2026 Annual Network Meeting

May 6-7, 2026
Big Ten Conference Center, Rosemont, IL

Hosted by the Indiana University Program Office:

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Acknowledgements*:* This material is based upon work supported by the National Science Foundation under Grant No. 2227627. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation.

Executive Summary

The 2026 Midwest Research Computing and Data (MWRCD) Consortium Annual Meeting convened 103 participants from 30 institutions, including 25 Midwest institutions (83%) and 5 institutions from outside the region (17%), reinforcing the Consortium's commitment to regional collaboration while engaging national partners. Participants represented a diverse mix of R1 and non-R1 institutions, with 27 attendees (26%) coming from non-R1 institutions, reflecting the Consortium's continued emphasis on broadening participation across the research computing community.

The meeting opened with a keynote by Ian Foster, "The Genesis Mission," which explored the transformative role of artificial intelligence in scientific discovery and set the stage for the meeting's central theme. Additional sessions covered AI, quantum computing, HPC, research networking, cloud operations, workforce development, research data ecosystems, and cyberinfrastructure. The program brought together research computing professionals, faculty, research software engineers, systems administrators, institutional leaders, students, and national cyberinfrastructure partners to share best practices, strengthen collaborations, and discuss emerging challenges facing the community.

The Consortium's Student Experience Program supported four students, including three from non-R1 institutions, providing hands-on exposure to the regional research computing community and expanding professional development opportunities for students from a range of institutional backgrounds.

Post-event evaluations reflected exceptionally high satisfaction, with 74% of respondents rating the meeting Excellent and 24% rating it Very Good. Attendees highlighted networking opportunities, AI-focused programming, and practical, implementation-oriented sessions as the meeting's greatest strengths. Overall, the meeting reinforced the Consortium's role as a trusted regional network for advancing collaboration, innovation, and capacity building across the Midwest research computing ecosystem.
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Conference at a Glance

Metric	Value
Total Registered Attendees	103
Attendees Count from R1 Institutions	76 (73.8%)
Attendees Count from Non-R1 Institutions	27 (26.2%)
Institutions Represented	30
Midwest Institutions	25(83.3%)
Other Institutions	5(16.7%)
Post-Event Survey Responses	46
Student Experience Program Participants	4 (3 from non-R1)
Survey Response Rate	Approximately 45%
Overall Satisfaction (Excellent)	74%
Overall Satisfaction (Very Good)	24%

Organizing Committee

- Winona Snapp-Childs (Indiana University)
- Esen Gokpinar-Shelton (Indiana University)
- Laura Pettit (Indiana University)
- Benjamin Lynch (University of Minnesota)
- Brock Palen (University of Michigan)
- Hadrian Djohari (Case Western Reserve University)
- Karen Tomko (Ohio Supercomputer Center)
- Lee Liming (University of Chicago)
- Preston Smith, (Purdue University)
- Scott Hampton (Notre Dame)
- Todd Shechter (University of Madison-Wisconsin)

Conference Structure & Program

The 2026 Annual Meeting was designed to help institutions prepare for the rapidly evolving research computing landscape. The program addressed the technological, operational, and strategic challenges facing research computing organizations, with an emphasis on practical implementation and peer learning.

The conference featured keynote presentations, technical talks, panel discussions, Birds-of-a-Feather sessions, lightning talks, facilitated discussions, and networking opportunities. Sessions highlighted real-world deployments, institutional case studies, and operational lessons that participants could adapt within their own organizations.

Program Themes

The program was organized around several key themes:

- Artificial Intelligence and High-Performance Computing
- Quantum Computing
- Agentic AI for Science
- Research Networking and Testbeds
- Cryo-EM Workflows
- Globus Compute
- Cloud Operations
- Research Data Ecosystems
- Next Generation Data Centers
- Institutional Capacity Planning
- Workforce Development
- AI Consultation Models
- Regional Collaboration and National Engagement

Key Themes Driving the Meeting

Four themes emerged throughout the meeting:

- **Artificial Intelligence**: AI was the central focus of the conference, with sessions exploring its impact on scientific workflows, cyberinfrastructure, and institutional strategy.
- **Practical Implementation**: Speakers emphasized operational experience, implementation strategies, and lessons learned over theoretical discussions.
- **Community Collaboration**: Networking and peer-to-peer knowledge sharing remained central to the meeting, reinforcing the Consortium's role as a regional community of practice.
- **Preparing for the Future**: Sessions encouraged institutions to think strategically about emerging technologies, workforce development, and the future of research computing.

