

# Conferences for the soul: A step by step guide to making the most out of academic meetings

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Conferences come in all forms and sizes. Ranging from intimate local gatherings of invited experts discussing a specific topic to more encompassing international world congresses, these meetings all have something to offer. The big conferences give you access to a breadth of knowledge, while more focused meetings can provide great networking opportunities. Both usually permit close looks at topics of special interests; often by the experts you only have read. It would be fantastic if we could attend all the meetings that interest us. We know we want to attend and recognize it is good for our education and career.

However, as grad students, we are often impeded by lack of time, money, or presentable data. So, how do we choose which conference to attend? And furthermore, once there, how do we make the most out of the experience?

## Choosing a Conference

Step 1. First of all, recognize that it is energizing and exciting to be part of the program. You will likely have more opportunities to interact with other professionals if you present something, presentations look good on curriculum vitae, and they often are the link to travel funding. At the beginning of your career, you may not have data to present but some conferences will allow submissions that are reviews of the literature. Even if you do not

have anything to present, conferences are a good way to familiarize yourself with the field and the process. If you are new to the conference scene, ask your supervisor or a senior student for advice. As a Graduate Students' CPA representative, I would be remiss if I did not encourage you to support Canadian Psychology by attending the Annual CPA Convention (this year: June 21-23 in Ste-Foy, Quebec).

Step 2. Plan ahead. Find out what conferences are coming up and when. Who are the audiences? Will mainly clinicians or researchers be attending the conferences? Are the conferences multidisciplinary? Who do you want to hear your message, and provide feedback? What are the themes of the conference? Where do your interests and data fit into all of this?

Step 3. Consider the practical issues involved.

- **TIME.** When is the conference? Look at your schedule. Will you have time to prepare and attend the conference? Remember, when submitting an abstract for a conference, you must also plan on having to spend time preparing your poster or presentation.
- **MONEY.** Consider financial issues. Do the conference organizers offer travel support for students? How much will conference attendance cost in total (e.g., registration, transportation,

accommodation, per diem, presentation costs)? Do you have any additional support available to you – e.g., through the Faculty of Graduate Studies, your Department, your funding agencies, your lab? Is anyone with whom you could share costs going?

- **QUALITY OF LIFE.** If you can afford the conference with respect to time and money, consider whether you will be able to enjoy the experience. It is difficult to make the most out of a conference when you are stressed out or fatigued. Hint: If you spend more time traveling than at the conference, you will probably be exhausted.

#### How to Make the Most Out of Conference Experiences

Okay, so you have chosen your conference, what should you do now?

Prepare.

1. Apply for travel funding.
2. Register – many conferences will offer an early registration discount.
3. Find out who else is attending. Try to coordinate transportation and accommodation to reduce costs. You may want to arrange meeting times in advance with colleagues.
4. Plan your presentation or poster. Find out ahead of time what the requirements are for presentations (e.g., poster size, presentation length) and what the conference will provide (e.g., slide projectors, poster hanging paraphernalia).
5. Along with your poster or presentation, you might also want to bring some emergency supplies such as tape, scissors, black marker, coordinating paper etc.

6. Articles relating to your paper or presentation in case you get stage fright during question periods might also come in handy.

7. Business cards are useful to have – these are handy to exchange with people with whom you share interests. Another good idea is to print out a bunch of address labels. These are great for putting on lists of requests for more information, reprints etc. Speaking of requests, you might want to post a sign-up sheet near your poster with a pen attached for parties interested in receiving further information on your research.

8. If you have the articles to go with the posters, you may want to have copies on hand. Depending on the length of your paper, handing out computer disks might be more economical. A word of caution: you may not want to hand out a paper until it has been accepted for publication.

9. Consider providing handouts summarizing their paper or poster.

10. Bring a notepad to your poster session. Consider it a mini-peer review – you can usually gauge potential weaknesses of your study, interest in the topic, and whether it is worthy of publication.

What should you do once there? It is helpful if you read the abstracts (or at least skim over the titles) before poster sessions. You don't want to spend all your time talking to someone about a poster that is of no relevance to your work, when your research idol is just around the corner. Know what/who is out there and budget your time accordingly. Make an effort to meet people with similar interests. Do not forget to make connections with grad students - Today's

students are tomorrow's plenary speakers after all.

ATTEND SOCIAL EVENTS TOO!!! These are often where you make the best connections, and have the most fun. Also, depending on the conference, you may get free food and/or drinks too. Party, but remember, there is a tomorrow.

What should you do after the conference? Making the most out of conferences includes some work even when they are over.

- Provide Feedback. People in our lab have been successful in reducing conference fees for students and bringing back author attended poster sessions at various meetings.
- Follow-up. Keep track of your contacts. If you said you would send a copy of the results/final manuscripts to individuals, do it!

- Exposure to a wide array of presentations can help you enhance your skills. Make note of what appealed to you about presentations and posters.

Although the new knowledge you can acquire, connections you can make, and travel are appealing aspects of conference attendance, I think the best thing about conferences is getting a chance to bond with the people you already know. It is a great way to build lab spirits and create fond memories. Conferences are about more than academic growth. From cheering a lab member on as they undertook a polar bear swim to sitting proudly in the audience as a fellow student presented a talk at recent conferences, I have come to realize that conferences can be good for the soul (Translation — for those of you who do not speak Pop Psych: Conferences can be good for the brain).