

Sparkathon 2027 Application Process

Topic: Next Generation of Cellular Therapies: In vivo, Ex vivo, Engagers and Beyond

Program Overview

This program is intended for early-career scientists and physicians (PhD and/or MD) who expect to transition to an independent position in academia, government, or industry within the next 1-2 years. Individuals from diverse scientific backgrounds are encouraged to apply. A dedicated selection committee will review applications competitively, and emerging leaders in the field will be selected as the 2027 participants. Applicants should demonstrate a strong foundation in cell therapies and a clear commitment to advancing this area of research in their future independent careers.

Program Goals and Outcomes

- *Leadership*: Develop leadership skills to direct a research or clinical team within academia, government, or industry, including understanding the challenges and responsibilities that new independent scientists face.
- *Communication*: Enhance scientific writing and presentation skills.
- *Mentorship*: Establish mentorship from world-renowned faculty and peers.
- *Innovative Science*: Design and implement projects that address an unmet need in the field of cell therapies.
- *Job search*: Prepare for academic, government, and industry job search.
- *Collaboration*: Build organic collaborations with peers and faculty across institutions, fostering efficient teamwork and advancing the field through shared expertise and collective outcomes
- *Networking*: Develop affinity among peers and senior faculty.
- *Engagement*: Gain visible leadership opportunities within SITC.

Eligibility Requirements

- Applicants should be within approximately 1–2 years of transitioning to an independent faculty position or launching an independent research program. All applicants must have NIH Early Stage Investigator (ESI) status at the time of application, as verified through the NIH eRA Commons/ERA portal. Applicants must upload documentation of their current ESI status with their application.
- Instructor appointments are eligible only if the applicant holds active ESI status and has not yet established an independent research program (e.g., has not received multiple major independent research grants or equivalent). Career development and transition awards (e.g., K awards) do not affect eligibility and are permitted. A letter from the Chair of the department is required to state 1) the applicant is expected to transition to an independent faculty position within the next 1–2 years, and 2) They have not yet established an independent research program.
- Applicants should demonstrate dedication and research related to the 2027 Sparkathon topic, *Next Generation of Cellular Therapies: In vivo, Ex vivo, Engagers and Beyond*.
- It is preferred that applicants have some prior involvement with SITC. Examples may include service on a committee; receipt of a Presidential Travel Award, Presidential Award, fellowship, or other recognition; abstract submission or presentation; participation in a SITC educational event (e.g., Annual Meeting, workshop, or collaborative program); use of SITC educational

resources or other meaningful interactions with SITC.

- Past Sparkathon participants are not eligible to apply.

Application Requirements

Participants must submit a completed application through Proposal Central by **Thursday, November 12, 2026, at 12 p.m. PT/2 p.m. CT/3 p.m. ET** that includes the following:

- I. One-page **Cover Letter** that outlines:
 - a. *Current Training and Expertise*: Identify your current stage of training (postdoc, fellow, etc.) and describe your research experience and expertise related to *cell therapies*.
 - b. *Future Commitment*: Describe your long-term interest in and commitment to advancing the field of *cell therapies* in your future independent career.
 - c. *Interest in the Program*: Explain why you are interested in participating in the Sparkathon 2027 program and how it aligns with your career goals.
 - d. *Involvement with SITC and Cancer Immunotherapy*: Describe your involvement with SITC and/or the field of cancer immunotherapy. Examples may include service on a committee; receipt of a Presidential Travel Award, Presidential Award, fellowship, or other recognition; abstract submission or presentation; participation in a SITC educational event (e.g., Annual Meeting, workshop, or collaborative program); use of SITC educational resources or other meaningful interactions with SITC.
 - e. *Career Development Plan*: Provide a brief career development plan outlining your goals during your remaining training period, including the steps you will take to prepare for an independent position and your plan to obtain a faculty or other independent research position within the next two years.
- II. **Letter of Recommendation** from an individual acting as a mentor to the applicant that includes:
 - a. The applicant's role and academic appointment(s).
 - b. 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.
 - c. Potential for the applicant to develop into an independent investigator.
- III. **NIH-formatted Specific Aims page** on future work related to *cell therapies*.
- IV. **NIH-formatted biosketch generated through SciENcv** that includes the applicant's education and training history, publications, and current or pending grants and awards.
- V. Documentation verifying current **NIH Early Stage Investigator (ESI) status**
- VI. For instructor appointments only: Required Department Chair letter

Review Criteria

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

- Dedication and research related to the 2027 Sparkathon topic, *Next Generation of Cellular Therapies: In vivo, Ex vivo, Engagers and Beyond*.
- 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.
- Collaborative team player (for example, co-authoring a paper).

Applicants will be notified in December 2026 if they are accepted into the 2027 Sparkathon program.

Participation Requirements

- Accepted applicants must be available to attend the two-and-a-half day in-person retreat from February 22-24, 2027, at the Rancho Bernardo Inn in San Diego, CA **and** the half-day program prior to SITC's 42nd Annual Meeting & Pre-Conference Programs in National Harbor, MD. Accepted applicants are expected to attend all program sessions, meals, and activities.
- Accepted applicants will give a presentation on their current science and future directions.
- Accepted applicants will write a collaborative perspective paper with their fellow Class of 2027 participants as an outcome of the program.
- Accepted applicants are strongly encouraged to attend and submit an abstract to the SITC Spring Scientific program, which takes place February 24-26, 2027, immediately following the Sparkathon program at the Rancho Bernardo Inn in San Diego, CA.
- Accepted applicants are strongly encouraged to attend the Early Career Scientist (ECS) activities at SITC's 42nd Annual Meeting & Pre-Conference Programs such as the Grant Writing Workshop, Meet the Expert Lunch, Speed Mentoring, ECS Networking and Sparkathon Receptions. The Sparkathon Reception is solely for Sparkathon Alumni.
- Accepted applicants are expected to conduct themselves professionally, responsibly, and ethically throughout the Sparkathon 2027 program. This includes active, uninterrupted participation; meeting all submission deadlines; being respectful and supportive of fellow participants; following general ethical standards; and complying with SITC's Meeting Code of Conduct. Failure to meet these standards or other program requirements may result in dismissal from the program.

SITC Sparkathon Alumni Network

After completing the Sparkathon 2027 program, emerging leaders will join an alumni network designed to advance their work, build new connections, strengthen existing relationships, and support future Sparkathon classes. The network will foster collaboration among alumni and faculty. Members may also be considered for future SITC leadership opportunities, including committee and Board service.

Please note that 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.