Attendee Profile and Institutional Representation

Attendee Profile

One of the greatest strengths of the Midwest Research Computing and Data (MWRCD) Consortium Annual Meeting is the diversity of the professionals it brings together. The 2026 meeting attracted **103 participants representing 30 institutions** across the Midwest and beyond, reflecting a broad cross-section of the research computing ecosystem.

Participants represented technical practitioners, research facilitators, cyberinfrastructure leaders, faculty members, software developers, graduate students, research support professionals, and institutional decision-makers. This diversity contributes to one of the Consortium's defining characteristics: the ability to connect individuals working at different organizational levels while addressing common research computing challenges.

Unlike conferences focused exclusively on systems administration, software development, or executive leadership, the MWRCD Annual Meeting intentionally fosters dialogue across professional roles. This interdisciplinary participation encourages attendees to understand research computing challenges from multiple perspectives and helps strengthen collaboration across institutions.

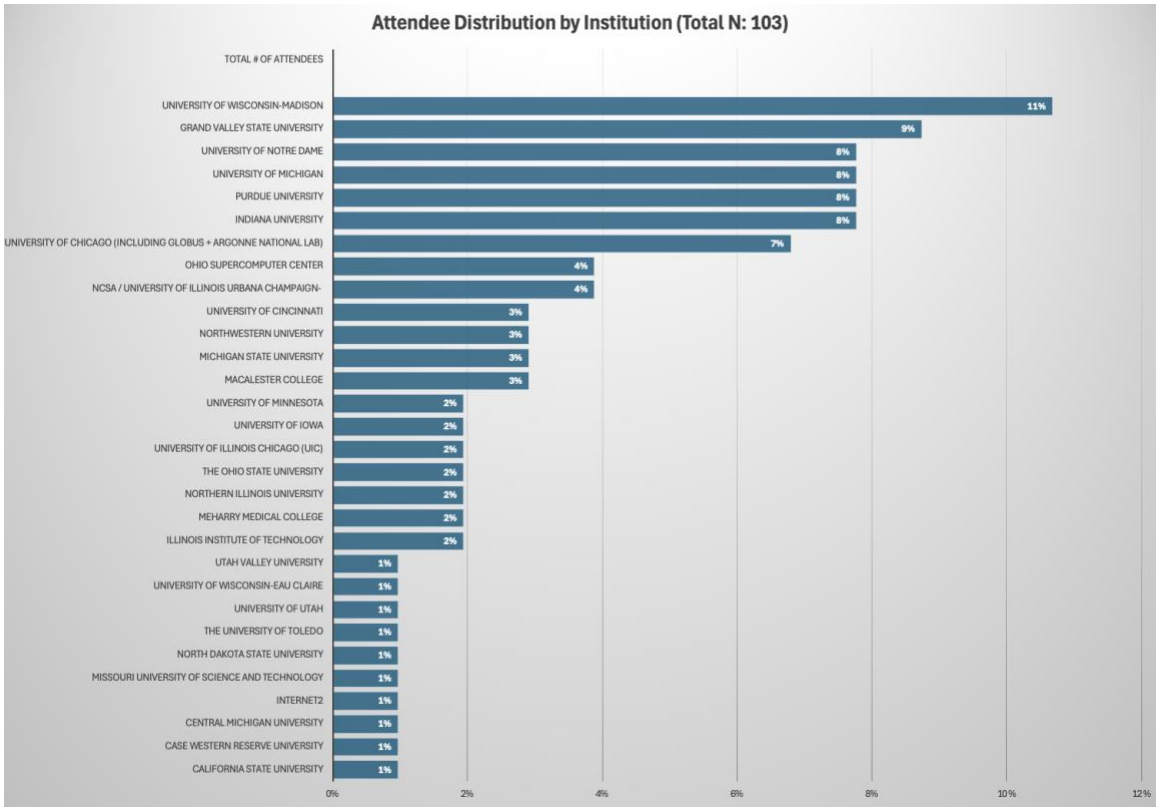
Institutional Representation

The 2026 Annual Meeting welcomed participants from **30 unique organizations**, including **25 institutions located within the Midwest region** and **five organizations from outside the region**. This balance reflects the Consortium's mission of strengthening regional collaboration while remaining connected to national cyberinfrastructure initiatives and partner organizations. The attendee distribution also demonstrates strong participation from both large research-intensive universities and smaller institutions, creating opportunities for institutions with varying levels of research computing maturity to exchange experiences and best practices.

