

Postdoc Academic Chat #4

GETTING THE MOST OUT OF RESEARCH CONFERENCES

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Hartley Conference Room Mitchell Earth Sciences Building
<http://pangea.stanford.edu/about/map.php>

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1. The Conference Scene

Inside Higher Ed, September 14, 2009, <http://www.insidehighered.com/>
By Eszter Hargittai

Given the importance of both staying up-to-date on recent scholarship and meeting fellow researchers, attending conferences should be a priority for junior academics. In fact, their importance is so high that it will take me two columns just to scratch the surface of relevant considerations.

In this first piece, I will address why it is important to go to professional meetings and how you can think about which ones to attend. In the second segment, I will talk about the do's and don'ts once you have taken the plunge. (Additionally, in a future piece I will discuss financial considerations more generally speaking since it is important to acknowledge that conference attendance comes with its own set of monetary challenges for many.)

Good scholarship is important to one's academic career. But what if you write an excellent paper that nobody knows about? If a paper is published and no one reads it, does it count? And how likely are you to write an excellent paper without feedback from colleagues in the first place? While there is always the chance that someone comes across your piece through browsing a journal, looking at your CV or doing a literature search, one of the best ways to draw attention to one's scholarship is through presentations at conferences.

Every field has its big national (and in many cases international) meetings. These can be helpful to attend to get a sense for the discipline as a whole. However, often smaller,

more focused meetings are much more useful for several reasons. As a graduate student in sociology, it was a no-brainer that at some point I would attend the American Sociological Association's annual meetings. However, I ended up getting at least as much, if not more, out of going to the International Network for Social Network Analysis conference early on in my career. First, such events may target more specific research areas and thus increase the likelihood that there will be relevant sessions and colleagues around. Second, simply due to their smaller size, they are often friendlier and make it easier to meet people, including the hotshots of the field. Such events may also be more likely to accept submissions than larger venues, although this will not always be the case. Overall, while it is important to find a way to get to the big meetings in one's field, the potential utility derived from smaller ones should not be dismissed.

There are two main ways to go about finding smaller meetings: by theme or by location. To find conferences closest to one's areas of interest, it is good to look out for events organized by relevant professional associations. If you do not know what the applicable organizations are for your interests, then talk to peers and mentors about your shared areas of expertise. Additionally, look out for e-mails about conference notifications often in the form of call-for-papers – aka CFPs – that come through on mailing lists. (In a future column, I will discuss how best to keep up with the goings-on in one's field.) Another way to find smaller meetings is to look for regional conferences in your geographical vicinity. These may not be the best match for your interests per se, but they offer other advantages. For one, they often require less travel and thus fewer funds than national and international meetings. While your work may get less exposure, the interactions may be more meaningful. It is also helpful for building local networks. You might find peers with whom you can start to meet up regularly or potential mentors who may be easier to contact.

While e-mail makes communication across large distances possible, the benefits derived from face-to-face interactions should not be disregarded. Knowing faculty at regional schools might also help you hear about temporary teaching positions best suited for those already in the area. Additionally, getting to know people at such meetings may be especially helpful for those who need to stay in the region after graduation for personal reasons and will not be able to pursue a national or international job search.

As per the above advice, keep an eye out for conferences in your town or nearby to take advantage of meetings whose attendance would cost less since you get to save on travel. Of course, depending on your location, your mileage may vary (sorry about that pun). If you are lucky enough to live in a city that hosts meetings then be sure to put these on your calendar, as they are a great low-cost way to practice conference participation. Their attendance may even be worth it when the topic is not as closely aligned with your work as it could be, and you might want to check these out even if you are not on the program as a presenter. Whether you feel ready for prime time or not, it is best not to pass up on such local opportunities given their low cost.

