

# Governance: Building Ecosystem Culture



## FROM SETTING PRIORITIES TO DECIDING WHAT GETS DONE AND WHEN, ECOSYSTEMS CAN'T THRIVE WITH A SYSTEM OF ORGANIZATION AND GOVERNANCE.

Some ecosystems rely on work groups; others have structures that include multiple boards; and some are far less structured. Leaders from Lancaster, Tulsa and Kansas City, all share information about how they have organized their work and communities.

Kansas City became the **KC STEM Alliance** through an evolution of existing Project Lead the Way and First Robotics partnerships pushed further with philanthropic support.

Ann Zimmerman, director of the KC STEM Alliance, recalls the history of the ecosystem and the evolution of its governance structure: "In 2006, we had multiple school districts implementing best practices. We did some strategic planning and realized we could create this umbrella organization over what was already happening to gain some synergy and scale; this would give us the opportunity to align learning and connect to industry."

She explains that the Kauffman Foundation had been a major investor and helped enable the official formation of the ecosystem in 2012.

## AT FIRST OUR ECOSYSTEM JUST CONVENED PARTNERS TO SHARE BEST PRACTICES AND RESOURCES. BY BUILDING OUT OUR STRUCTURE TO INCLUDE AN ADVISORY BOARD, WE WERE ABLE TO EXPAND CAPACITY, SCALE AND CONNECT TO INDUSTRY.

The Lancaster STEM Alliance trajectory was aligned to strategic priorities from the start. "We have five strategic priorities that help us align under a common vision," says Willonda McCloud of the **Lancaster STEM Alliance**. "The Alliance is made up of K-12 schools, informal learning organizations, universities and industry. The five priorities allow partners to find a place for their expertise and operationalize together."

McCloud shares meetings are efficient, with the Alliance's backbone organization, the Steinman Foundation, taking on the overall organization of the Alliance and the subgroups taking responsibility for their goals during subgroup meetings. "It keeps partners engaged and coming back to the table," says Willonda. "Each subgroup has a chair responsible for moving that work along as well. Establishing a process like this allows us to be respectful of people's time and they know what to expect."



Lancaster keeps ecosystem partners coming to the table, under a shared vision, by advancing five key priority areas for the region.

## WE LAUNCH PROJECTS AND WORKING GROUPS WHERE THEY FIT NATURALLY - VISION-CENTRIC, BASED ON THE EXPERTISE IN THE ROOM AND THE COMMUNITY NEED.

"It was a bit of a hot mess, but it was our hot mess," Xan Black reveals the origin story of [Tulsa's Regional STEM Alliance](#). "Our design work with TIES in the beginning was instrumental. We put 60 partners in a room to discover and vet everything that was happening related to STEM in Tulsa, and equally important, what was not happening. Together, TRSA was formed, a 'dynamic mesh network,' with no hierarchy of authority, which was really important to the group. This was really the right course at that point because if one group had authority and been in charge of it, I think the other groups would have said, 'Oh that's a chamber thing or that's a public-school thing or oh that's a University of Tulsa thing,' but we wanted it to be all people and all the groups had an equal voice."

## OUR NETWORK WAS DESIGNED IN A WAY THAT ALL GROUPS HAD EQUAL VOICES AND OWNERSHIP IN THE PROJECT, WHICH ALLOWED THE WORK TO PROGRESS.

Initially, TRSA started with a program manager and a part-time assistant program manager to serve the advisory council and Alliance, at large.

"Since that time thanks to our amazing partners in the regional STEM Alliance, our work has grown. This added more financial responsibility so in June 2018 we became a 501C-3," Black says. "With that, came a more traditional hierarchy type of governance. So now we have a 25-member board of directors and five committees."

Despite this shift, Black says the original vision and organization has actually remained constant. "All of the people that were originally in that room five years ago, are represented on our board. We still have an [advisory council](#) that meets quarterly so we still have that very grassroots voice presence in everything we do. Now we just have a BOD that take more fiduciary responsibility."

### PANELISTS

**Xan Black**, Executive Director, Tulsa Regional STEM Alliance

**Willonda McCloud**, President & CEO, Bright Side Opportunities Center, Lancaster STEM Alliance

**Ann Zimmerman**, Strategic Development, KC STEM Alliance



A FULL RECORDING OF THE WEBINAR IS AVAILABLE AT:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lhq-Z\\_jQWrS](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lhq-Z_jQWrS)

### STEM Learning Ecosystem Discussion Series - Pressing Topics

The Governance Conversation is the third in a series of webinar-based discussions designed to meet the needs of local and regional Ecosystem leaders have identified. Topics of high interest were identified through a survey distributed to Ecosystem leaders. Panelists were selected based on self-assessed expertise and data from the Ecosystems Indicator Tool (EIT).

### OTHER WEBINAR TOPICS IN THIS SERIES INCLUDE:

- Communications
- Business Connections
- Programs
- Fundraising

### Look at the landscape.

Find your assets to build on early. Making connections that are almost there will give you something to talk about and build momentum. Also, identify the gaps that need to be addressed. This work will create longer-term changes in communities that produce thriving economies.

### Planning is critical.

Designing your bigger vision for the work is important. It might take you a while to get there, but understanding the challenges you want to solve and identifying benchmarks to get there will give you a map when things get messy.

### Systems work.

It can take a while to develop new systems that people use to share information, collaborate and track progress, but it's worth the time invested. Mechanisms to create and track the work will allow you to scale.

### Track your progress.

Measurement can be tricky, especially in the beginning when things are messy, however, it can provide a historical reference of progress when new partners and funders start to notice you. Find things you can track and review metrics consistently.

### Ask for help and elevate community leaders.

Recruit experts in the community to lead work groups or act as ecosystem champions. By elevating existing talent, you "work smarter," making them look good, getting quality work done, and creating another arm of publicity to advertise the work.

### Celebrate success.

No success is too small to get excited about. Celebrate your partners, convene and communicate often. Keep your partners coming back.