Annual Meeting, interim workshop or collaborative program; creating or updating your profile on the SITC CONNECT website; posting on a discussion board on the SITC website; using SITC's online resources; providing feedback to SITC in some way such as responding to a survey; etc.)
 - Brief career development plan during their remaining training period to prepare them for independence: Career objectives and plan to obtain a faculty position in the next two years

II. Letter of Recommendation

- i. Mentor's Letter of Recommendation: This letter should be from an individual acting as a fellowship mentor to the applicant. It must clearly present:
 - The applicant's role and academic appointment(s)
 - The mentor's role in the proposed research plan, including their commitment to provide support as necessary as the applicant transitions into an independent faculty position
 - Potential for the applicant to develop into an independent investigator

III. One page NIH-formatted Specific Aims page on your future work in the area of *Enhancing Cellular Therapies with Next-generation IO Molecules*.

IV. Applicant's NIH biosketch

Standard NIH formatting is required. The biosketch must include a history of applicant's training, publications and grants or awards currently received or pending.

Review Criteria

The review committee will assess the following items for each candidate but will consider all other strengths and experiences emphasized in the applications. Items are listed by order of importance.

- Dedication and research related to the 2026 Sparkathon topic, *Enhancing Cellular Therapies with Next-generation IO Molecules*
- Scientific achievements and experience in cancer immunotherapy, as highlighted by publications, appointments, grants, awards, and presentations at conferences.
- Likelihood of securing an independent position in the next 2-3 years
- Collaboration/team player (for example through co-authoring a paper)

All application materials are due by November 17, 2025, at 12pm PT.

Applicants will be notified in December 2025 if they are accepted into the 2026 Sparkathon program.