When will you know if you are ready to give a presentation? You can talk to your adviser about it, but if you are working on an original research project then chances are you are

good to go. Both abstract and paper submission deadlines as well as actual meeting dates can serve as good motivators for getting things done, so do not feel that you have to have something polished the moment you decide you would like to attend a meeting. While you may not feel like you are quite ready, there is nothing like an upcoming talk to help you make serious progress on a project.

It is also worth noting that many conferences have alternatives to presenting a fully polished paper, such as poster sessions and roundtable discussions where people give shorter, more informal presentations than on a regular panel. In some cases it is up to you to decide whether you submit your work to such a session; in others, the conference organizers track submissions into the various categories.

It depends on the meeting whether these are less prestigious than being on a regular panel. It would be wrong to think that by definition they yield less useful feedback or exposure than a formal presentation. Both poster sessions and roundtable discussions tend to allow for much more engaged conversations among the presenters and those who show up. One of the most useful sessions I attended during graduate school concerned a roundtable where only one other presenter – a graduate student from another program – and one additional person were present. It may not look like much, but we ended up having an extremely involved and useful conversation about our various methodological challenges in our respective projects, more food for thought than I could have hoped for from other presentation formats. In the same vein, most people can cite cases of panels where only a couple of people came to hear the talks. It is hard to say ahead of time what will yield the most useful outcome. Certainly in the early stages of one's career, I would not discriminate against the different formats. They each have their strengths and weaknesses.

More generally regarding stages in the career process, the year before and the year of being on the job market as well as the year of going up for promotion are all especially important times to show up at professional meetings. The visibility that such venues make possible is very important both in terms of formal presentations as well as informal interactions, which is why showing up to them is so crucial at those times in particular. That said, while these are stages when you should make it a priority to go to meetings, you will definitely want to start gaining experiences earlier to make sure that by the time it really matters (on the job market, up for promotion), you are a seasoned conference goer.

But of course, everything has two sides so I must add the following caveat. While attending conferences is very important, it should not become a distraction from writing and finishing papers (and in the case of graduate students, from ultimately finishing the dissertation). Having presentations on one's CV is important, but so is following up on these with publications. If the latter is missing, this suggests that the person is unable to follow up and complete work. This is of concern to hiring and tenure committees, because it raises questions about the candidate's ability to get things out the door, a requisite part of building the kind of CV that will result in a favorable promotion review. (All of this may be less of an issue in fields where conferences publish proceedings after

a rigorous peer-review process with low acceptance rates. Even in such instances, however, getting longer more elaborate pieces in journals can be helpful.)

So like with everything else, the best advice is to practice moderation when building conferences into one's schedule. Do not be shy. If you are at a graduate program or beyond, you are certainly ready to go. But also do not use conferences as an excuse for missing other important milestones in your career.

In the next installment of this column, I will address what to do once you have committed to going to a meeting. Absent from the above is a detailed discussion about the importance of informal interactions at conferences and how to navigate them. As a rather crucial component of time spent at such meetings, I wanted to devote sufficient space to discussing optimal approaches to it and will do so in the following piece.

2. Conference Do's and Don't's

Inside Higher Ed, October 19, 2009, <http://www.insidehighered.com/>
By Eszter Hargittai

In my last piece, (see above) I discussed ways to think about when to start attending conferences and how to find ones that will be beneficial. This time around, I want to address what to do and what not to do once you have decided to take the plunge and go to a meeting. Below are some suggestions for how to make the most of it without sabotaging your career opportunities. (One issue I will not address here and will leave to yet another piece is how to go about preparing for your own talk, as that merits its own separate discussion.)

While an important part of going to conferences is to present your work and hear updates on other people's research, it would be wrong to think that formal presentations are the only key component of professional meetings. In fact, at least as significant if not more are interactions that happen in between sessions and during social outings (e.g., receptions, group dinners). Accordingly, it is important to think about these consciously while working on your plans for a meeting.

