

Networking at Conferences

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Editor's Note

The following chapter is a combination of two recent Cornerstone articles written for *TechTrends*: "An Academic Experience of a Lifetime!" by Jered Borup and "Internship Reflection" by Abigail Hawkins.

Borup, J. (2013). An academic experience of a lifetime! *TechTrends*, 57(5), 4–5. doi: 10.1007/s11528-013-0682-9

Hawkins, A. (2010). Internship reflection. *TechTrends*, 54(4), 10. doi:10.1007/s11528-010-0410-7

Charles Graham (faculty member at Brigham Young University) once stated that what happens in conference hallways is often more valuable than what happens in the sessions. When attending a conference, you can meet amazing people and form relationships you never thought possible. The following networking strategies are for other graduates who may have felt peripheral and out of place at academic conferences. Our advice is simple: insert yourself into the scene. We would like to share three ways that any and all graduate students can do just that and make the most of their time at a conference: stand tall, shake hands, and get organized.

Stand Tall

This isn't an encouragement to improve your posture but to make the most of your opportunities. There are four ways for graduate students to stand tall at conferences.

Be confident. The former Saturday Night Live comedian Al Franken had a recurring character named Stuart Smalley. In every sketch, Stuart would look in the mirror and confidently say, "I'm good enough, I'm smart enough, and doggone it, people like me!" While we don't advocate that you chant this affirmation while at a conference, you wouldn't be wrong if you did. It will not take you long before you realize that the organization values graduate students and there is no reason not to confidently stand tall as a graduate student knowing that "You're good enough, you're smart enough, and doggone it, people like you!" Having that knowledge is critical to making the most of your time there.

Participate. It is easy for new graduate students to feel that they are not able to make a meaningful contribution. This simply is not true. If possible, you should submit a research proposal and present your work. If your research is not developed enough for a full-paper presentation, submit it as a roundtable or poster presentation. If you don't have anything to present, you can still ask questions or make comments at the sessions you attend.

Apply for awards. Look for awards supported by the organizations that sponsor the conference you are attending. There are likely several. We would recommend applying first for the ones that are specifically for graduate students. You can also ask your advisor or another faculty member familiar with the conference for advice on what awards you should apply for.

Give service. There are lots of ways that graduate students can give service. You may want to consider volunteering at the conference. It can be a good way to become familiar with the organization and meet new people. You should also try to attend one or two division meetings. At the division meeting, they will look for volunteers to help the division. Reviewing presentation submissions can be a great way to serve the division and learn what makes a good proposal.

Shake Hands and Network

We have all heard about the importance of networking. Probably the best networking advice Jered ever received was to “shake as many hands as possible.” Although networking obviously involves more than a handshake, it’s a good place to start. We’ve compiled a list of the five primary opportunities to shake hands and network at the conference (sessions, receptions, activities, meals, and the job board) and the three main resources for doing so (faculty, peers, and yourself).

Sessions. Researchers love to talk about their research. After attending a session, stick around and talk with those who are still buzzing. Listen. Ask questions. Share ideas. Exchange cards. Become a part of the larger conversation and your research community. You’ll find that some of the best conversations happen after the formal presentations are over. Poster sessions and roundtables are also great opportunities to actively discuss interesting topics.

Receptions. Each conference is different, but some organize receptions that are specifically designed to help people get to know each other and network. Don’t miss them! If this is your first time at the conference, it may be helpful if you went with an advisor or another faculty member from your department. They will be able to introduce you to new people until you feel comfortable branching out on your own.

Activities. There are several planned activities to help you get out there and shake some hands. Some are free with your registration, and others cost a little extra but are worth the money. For instance, Jered made some of his best memories on a riverboat cruise.

Meals. It’s not uncommon for graduate students to try to eat cheap and save money during their time at a conference. Money can be tight for graduate students, but being too frugal can cost you. Worry more about who you are eating with than the cost of the meal. For example, attend that pricey division luncheon. You’ll sit at a table with eight other people interested in an area of research similar to your own. You will make friends, comment on how horrible the food is, and learn the inner workings of the division. Remember the service advice from earlier? After the lunch would be a great time to ask one of the division leaders if there is any volunteer division work you could participate in during the year.

The job board. If you are on the job hunt, you should take a look at the job board. You can post your vitae and see the jobs that are available. Typically the postings will have a contact number. Don’t hesitate to call, text, or email the contacts for the jobs that you are interested in to set up a time to talk at the conference.

Faculty. Don’t be afraid to ask for help from your faculty. They are, not surprisingly, more familiar with the conference and other attendees and can introduce you to people they know. After her second day at the conference, Abigail pinged Dr. David Wiley asking if he would introduce her to people the next morning. He was more than accommodating and introduced her to several individuals and potential employers. Similarly, Dr. Rick West introduced her to several faculty members who were looking to hire.

Peers. While you’re making bold moves and shaking hands with big names in the field, be inclusive by inviting other graduate students to join you for lunch. Introduce one another to people you know. Fellow participants in the conference that Abigail attended, Heather Leary, Eunjung Oh, and Nari Kim, all introduced Abigail to faculty from their departments.

Similarly, she introduced them to faculty from hers. It was a simple, kind, and easy way to meet others through the use of a peer network.

Yourself. Do the uncomfortable. For instance, would you be horrified if we told you to invite yourself to lunch with someone? It is a common mindset that one waits for an invitation. However, it is completely normal at a conference to ask if people have lunch plans and if you could join them (or if they would join you). So after lingering at a session and meeting people with similar research interests, be bold and ask if they have lunch plans. Make the first move. You'll be surprised by the outcome.

Get Organized

Being unorganized is a sure way to miss great opportunities. We'll look at three phases of organization: before, during, and after.

Before the conference. Plan before you go. You should start organizing and preparing long before the conference actually starts. First, identify the sessions that you would like to attend. Remember, who is presenting is just as important as what they are presenting. Ideally, you would be familiar with the presenters' work and their ideas relevant to your research. You can also contact individuals you would like to meet in advance and ask if you could take them out for coffee or chat with them during a session break. If you are not sure whom to meet, ask your advisor. Have questions prepared to ask about their research and how it relates to your own. Second, clear your plate of your other responsibilities. You want to avoid grading assignments or working on class assignments during the conference. Third, get some business cards. You are probably thinking, "But I'm just a graduate student." And? If you are teaching or a research assistant, ask your department secretary if you can get cards made with the university logo. Also, print some copies of your vitae and sample publications. These are especially important if you are on the job hunt. Lastly, join the Facebook groups for the assemblies and divisions that you care most about (especially any that are for graduate students). It will help you get a pulse for the community and be aware of important events.

During the conference. It can be easy to get a little disorganized at the conference. Two strategies may help. First, when you receive a business card (and pass out one of your own at the same time), write on the back the person's research area or employment, what you were talking about, and anything that you would like to follow up on. It would also be helpful to jot down one personal fact you can recall from the conversation. Second, carry a pocket-sized notebook for note-keeping. If you don't write down your ideas, you may forget them.

After the conference. Don't just put the business cards you collected or the notes that you took in a drawer and forget about them. Instead follow up on the conversations that you had, invite people to join your LinkedIn and other social networks, and actually read the articles that you told yourself you would. It's also a good idea to email those who helped you at the conference and thank them.

Conclusion

If you are a graduate student who is considering attending a conference—do it! And remember to stand tall, shake hands, and be organized.

Application Exercises

- After reading this article, find a professor or another graduate student who has attended a conference. Ask them about their advice for attending conferences.
- Reflect on how you would or will prepare to make the most of a conference. What would you bring. Who would you want to talk to?



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