

GRADUpdATE 7-30-2013

Dear Graduate Student,

People attend academic conferences for a variety of reasons, ranging from presenting papers and meeting other scholars in their field, to exploring prospective jobs or receiving feedback on their research. Often, many of these goals are pursued simultaneously. Academic conferences or seminars can offer exciting opportunities for academic and professional growth, and even personal enrichment.

Consider setting professional development goals for yourself, such as:

- Plan to attend a certain number of conferences a year (especially if they look useful or relevant to your field of study)
- Identify certain skills or areas of knowledge you would like to improve upon and seek out meaningful learning opportunities.
- Identify annual conferences that you would like to attend each year.

Attending conferences can be a vital part of the graduate school experience, yet they may also seem intimidating or confusing, especially for new graduate students. Listed below are some guidelines for helping you to prepare effectively for your next conference.

Tips for Attending Conferences

- Dr. Stephen R. Covey (author of the international bestseller *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*) suggests that you “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.
- Look at the conference schedule as soon as it is available and decide what sessions, activities, panel discussions, dinners, receptions, etc., will help you get more information about your research and enable you to make valuable contacts.
- 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

- Have some business cards printed—with your name, email address, affiliation and a word or two about your research interests. That way after meeting and speaking with people at the conference, they have something tangible and, hopefully, memorable to link with you.
- 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.
- Print out the conference details, your planning or goals list, and travel details in advance; check the weather forecast; back up your laptop and charge the batteries.
- Plan to dress for success. Looking like a professional will help you make a good impression.

Lastly....

- Take the 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).
- Don't forget to send a thank you email to those who made the opportunity to meet with you and those who provided you with important information. Let them know what you took away with you.

Resource:

Getting the Most Out of a Research Conference (2010), <http://cgi.stanford.edu/~dept-ctl/tomprof/posting.php?ID=1030>

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