A bit of preparation before showing up at a conference can go a long way in making it a positive experience. Nowadays, the program is usually available online ahead of time and is worth checking out both for presentations you might want to attend and people you would like to meet. Although you may be inclined to fill up your schedule with formal talks you want to hear, it is important to leave room for one-on-one meetings.

What is the likelihood that you will get to meet your academic hero or colleagues whose work is closely related to yours simply by chance? Without preparation, unless it is an especially small meeting or you know you are on the same panel with some of these people, the odds are low. Get in touch with those of interest before the event to improve the chances of getting on their schedule. Be sure to do this with enough lead time as people's agendas often fill up quickly. After all, not only will there be many others who

want to see the more senior researchers for scholarly purposes, conferences are often the place where academics catch up with old friends from graduate school and elsewhere, leaving little room on their schedules last minute.

Another reason to get in touch ahead of time is to confirm that the person will be at the meeting when the program suggests they may be. Recently, a graduate student from another program contacted me to say that she would be at my presentation at an upcoming conference and was looking forward to talking with me then. I was able to clarify to her that I could not make the session – my co-author would be giving our paper. However, I was happy to arrange a meeting with her on another day when I would be around. Since sometimes only one of multiple authors shows up to give a talk, planning to meet someone right after a panel without verifying who will be giving the presentation may lead to disappointment.

Even if the person shows up as expected, the time right after a formal presentation may only allow for brief interactions since there will likely be others waiting in line for their chance to talk to the speaker. As to approaching someone right before an engagement, it is often not a good idea since the person may be in the midst of last-minute preparations for the talk and should be given room to put any finishing touches on the presentation. If you are too shy to make arrangements to meet someone, you can let your professors know that you are especially interested in meeting so-and-so and request that they introduce you. To help facilitate this, you may want to remind your mentors why this meeting is particularly relevant for your professional development.

Whatever the means by which you meet people of interest, you should be ready to have things to say. Since you are the one seeking out contact and you are the one who knows of the other person (while the reverse may not be the case), it is up to you to have a topic of conversation ready. While it is flattering to have people come up and say hi, it can be awkward when they then have nothing to say. For example, you could mention a recent piece of theirs you particularly enjoyed and then link that to your work in some manner to signal your areas of interest and how these connect to the person's research.

While setting up meetings ahead of time can be very fruitful, there is also much to be said for the serendipity that occurs at conferences. Be open to being introduced to folks and also do your best making introductions among others. Some of the most helpful connections I have made at conferences have come out of friends or acquaintances introducing me to someone who happened to be nearby and us realizing that our work had considerable overlap.

It is not easy to go to a meeting where you may not know anybody, but it can be a good opportunity to make new connections. A student recently asked me what he should do at an upcoming meeting for dinner since he did not know any of the other attendees. While it may be a bit intimidating at first, last-minute dinner plans that emerge among attendees can be excellent opportunities for meeting new colleagues. Often folks will start organizing dinners spontaneously as an extension of informal conversations happening close to dinnertime. As a friend of mine pointed out years ago: rarely is it worth passing

up an invitation with the hopes that the opportunity to dine with someone more important will come along later. More likely, you will have passed up a perfectly good opportunity to spend time with some interesting people and instead may end up being stuck with no plans at all.

Conversations at dinner – like chit-chats in the hallways after sessions or at receptions – are prime opportunities to make new contacts and possibly even long-term friends. Equally important, these situations can be helpful for figuring out who does not play nice. It is worth remembering that today's graduate student peers are tomorrow's members of hiring committees and grant review panels. Impressions made during informal gatherings, whether positive or negative, are at least as likely to stick with people as those made in more formal settings. If you are rude and make obnoxious dismissive comments to others, this may not do you much good when, in three years, the target of your negative remarks is on the personnel committee in a department where you are hoping to land a job.