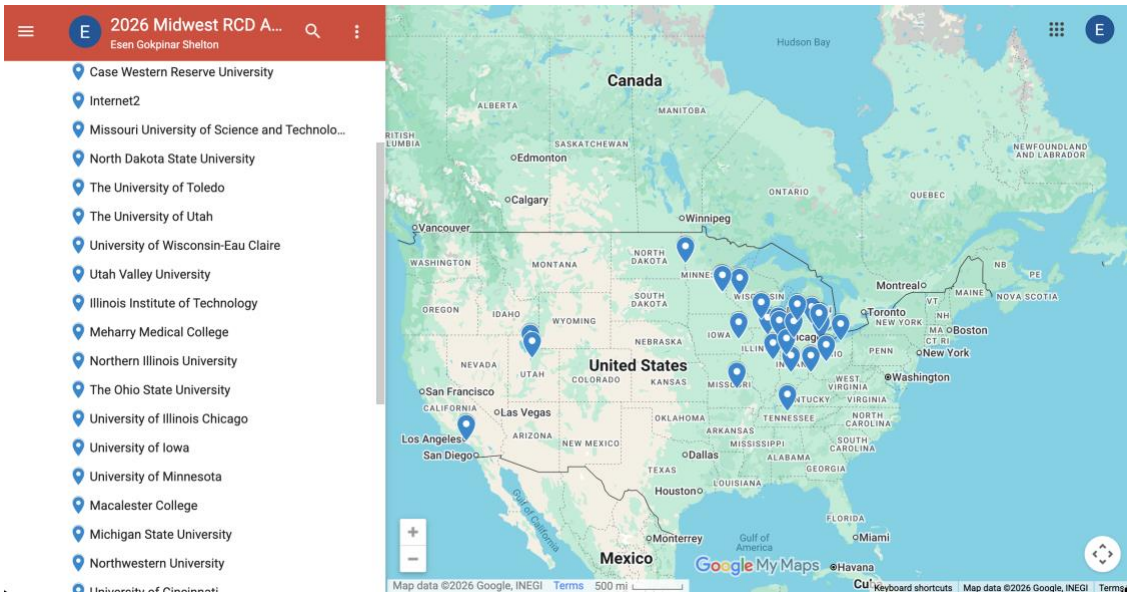
The largest institutional delegations came from:

Institution	Attendees	Percentage
University of Wisconsin–Madison	11	11%
Grand Valley State University	9	9%
Indiana University	8	8%
Purdue University	8	8%
University of Michigan	8	8%
University of Notre Dame	8	8%
University of Chicago (including Globus & Argonne participants)	7	7%
NCSA / University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign	4	4%
Ohio Supercomputer Center	4	4%
Northwestern University	3	3%
Michigan State University	3	3%
University of Cincinnati	3	3%
Macalester College	3	3%

Figure 2. Institutional Representation by Percentage of Attendees



The concentration of attendees from several major Midwest research universities reflects the strong commitment of these institutions to regional collaboration and shared cyberinfrastructure development. At the same time, participation from smaller institutions, liberal arts colleges, minority-serving institutions, and national organizations demonstrates the Consortium's broad appeal and inclusive approach to community building. Nearly one-third of participating organizations sent multiple attendees, allowing institutions to engage simultaneously in technical sessions, strategic discussions, and collaborative activities throughout the meeting. The participation of organizations such as the National Center for Supercomputing Applications (NCSA), Internet2, Globus, Ohio Supercomputer Center, and Argonne National Laboratory further strengthened connections between campus research computing organizations and national cyberinfrastructure initiatives.

