

How to Get the Most Out of a Professional Conference

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Introduction

Attending professional conferences play an important role in the development of an academic career. However, some individuals may view these meetings merely as opportunities to socialize, and not worth the time away from work or the expense of travel. Others are suspicious that a request to go to a conference might really be a subsidized chance to visit family or friends, not a legitimate professional activity. The purpose of this article is to point out the career development opportunities afforded by attending professional conferences—some of which may not be self-evident—and why people early in their academic careers should seek out opportunities to do so.

Early-career individuals understand that submitting abstracts or posters for presentation at conferences is an important part of building a scientific career. Research that is not disseminated may as well have never been done. Forums such as the annual Medical Student Research Day at Wake Forest demonstrate the value we place on publicly presenting one's work to peers and the academic community as a whole. However, this article also describes the benefits of conferences even when one has not submitted a piece of their work to be part of a scientific meeting's program.

This article grew out of a discussion held at a Translational Research Academy meeting in August 2015. The Academy, a vital component of the Wake Forest Clinical and Translational Science Institute, is a learning academy for early-stage faculty in which research-relevant topics are discussed. Such topics

include grant and manuscript writing and professional development. Although the Academy is a faculty forum, we believe the conclusions drawn from this discussion are germane for others, such as students, residents, and fellows who are not yet faculty members, but whose education and training is designed toward achieving that status. These concepts may also be a useful reminder to more experienced individuals, who are approached for approval and financial support to enable conference attendance or may be in a position to advise learners on how to get the most out of the conference experience.

Why Go to a Conference?

Regardless of career stage, one should consider attending a conference with explicit goals aligned with his or her professional aspirations. Such goals could be personal or scientific, and they could be short-term (i.e., achieved at the conference itself) or long-term (i.e., networking). The type of conference—large or more focused and intensive—should be a factor in these considerations. Practically speaking, cost may be a consideration. Perhaps only events within driving distance are feasible, or conferences with free registration. Identifying one's goals ahead of time makes it more likely that (a) the conference will help meet the attendee's goal(s), and (b) supervisors—or others who must agree to time off—will see it as a worthwhile activity. Having said that, a person's goals for attending a conference are likely to be varied, depending on career stage or the conference itself. For example, a smaller conference facilitates networking

and one-on-one conversations with influential individuals, whereas a larger conference draws a more diverse group of attendees and may be considered a premiere event in the field.

We recommend making any changes in your schedule to accommodate your travel to a conference well in advance. This is courteous to your colleagues and sends the message to them and to your supervisor that you will keep up with your responsibilities, rather than treating the conference as a vacation.

Takeaway: Determine which type of conference is most likely to fulfill specific scientific or career development goals

Establishing Your Brand

Although people may be reluctant to say so, self-promotion is a key reason for nearly anyone to attend a conference. “Self-promotion” does not mean “self-aggrandizement.” Think of yourself as a marketer. You are marketing you: your talents, your expertise, and/or your potential for scientific accomplishments. Marketing means having a brand; extrapolated to academic science, that means deciding how you want to be recognized. This can be as simple as how you introduce yourself in a conversation at a conference. Consider how “I’m Nkecha Rucker, and I’m an educational curriculum specialist at Wake Forest School of Medicine” is much more informative than “I’m Nkecha Rucker, and I enjoyed your talk.”

When discussing your work, whether at a poster session or more informally, own it. For example, when elaborating on your line of research, it is appropriate to say “In our model, we have found...” or “we designed our pilot study to ask...”. Such a statement conveys authority (i.e., knowing what the model is) and establishes you as a peer with something to contribute. It is helpful to convey an understanding about the field beyond the specifics of what is presented in your work. It is also helpful to fairly convey the strengths, limitations, and next steps. Together these demonstrate a maturing and critical interest in the field, both of which are promising signs of future independence. Note that this is not a solo act. Your work should be placed in the context of an ongoing group effort — although it might be germane to allude to your specific role. Saying something

like “After I interviewed possible participants for our trial, I really grasped the meaning of patient-centered outcomes” serves two purposes: it conveys your specific experience in a study, and your awareness of a “hot topic” in current clinical research (patient-centered outcomes).

At a conference, be strategic about conversations. Plan to introduce yourself to experts in your content area of interest, and when you do, note potential areas of collaboration. If someone is an associate editor or editor of a journal, say, he or she is always on the lookout for potential manuscript reviewers. You could mention your areas of interest and ask how to be added to their pool of reviewers. If you are planning the next step in your career, seek out people from institutions of particular interest and talk about what they do that is exciting. Investigators who have just been awarded big grants are bringing online state-of-the-art specialized research core labs, or whose institutions are expanding their research portfolios, are eager to talk about these activities. From there, the conversation will naturally turn to new opportunities for collaboration.

Takeaway: Be purposeful in establishing your brand; it gives people you meet a snapshot of who you are, and facilitates your future networking opportunities.