Too many people naively think that what happens at a conference gathering stays at a conference gathering. Not so. What one says and does under such circumstances is just as likely – if not more so! – to make lasting impressions as what happens during more formal interactions on panels. Of course, this is not meant to scare you from these get-togethers. The goal is simply to recognize the reality of the situation and remind you that whether at a talk or at a reception, you are still at a professional meeting and thus should behave accordingly rather than confusing it with what you might do at the surprise birthday party you just threw for your best friend. In time, some of these people may indeed become very close friends and then your meet-ups will start resembling the informality of purely social get-togethers. But do not mistake initial professional meetings for such casual gatherings.

All-in-all, conferences can be rewarding at many levels. They allow you to let people know about your work and get feedback on it while also hearing about exciting new research by others. They also give you the opportunity to meet new colleagues, make new friends and catch up with old ones. What you get out of a conference attendance is largely up to you. With some planning, an openness to meeting new people and the realization that you are in a professional setting, you are likely to come out ahead with the experiences accumulated at a conference.

3. Proven Pointers for Getting the Most Out of Your Next Scientific Conference

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Training Initiative in Biomedical and Biological Sciences

Prepared by Patrick Brandt, PhD

Whether you're in your first year of graduate school or nearing the end of your

graduate training, attending a scientific conference is an excellent career building opportunity. You'll have the chance to introduce yourself and your work to other scientists, network with researchers who can provide needed ideas or reagents, and you may even meet your future employer. Almost all scientific meetings consist of three essential components: platform talks, poster sessions, and social events. Each venue has its unique advantages and challenges for facilitating interaction with scientists in your field. Let's examine what you can do before, during, and after your next scientific conference to get the most out of the experience.

Before the Conference

- Often the list of attendees and the meeting schedule will be posted on the conference website a few days before the meeting. If it is, look through the information to find out who will be in attendance and what they'll be talking about. Send an email to the students and professors with whom you'd like to meet to discuss their research, to request technical assistance, or to plant the seed for future employment. Anticipate who will come to your poster and what they'll be interested in. If you haven't met them before, look for a photo on the web so you'll have a chance of recognizing them even if their nametag happens to be turned over when you meet them.
- If you're presenting a poster, be sure to have it printed with plenty of time to spare keeping in mind that most copy centers require 3 to 5 days to print a poster. (See the "Additional Information" section below for links on how to prepare an effective poster.) Practice a 5 minute and 10 minute version of your poster presentation with your lab members, your dog, or better yet a non-science major. Practicing beforehand will ensure that you exude competence and confidence during the poster session. Once printed, don't let your poster out of your sight! Even if the airline attendant wants to put your poster tube in the cargo hold because it looks like a bazooka, insist on keeping it with you. You could even prove your innocence by pulling out the poster and practicing your 5 minute spiel on them.
- Richard Reis of the Stanford Learning Laboratory recommends having a hallway (30 second), elevator (1 minute), and mealtime (5-10 minute) description of your research ready to share with any interested meeting attendee. He suggests that the ability to succinctly explain your research interests without notes or illustrations will help you to stand out among your peers. (See the "Additional Information" section to locate more tips from Dr. Reis.)

During the Conference

Platform talks • Platform talks are a great way to hear about recent, unpublished results from leaders in your field. The talks and the audience's questions following them will give you a sense of the currently contested issues and the pressing future questions. Be sure to take notes during the talks. If nothing else it will keep you from

nodding off during that killer session after a big meal.

- Try to think of at least one question you could ask each presenter. Thinking of questions even if you never verbalize them will help you become a better scientist, and there's no better way for a graduate student to get noticed than to ask a question following a platform talk.
- Take the opportunity to analyze each presenter's speaking style and PowerPoint usage. You'll receive lots of insight about what to implement and avoid in your own presentation style.