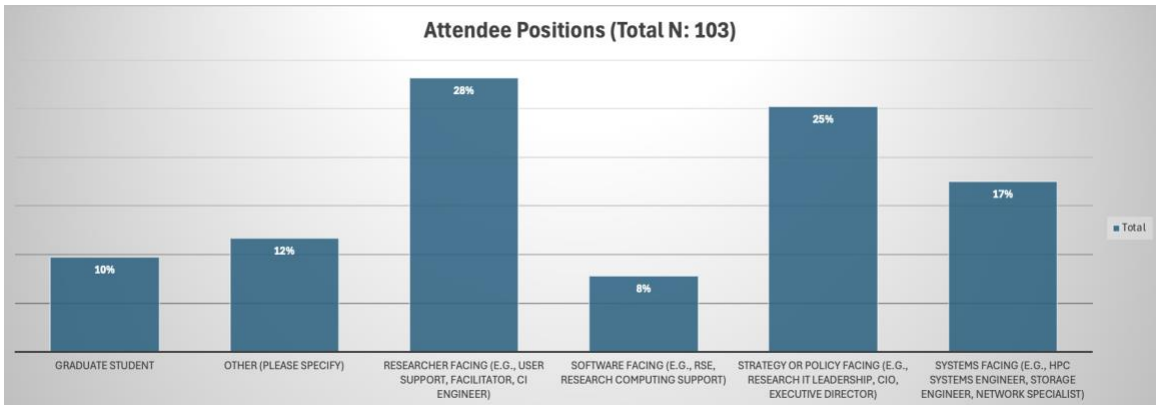


Professional Roles

Research computing is inherently interdisciplinary, requiring collaboration among technical staff, facilitators, software developers, institutional leaders, educators, and researchers. The professional role distribution of attendees reflects this diversity.

Professional Role	Percentage
Researcher-facing	28%
Strategy or Policy	25%
Systems	17%
Other	12%
Graduate Student	10%
Software	8%

Figure 4. Professional Roles of Attendees



Researcher-facing professionals represented the largest attendee group (28%). These individuals, including facilitators, consultants, user support specialists, and cyberinfrastructure engineers, serve as the primary interface between researchers and advanced computing resources. Their strong participation reflects the Consortium's continuing emphasis on improving research support services across member institutions.

Institutional leadership also represented a substantial portion of attendees. Approximately one-quarter of participants identified as strategy or policy professionals, including research IT leaders, executive directors, and CIO-level administrators. Their presence demonstrates that research computing is increasingly recognized as a strategic institutional priority rather than solely a technical service. Systems professionals accounted for 17% of attendees, illustrating continued engagement from those responsible for operating and maintaining high-performance computing, storage, networking, and cyberinfrastructure environments. Graduate students represented approximately 10% of participants, highlighting the Consortium's commitment to workforce development and cultivating the next generation of research computing professionals. Software-focused professionals, including research software engineers (RSEs) and software support specialists, comprised 8% of attendees, reflecting the growing importance of software sustainability and reproducibility within computational research.

Twelve percent of attendees selected "Other" when describing their professional role. Their responses illustrate the increasingly interdisciplinary nature of modern research computing. These participants included:

- Project and Program Managers for Research Computing
- Bioinformatics leaders
- Teaching-focused professionals
- Faculty members
- Assistant Professors
- Professors
- Solutions Architects
- Community coordinators
- Senior Research Consultants
- Individuals serving multiple researcher-, software-, and data-facing responsibilities

These responses demonstrate that research computing extends well beyond traditional technical roles. Increasingly, institutions rely on professionals who combine expertise in project management, education, software engineering, data science, and organizational leadership to support modern research programs.

Participant Demographics

The demographic profile of attendees provides insight into the diversity and composition of the Midwest research computing workforce. While demographic questions were optional, responses provide a useful overview of participant characteristics and help inform future diversity, equity, inclusion, and workforce development efforts.

Age Distribution

Participants represented a wide range of career stages, though the majority were mid-career professionals. More than three-quarters of attendees were between the ages of **26**

and 55, indicating that the conference primarily serves professionals in the most active stages of their careers. At the same time, participation from graduate students, early-career professionals, and senior leaders demonstrates healthy representation across the professional pipeline.

Age Group	Percentage
18–25	3.4%
26–35	25.0%
36–45	23.9%
46–55	27.3%
56–65	10.2%
66–75	1.1%
76+	1.1%
Prefer not to say	8.0%

Gender Identity

The gender distribution generally reflects the broader research computing profession, which continues to be predominantly male. Nevertheless, more than one-fifth of attendees identified as women, and participants representing additional gender identities were also present. Continued efforts to broaden participation remain an important opportunity for the Consortium and the wider RCD community.