Understanding Your Field

A conference is an ideal venue in which to refresh your understanding of the field or be introduced to an emerging area. When experts are in the room, it is a missed opportunity not to learn whatever you can from them. Again, this exercise is more likely to be productive if you do your homework ahead of time about who you want to meet and why.

If you are attending a conference with a mentor or colleague, before you go, pick his or her brain about the movers and shakers who will be there. What are the current controversies in the field, and what context would be helpful to get a full perspective about them? Who are the main protagonists in the debates, and what should you know about them to avoid a faux pas in conversation? Attend talks given by those movers and shakers, and be attentive in question-and-answer sessions thereafter — this is often where hot topics and active

controversies are aired. Ideally, your supervisor will be able to personally introduce you to these leaders in the field.

Sometimes a conference can illuminate areas of your work that have been troublesome. For example, if you have written proposals or manuscripts in which reviewers criticized a particular approach, a conference can be a golden opportunity to find out why. If the methodology was out of date, for example, newer techniques and approaches may be described in posters and talks — and the presenters will be there to answer questions. If the hypotheses are not considered fresh or exciting by reviewers, a conference is a key opportunity to brainstorm with others and learn how to improve your work.

The people who make topics hot and exert influence on the field in general tend to be the same people who review grant applications and manuscripts. So weigh carefully how your work can align with emerging trends, especially ideas imported from other fields that may impart novel perspectives. Those insights make your work more likely to appeal to such reviewers, and attending a conference first can help you understand what new tools you could add to your toolbox. That may mean seeking out collaborators with different areas of expertise to apply new techniques to your work. Or it may suggest that augmenting your own training, or moving your research career trajectory in a different direction, is called for. Hot topics at conferences are sometimes in the avant garde, and may take several years to gather steam through peer-reviewed manuscripts and grant proposals. You gain a strategic advantage when you can be part of an evolving trend, rather than following it later.

Takeaway: Conferences let you get ahead of the curve and offer brainstorming opportunities to address roadblocks or otherwise improve your ability to meet your research goals.

Serendipity

Woody Allen, who knows something about success, once said, “Eighty percent of success is showing up.” Being in the right place at the right time is partly the result of good planning, as the earlier parts of this manuscript illustrate. However, without an open mind and a willingness to seize

on opportunities, any advantage is lost. In our experience, influential thought leaders are often much more accessible in person than by email or phone. Conferences offer an unparalleled chance to meet such people in unplanned, casual ways. Important professional connections can start with a chance encounter in a hotel elevator, at a conference reception, or waiting in line at the coffee shop.

Sometimes the most important people you can meet at a conference are not “influential” figures, but peers and potential colleagues and possibly future leaders. Let’s say you have a poster being presented at a conference; these are usually grouped thematically. A poster viewing session lasts several hours, providing more than enough time to exchange business cards (bring more than you think you will need). So don’t neglect your neighboring presenters, even while you interact with people who stop to view your poster. Keep in mind that those persons you interact with may be your colleagues for the rest of your professional career. Be polite and respectful, even if you disagree.

Takeaway: Seize opportunities for chance meetings.

After the Conference

The savvy conference-goer follows up promptly, perhaps even from the airport on the way home. For anyone you met, add their contact information to your computer (business cards get lost easily). If you promised to send someone a contact, an article, or some other piece of information, either do so immediately or write yourself a reminder to do so as soon as you get home. If you asked about becoming a manuscript reviewer, send in the request for consideration and join the relevant society if necessary. If you heard about opportunities to review proposals, apply to the granting agencies in question. This is also an excellent time to email brief thank-you notes to people with whom you want to maintain connections. Be specific about what you talked about and any next steps, either on your part or theirs (e.g., “I look forward to reading the final draft of your white paper sometime next month.”)

Takeaway: Assiduous follow-up can help solidify relationships you initiated at a conference.

Conclusions

Even in this digital age, there is no substitute for face-to-face interactions with peers and colleagues in professional settings. The value of meeting in person is even more appreciated than it used to be, probably because virtual meetings have become common, and everyone's time and financial resources are limited. However, the latter issue can be overcome through grants for travel to conferences, which are offered by a variety of sources. Many conferences have competitive travel awards for students and fellows. Department Chairs, Center Directors, or lab leaders who value their trainees' or early-stage faculty members' development can set aside some funds for conference attendance. These may not be advertised widely, so it is prudent to meet regularly with such individuals to apprise them of your plans and ask their advice about which meetings would be of most value to you and what resources might be available for participation.

In summary, attending a professional conference can do a great deal to advance your understanding of your field, help you make your mark in it, and widen your professional circle and status within your field. All of those benefits can occur even if you are not presenting a talk or a poster at a conference. It takes planning and effort to make a conference experience truly worthwhile. However, the benefits you can reap are significant, for career success and personal growth.

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