Poster sessions

- When you're presenting your poster be enthusiastic and engaging but don't hijack your listeners for more than 5 minutes unless they are asking the questions. Don't feel bad if 75% of the people who look at your poster just read the title and walk away – that's normal. When you meet someone who's interested in your work or asks you for advice be sure to write down their contact information so you can follow up with them after the meeting.
- You can maximize your efficiency when it's your turn to poster surf by scanning through the abstracts beforehand. Highlight names or keywords in the abstracts so you can be sure to visit the posters that are most interesting to you. Keep in mind that the most interesting posters may not necessarily be the ones that are the most relevant to your own project. Poster sessions are the ideal opportunity to meet new people who share your research interests.

Social events

- Every scientific meeting will have unstructured social activities where you can get to know your colleagues better and talk about science (or not) in a more relaxed way. Depending on your personality this can be the most enjoyable or the most terrifying part of the conference. No matter how uncomfortable you may feel, don't just hang around with your labmates. Take advantage of these opportunities to introduce yourself and build your network. If you're at the meeting with your mentor ask him or her to introduce you to the important people in your field.
- Finally, one last bit of advice about staying sane during multi-day meetings that have something scheduled 18 hours per day every day of the conference. Make opportunities to take a walk, head into town, go to the fitness room or whatever relaxes you so that your brain doesn't give out half way through the conference. By the same token, never underestimate the importance of a good night's sleep.

After the Conference

- Get some rest – you're probably exhausted and your brain likely feels like Jell-O.
- Take time to review your notes to look for ideas on how to move your project

forward (or start a tangential project). Then discuss with your mentor how to incorporate those ideas into your project.

- Send an email to the people you met to thank them for their advice and friendship.
- If you agreed to help another researcher, be sure to follow up in a timely manner.

In conclusion, scientific conferences offer a unique opportunity for personal contact between researchers that would probably never occur otherwise. As Gregory Petsko, a principle investigator at Brandeis University, states; “We have to go to meetings – they’re the only practical way to get a sense of how other scientists think about their work. They’re also the only way we can ensure that our work, apart from maybe the most newsworthy bits of it, gets noticed.” With a solid understanding of what to expect and how to prepare, you can make your next meeting a maximally beneficial and enjoyable experience. Patrick Brandt, PhD

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Articles about attending conferences:

- http://sciencecareers.sciencemag.org/career_development/previous_issues/articles/0210/how_to_work_a_scientific_conference/ This editorial found on Science Magazine’s website titled “How to work a scientific conference” has a lot of practical advice.
 - <http://chronicle.com/jobs/news/2000/02/2000020403c.htm> This is an article by Richard Reis in the Chronicle of Higher Education titled “How to get the most out of scientific conferences”.
 - <http://www.grc.org/students.aspx> This link gives general advice and guidelines for students and postdocs attending Gordon Research Conferences.
 - Aiken, J. What’s the value of conferences? 2006. The Scientist 20(5):54. This article describes an effort by Keystone Symposia planners to quantify the benefits of attending scientific conferences in terms of research dollars and time saved as a direct result of researchers interacting with one another. You might be surprised by their findings.
 - Petsko, G. The highs and lows of scientific conferences. 2006. Nat Rev Mol Cell Biol. Mar;7(3):231-4. This article from Nature Reviews humorously describes the author’s opinions about different conference styles and how to cope with each one. Resources for preparing and presenting a poster at a scientific meeting:
 - http://www.hsl.unc.edu/services/tutorials/poster_design/home.htm This is a poster-making tutorial from the UNC Health Sciences Library. They can also print your poster if you design it in the HSL.
 - <http://www.ncsu.edu/project/posters> This NC State website has excellent advice on creating a poster and quickly evaluating your poster for common pitfalls.
 - <http://www.swarthmore.edu/NatSci/cpurrin1/posteradvice.htm> An excellent (and humorous) resource from Swarthmore College about creating and presenting

effective scientific posters.

- <http://www.training.nih.gov/careers/careercenter/publish.html> Scroll down to the bottom of this page from the NIH Career Center for lots of great information about presenting a talk or poster at a conference.
- <http://www.scifor.com/Guidelines.htm> Guidelines from The Science Forum about creating effective posters in the digital age.