Gender	Percentage
Man	69.6%
Woman	21.7%
Non-binary / Gender Non-Conforming	1.1%
Self-described	1.1%
Prefer not to say	6.5%

Race and Ethnicity

The attendee population reflected a range of racial and ethnic backgrounds. While White participants comprised the largest demographic group, representation from Asian, Black, Hispanic/Latino/a/x, Middle Eastern/North African, and multiracial participants demonstrates continued progress toward broadening participation within research computing. The relatively large percentage of respondents choosing not to disclose demographic information also suggests the importance of respecting participant privacy while continuing to monitor long-term diversity trends.

Race/Ethnicity	Percentage
White	56.2%
Asian	18.0%
Black or African American	4.5%
Middle Eastern or North African	3.4%
Hispanic/Latino/a/x	1.1%
Multiple identities / combinations	3.4%
Prefer not to say	12.4%

Disability Status

Approximately 8% of respondents reported having a current or past disability. While this represents a relatively small portion of attendees, it underscores the importance of maintaining accessible conference environments, inclusive programming, and accommodations that support participation from individuals with diverse needs.

Disability Status	Percentage
No disability	81.8%
Current or past disability	8.0%
Prefer not to say	10.2%

Program Outcomes and Post-Event Survey Analysis

Following the Annual Meeting, participants were invited to complete an anonymous evaluation survey assessing the quality of conference programming, networking opportunities, and overall meeting experience. A total of 46 attendees completed the survey, representing an estimated 45% response rate. Responses included quantitative ratings for individual sessions as well as open-ended feedback regarding favorite presentations, key takeaways, suggestions for improvement, and future programming interests. Overall, survey results indicate exceptionally high participant satisfaction and provide strong evidence that the meeting successfully achieved its primary objectives. Overall satisfaction with the Annual Meeting was overwhelmingly positive.

Nearly every survey respondent rated the conference either **Excellent** or **Very Good**, demonstrating that participants found significant value in the meeting's content, networking opportunities, and overall organization.

Rating	Percentage
Excellent	74%
Very Good	24%
Good or Below	2%

Most Highly Rated Activities

Participants evaluated each conference activity using a five-point value scale ranging from "Not Valuable" to "Very Valuable." Among sessions attracting broad participation, the following activities received the strongest evaluations. Overall, networking emerged as the highest-rated activity of the conference, reinforcing one of the Consortium's defining strengths: providing opportunities for meaningful peer interaction and professional relationship building. Technical sessions addressing artificial intelligence and operational practices also received exceptionally strong ratings, suggesting that participants are actively seeking practical guidance for integrating emerging technologies into institutional research computing environments.

Activity	Valuable / Very Valuable
Networking Reception	93%
AI & HPC Breakout	88%
Plenary: Strategy & Capacity Building	76%
Globus Compute Panel	75%
Keynote: Agentic AI & Science	73%
Lightning Talks	71%
CASC / NSF State Engagement	71%
Next Generation Data Centers	70%

Session by Session Highlights

Quantum Computing for All:

The introductory quantum computing workshop attracted substantial attendance and successfully introduced participants to core quantum computing concepts without

requiring prior expertise. Although the topic generated considerable interest, participant ratings suggest varying levels of familiarity with quantum computing among attendees. The session appears to have served as an effective introduction while highlighting opportunities for additional beginner-focused programming in future meetings
Attendance: 38 participants
Valuable or Very Valuable: 53%

Keynote Presentation:
National Strategy and Agentic AI for Science

Ian Foster's keynote presentation established the strategic foundation for the conference by examining the Department of Energy's Genesis Mission and the growing role of agentic artificial intelligence in scientific discovery. Participants responded very positively to the keynote, frequently referencing it throughout open-ended survey responses. The presentation stimulated discussion around how AI is transforming scientific workflows, infrastructure planning, and future workforce needs.
Attendance: 45 participants
Valuable or Very Valuable: 73%

AI & HPC Breakout

The AI & HPC breakout emerged as one of the conference's strongest technical sessions. Presentations explored practical approaches for integrating agentic AI into high-performance computing environments while also demonstrating new tools supporting AI-enabled scientific workflows. Attendees particularly appreciated the emphasis on operational implementation rather than conceptual discussions.
Attendance: 41 participants
Valuable or Very Valuable: 88%

