

## **TWENTY TIPS FOR GETTING THE MOST OUT OF YOUR RESEARCH CONFERENCE EXPERIENCE**

Unless you've been given a travel grant or some sort of fellowship, attending research conferences while in graduate school is going to cost you a fair bit of money. There are ways of keeping costs down, of course--such as buying air tickets well in advance or through heavily discounted travel websites, and sharing the cost of the hotel room with several of your cohort. No matter how you manage it, however, attending conferences as a graduate student is a priceless experience.

There are two things to keep in mind. First, you should attend major conferences in your field even if you are not presenting...indeed, some grad students say they learn a lot more when they *don't* have the stress of presenting and can focus on immersing themselves in the experience. Second, whereas listening to speakers, viewing posters and attending workshops are all useful and interesting, some of the best learning—and career enhancement—comes from what goes on outside the sessions themselves.

The following list is not exhaustive, by any means. Indeed, if you find that something invaluable to you is missing, please email a brief outline and we may include it. Hopefully you will find something here you've not thought about before, to help make your next research conference experience the best ever.

### **BEFORE THE CONFERENCE**

1. Dr. Stephen R. Covey (author of the international bestseller *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*) articulated it perfectly when he advised: "Start with the end in mind." Why are you attending this conference and what specifically do you want to achieve? Make concrete connections between the value the conference represents and your personal and professional goals. Outline several detailed goals that you are committed to and keep them in mind throughout this process.
2. Explore the conference schedule as soon as it's available. Don't wait until the event has started before planning your schedule. The bigger conferences have schedules the size of a telephone directory—you can't hope to attend even a fraction of what's on offer. Be selective and strategic about your planning schedule. Begin by focusing on the Divisions and Special Interest Groups (SIGs) relevant to your research interests.
3. Review the breakfast talks and other invitational sessions, particularly ones addressing current trends in your research area. As one grad student put it: "Even though you've read their books and articles, there's nothing beats hearing the voices of the authors."
4. Don't discount the value of attending presentations made by journal editors or program officers of granting sources. You'll not only learn the challenges they

- face (including not knowing what they're looking for until they see it!) but they can provide you with information that makes it much more likely you'll offer them a good submission. It also doesn't hurt to have editorial types within your professional network—remember, they need you as much as you need them.
5. Find out what evening social events your professors plan to attend and ask if you can tag along. The good ones will always be willing to do this for exemplary students. They know a lot more people than you do, and can assist with appropriate introductions. Your side of the bargain is to have a good elevator pitch and professional c.v. on hand, which makes faculty look good for promoting you. But even when you're on your own, leverage every social opportunity you get. You never know when individuals you meet casually over a drink or meal could be a peer reviewer for a journal article that you submit, or a future colleague. Make time (and have plenty of energy) for socializing!
  6. Write, edit, and practice, practice, practice what is called in the business world your “elevator pitch” – basically, the ability to talk about yourself and your research interests in the briefest moment of time. Prepare several versions:
    - a) The 30-second version for brief introductions
    - b) The one minute version for people you are interested in networking with
    - c) The (slightly!) longer version when someone asks you to tell them more
  7. While you're at it, check that your handshake isn't a bone-breaker or like limp lettuce.
  8. Email key researchers you'd like to meet--ahead of time. Be clear and succinct about why you'd like to visit with them (use your “elevator pitch” as a guide), and invite them to coffee. Even though you're a graduate student you may have a perspective around their research area that could be of interest to them. Or you may be planning to replicate an experiment of theirs (or have done so already) that they might like to hear about.
  9. Have some inexpensive business cards printed—with your name, email address, affiliation and a word or two about your research interests. That way when the other person returns to their office they have something tangible and, hopefully, memorable to link with you.
  10. Prepare a list of the most important questions you'd like answered while you're at the conference. It's easy to forget things when you're rushed or excited.

### **DURING THE CONFERENCE**

11. Stay at the conference hotel whenever possible. Not only does that give you more time to attend sessions and evening events, but being on the premises increases the number of chance encounters you could benefit from. “Some of

- the best conversations and even contacts I've had were made in a hotel lobby or coffee shop," is a common experience for many graduate students.
12. Dress for success! If you want people to regard and treat you as a fellow professional then be mindful of your appearance at all times. Being "smart" means more than having superior brainpower.
  13. Don't drink alcohol unless you are in a different physical location from the people with whom you want to develop future professional relationships and you are sure you will be separated for the rest of the evening.
  14. Don't pretend to chat with someone while constantly looking over their shoulder to see if anyone "more interesting" is coming into view. If you are talking to someone, talk to *them*. You never know who knows whom, and your all-too-obvious scanning for a better catch might make a bad impression that could be communicated far beyond that room.
  15. If someone says they're too busy to speak with you, don't take it personally. Be gracious--say it was nice to meet them albeit briefly, smile, and walk away. That favorable impression may make them more amenable to a discussion some time in the future. Never become the academic equivalent of a groupie!
  16. Make notes about key conversations *at least* at the end of each day – especially ones that cover your most important questions. There'll be such a lot going on that you're bound to forget the specifics by the time you get home.

### **AFTER THE CONFERENCE**

17. Take time to reflect on your conference experience—did you accomplish your goals? If not, why not? What would you do differently next time? Write all of this down so you don't forget it! What might you undertake the rest of the year to improve your skills? For example, contact your school or college's career office, or other professional development resources that are available on and off campus, and check out what workshops they offer on networking skills, or crafting your c.v. (especially if you're looking for an academic job).
18. Be sure to contact anyone whose presentation you didn't manage to attend and request materials if these are not available through the conference website.
19. Commit to keep in contact with students who graduate from your department and other relevant alums. That will help boost opportunities for socializing with researchers at other universities or organizations when you meet up with them at next year's event.
20. Send a brief email to key people that you met at the conference, particularly if they went out of their way to help you, saying something about what you got out

of the conversation or their presentation. Respectfully maintain lines of communication throughout the year... that doesn't mean bombarding them with emails, but neither is it a good idea to leave it just before the next event before popping up again!

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