

## Grad Students: Make the Most Out of Your First Academic Conference

By Neil Eldred

As an adult student returning to college to attend graduate school, you'll likely have to present your research at a regional or national conference in your discipline. You may find the idea of presenting your research findings before experts in your specialty intimidating.

However, conferences offer you a garden of opportunities. Plant the right seeds in people's minds, and you may be accepted into the network of professors and students specializing in your research area. Being a member of this network may translate into collaborative publishing opportunities or a future job. Here's how to make the most of your first conference experience.

### **Preparation**

A successful conference experience is born in the preparation you do in the weeks leading up to it. First, worry most about your research presentation. This is where you're going to make the impression that leads to networking opportunities. A memorable conference presentation hinges on three things:

- A well-written paper
- Solid research findings
- A powerful performance

Complete your paper ahead of time so you can present it before your fellow students and department professors. They can point out problematic arguments and inferences and identify weaknesses in your data analysis. Their questions will also provide clues to the inquiries you'll face at the conference.

Fix anything that needs fixing and prepare answers to the expected questions. Then practice, practice, practice your presentation. Your goals are to present your research without reading from the paper and demonstrate solid confidence in your research findings.

### **Getting Ready to Network**

You will also prepare by researching the people you hope to meet. These should be the people whose work stands out in your field. Don't shoot for just the dominate players. These are the people who, unless you are lucky, will give you the least amount of time. Look for the names of those with several articles in your field. They're the "up and comers" and may be open to collaborating on a project with you in the future.

Once you made your list of who you hope to meet, start researching them. You can Google them, but this will most likely only provide academic information and links to articles they've written. What you want is to find things you have in common with each person besides research interests.

Turn to social media and look for interests you share with those you hope to connect with. The goal when you meet is to quickly establish a rapport with them. Talking about things the two of you have in common is one of the fastest ways to establish rapport.

Check their tweets, their LinkedIn and Google+ profiles. Find out who their friends are on Facebook. Maybe you know someone who can make an introduction or put in a word for you. See if they belong to Reddit. If so, do you share any passions or viewpoints with them? Keep this information in a notebook that you can fit in your pocket or purse. Don't leave it at home!

Also take the time to craft a 30 second "elevator speech" that sums up who you are, your research interests, and career goals. Rehearse this speech until you memorize it. Use it when other conference attendees ask you about yourself. Now you have a short, concise description of who you are and what you do. The elevator speech will help you avoid rambling, stuttering, and backtracking for five minutes when meeting someone new.

### **Buy Business Cards**

There's one more thing to do before the conference. Go to an office supply store and have a couple hundred business cards made up. Make sure the cards have your name, university, department, phone number, and a professional email address printed on them. Don't get glossy or dark color cards. This will allow people to have the ability to write a note or two on the back about you.

Carry a healthy number of cards with you at all times. Give one to anyone you talk to, whether they're in your field or not. The goal is to genuinely connect with as many people as possible. You never know where a relationship will take you.

When packing, plan on dressing professionally during the time you're involved in conference activities. A good dark suit or dress and nice shoes can be worn on multiple days and looks professional. You can bring casual clothes for when you are done attending conference activities each day.

### **Arriving at the Conference**

Once you arrive at the conference, go to the paper room and obtain copies of papers from anyone on your panel that didn't send you one ahead of time. Make sure you read the papers before the panel. Try to find a question or two to ask each author.

Bring copies of your paper to leave in the copy room. Keep ten or so copies to hand out to members in your panel's audience that don't have one. If you do not have enough, and there are people who want copies, take their names and email addresses. Email them a copy before going to bed the night you get home.

### **Begin Networking**

Avoid the temptation to stay holed up in your room watching old movies. Jump right out into the action by spending your time networking and attending panels on subjects you're interested in. Also, start searching for the people you want to meet. Talk to other students and strike up friendships. Connections are the fuel that turns ideas into reality. Every connection you make has the potential to lead you closer to launching your career.

When you meet one of the people you want to connect with, compliment their work. Share how it inspired your own research. Use the information you located on them to establish rapport. When your conversation comes to an end, give the other person one of your business cards. Explain that you'd like to learn more about what the two of you are talking about.

### **Your Presentation**

At last, your turn to present will arrive. Arrive at the panel room a little early. Confidently take your place at the presenters table. Introduce yourself to the other presenters. They are probably on your list of people to meet.

You'll be nervous, but try to listen to the other presentations. Listen for things that are intriguing and take notes. You can use this information to formulate a question or comment as a lead into a conversation after the panel.

When your turn to present arrives, concentrate on appearing professional. Face the audience as you speak, making sure to address them in an audible, clear, and articulate voice. Do not race through your presentation. Make sure you hold yourself and speak in a way that exudes confidence.

### **After the Presentation**

When you finish your presentation, smile and confidently ask if there are any questions. Write down things people mention that you haven't considered. Thank them. Some professors will offer suggestions of other variables to try. Write them down, and offer your thanks. If someone criticizes your findings, simply say with confidence, "I stand by my results."

When the panel ends, you must resist the impulse to flee. Instead, talk with the other panelists and audience members. Pay particular attention to the people who seem interested in your work. Find out what they do. Give them a card. Who knows, maybe at the next conference you'll present a joint paper with them.

### **After Conference Follow Up**

When you return home, think about the people you connected with and identify where chances to collaborate on research exist. Handwrite thank you cards to those people. Write one thing about them or their work that inspired you. Include a card with your contact info. Offer to assist them in the future. Mail the cards the next morning.

Touch base with those people every couple of months. Send an article of interest related to their work. Take advantages of any offers to work together on a project. But let them suggest working together.

You made it through your first conference, and you may have laid the foundation for your career. Don't rest now. Start working on your next conference proposal and paper. You know what to expect now and

how to make the most of these events. From now on, take advantage of each conference as much as you can.