Networking, Testbeds, and Debugging

Although attendance was naturally smaller due to concurrent breakout sessions, participants who attended found substantial value in discussions focused on networking infrastructure, distributed monitoring, and research testbeds. The session appealed primarily to specialists responsible for networking and cyberinfrastructure operations.
Attendance: 13 participants
Valuable or Very Valuable: 69%

Cryo-EM Workflows

The Cryo-EM breakout served a specialized audience interested in computational workflows supporting cryo-electron microscopy. Because of its specialized focus, attendance and ratings were somewhat lower than broader sessions. Nevertheless, participants working within this domain appreciated opportunities to discuss deployment strategies, storage management, GPU utilization, and workflow optimization.
Attendance: 13 participants
Valuable or Very Valuable: 46%

Globus Compute Panel

The Globus Compute panel received exceptionally positive feedback.
Participants valued hearing practical implementation experiences from institutions already deploying Globus Compute within AI and HPC workflows. Survey comments frequently referenced learning about new capabilities and opportunities for adoption.

Attendance: 40 participants
Valuable or Very Valuable: 75%

Next Generation Data Centers Discussion

Unlike traditional presentations, this facilitated discussion encouraged institutions to exchange experiences regarding hardware procurement, supply chain disruptions, infrastructure refresh cycles, and budgeting strategies. Attendees consistently praised the collaborative format and practical nature of these conversations.
Attendance: 20 participants
Valuable or Very Valuable: 70%

Lightning Talks

The Lightning Talks were among the most frequently mentioned favorite sessions. Participants appreciated hearing concise, institution-specific examples that highlighted practical solutions and innovative projects without requiring lengthy presentations. Topics ranged from Open OnDemand applications and secure HPC environments to research data ecosystems.
Attendance: 42 participants
Valuable or Very Valuable: 71%

Strategy & Capacity Planning Plenary

This plenary session emphasized institutional planning, benchmarking, and the Midwest RCD ROI Toolkit. Participants responded positively to discussions focused on helping institutions make informed investments in cyberinfrastructure while demonstrating organizational value to campus leadership.
Attendance: 38 participants
Valuable or Very Valuable: 76%

Strategic Findings, Recommendations, and Looking Ahead

The 2026 Midwest Research Computing and Data (MWRCD) Consortium Annual Meeting demonstrated the continued growth and maturity of the regional research computing community. Attendance, participant demographics, institutional representation, and post-event survey responses collectively indicate that the Consortium has become an important venue for advancing collaboration, knowledge exchange, and strategic planning across the Midwest.

Several key findings emerged from this year's meeting that have implications not only for future Annual Meetings, but also for the Consortium's year-round activities, Affinity Groups, leadership programs, and regional initiatives.

Finding 1

Artificial Intelligence Has Transitioned from Emerging Topic to Core Research Computing Infrastructure

One of the clearest conclusions from the meeting is that artificial intelligence is no longer viewed as an isolated technology or specialized research area. Instead, AI has become deeply integrated into nearly every aspect of research computing.
The conference agenda reflected this shift through sessions addressing:

- Agentic AI
- AI-enabled HPC
- AI consultation services
- AI infrastructure
- AI workflows
- AI and scientific discovery
- AI capacity planning
- AI workforce development

Survey responses reinforced this trend, with AI appearing consistently among participants' favorite sessions, key takeaways, and suggestions for future programming. This finding suggests that future Consortium activities should continue positioning AI as a cross-cutting theme that intersects with infrastructure, workforce development, research support, governance, and institutional planning rather than treating it as a standalone technical topic.

Finding 2

Community Remains the Consortium's Greatest Value

While technical content received consistently positive evaluations, networking emerged as the single highest-rated component of the conference.
Participants repeatedly emphasized that the opportunity to interact with colleagues from peer institutions was among the most valuable aspects of attending the meeting.
Networking supported:

- Sharing operational experiences
- Learning from peer institutions
- Building professional relationships
- Exploring collaborations
- Reducing duplicated effort

- Developing future partnerships

Unlike traditional conferences that primarily emphasize presentations, the Midwest RCD Annual Meeting functions as a regional community of practice where relationships often become as valuable as the formal program itself.
Maintaining this collaborative culture should remain a defining characteristic of future Consortium activities.

Finding 3

Institutions Are Solving Similar Problems

Across presentations and survey responses, participants repeatedly recognized that institutions are facing remarkably similar challenges regardless of organizational size. Common concerns included:

- AI integration
- Staffing shortages
- Budget limitations
- Infrastructure modernization
- Workforce development
- Cybersecurity
- Storage growth
- Research data management
- Communicating institutional value

These shared challenges reinforce the importance of regional collaboration. Rather than solving problems independently, institutions increasingly benefit from exchanging successful practices, avoiding duplicated effort, and collectively advancing research computing capabilities.

Finding 4

Practical Experience Is More Valuable Than Conceptual Discussion Alone

One of the strongest messages emerging from participant feedback was the importance of implementation-focused programming. Attendees consistently favored presentations that demonstrated:

- Operational deployments
- Lessons learned
- Best practices
- Institutional case studies
- Implementation strategies
- Practical tools
- Technical workflows

While visionary presentations remain important for establishing long-term direction, survey responses indicate that participants derive the greatest value from sessions they can immediately apply within their own organizations. This practical orientation has become one of the Consortium's distinguishing strengths.

Strategic Recommendations

Based on attendee demographics, institutional participation, and survey findings, several recommendations emerge for future Consortium programming.

Recommendation 1

Continue Expanding Artificial Intelligence Programming

AI should remain a central theme across future Annual Meetings and Affinity Group activities. Potential future topics include:

- AI governance
- AI infrastructure planning
- AI security
- AI benchmarking
- AI cost management
- LLM deployment
- Agentic workflows
- AI consultation services
- Institutional AI strategies

Rather than organizing AI into a single breakout track, future meetings should continue integrating AI discussions across multiple technical and strategic areas.

Recommendation 2

Protect Dedicated Networking Time

Networking consistently receives the highest participant ratings. Future meetings should preserve and expand opportunities for:

- Informal discussion
- Small-group conversations
- Affinity Group meetings
- Birds-of-a-Feather sessions
- Regional collaboration planning

Several participants specifically requested less densely scheduled agendas to allow additional networking time.

Recommendation 3

Increase Interactive Programming

Participants expressed strong interest in discussion-oriented sessions. Future Annual Meetings should continue incorporating:

- Roundtable discussions
- Interactive workshops
- Birds-of-a-Feather sessions
- Panel discussions
- Facilitated problem-solving sessions
- Community forums

These formats encourage participants to contribute their own experiences while learning from peers.

Recommendation 4

Continue Investing in Workforce Development

Workforce development remains a strategic priority throughout the research computing community. Future programming should continue highlighting:

- Student engagement
- Career pathways
- Research software engineering
- Professional development
- Mentoring
- Leadership development
- Institutional workforce models

These efforts align closely with the Consortium's Emerging Leaders Program and broader workforce initiatives.

Recommendation 5

Strengthen Regional Collaboration Beyond the Annual Meeting

The Annual Meeting serves as an important catalyst for collaboration, but participants also expressed interest in maintaining connections throughout the year.
Potential opportunities include:

- Additional virtual workshops
- Collaborative working groups
- Regional proposal development
- Shared benchmarking activities
- Joint training initiatives
- Expanded Affinity Group programming

Year-round engagement would allow the momentum generated during the Annual Meeting to continue benefiting member institutions.

Looking Ahead

The research computing landscape continues to evolve rapidly. Artificial intelligence, advanced cyberinfrastructure, research data ecosystems, cloud platforms, and national initiatives are reshaping how institutions support research across every discipline.
The Midwest RCD Consortium is uniquely positioned to help institutions navigate these changes.

Future Annual Meetings will continue serving as opportunities not only to share technical knowledge but also to build relationships, strengthen regional capacity, and develop collective strategies for addressing emerging challenges.

Several initiatives highlighted during the 2026 meeting illustrate how the Consortium is evolving from a conference-focused organization into a year-round collaborative network supporting research computing across the Midwest. Looking forward, the Consortium will continue emphasizing:

- Regional collaboration
- Practical implementation
- Workforce development
- Emerging technologies
- Institutional capacity building
- National engagement
- Community-driven innovation

These priorities position the Consortium to remain an important contributor to the broader research computing ecosystem while continuing to serve the evolving needs of Midwest institutions.

Appendix

Program Agenda
Post Event Survey Results
Registration Data

End of Report