

Attending Conferences

Hunter College Gender Equity Project

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1. Reasons to attend conferences

- Present your work and learn about others' work
 - Increasingly, people learn about current work by attending conferences
 - Publishing is important but so many papers are published that it is difficult for people to keep up with the literature
 - By presenting your work, you increase its visibility and accessibility
 - You want to do your best for your work; making sure that people know about it is part of that
 - By giving people multiple cues (your face, your voice, your style), you make it more likely that they will remember what you presented and link your written papers with you as a person
 - Practice, practice, practice: attendees go to many talks; they are likely to remember only those that were delivered well with a clear message; they will be drawn to hear you talk again if you made a great, first impression
 - Practice with a clock; do not go over your time
 - Simplify your presentation to its bare bones; it's hard to oversimplify
 - Your goal is for people to remember your main message: make it easy for them
 - By attending others' talks and posters, you learn about current research
 - You can develop new collaborators
 - You can learn how to improve your current projects
 - You can find out if your approach is similar to or different from others' thinking
 - Either way is okay, but you want to know where you stand
- Meet your peers and senior investigators: know and be known in order to develop your field and the impact of your work
 - Knowing colleagues at other institutions helps you be part of a community

- Meeting colleagues gives you information about them – and gives them information about you – that written work alone does not provide
 - how they and you respond to questions
 - how they and you interact with others
 - what they and you contribute to one-on-one conversations
- Colleagues might invite you to visit their institution to give a talk or agree to visit your institution
- Colleagues may have techniques you want to learn, data you want to analyze, useful advice, feedback, or information you need
 - People are more apt to cooperate with people they know than with people they do not know
 - Colleagues might review your papers or grant proposals or might be people whose papers or grant proposals you will review

- Meet representatives from funding agencies, heads of study sections, program directors
 - You will feel more comfortable calling people to discuss a grant submission if you have already met them
 - You will be more likely to be invited to serve on a panel if people have met you; you can indicate your willingness to serve on a panel

- Informal screenings of potential job candidates often take place at conferences

- Colleagues you meet at conferences might be appropriate to suggest as outside reviewers when you are a candidate for tenure, promotion, or another job

- Do not take lack of interest or rejection personally: some attendees may not reciprocate your attempts to establish a connection; if you achieve a 50 % hit rate in meeting and getting to know new colleagues, you should consider that a very successful conference
 - Senior colleagues may not have the time to talk when you approach them because of numerous other demands on their time; make the effort and don't be discouraged if it doesn't work
 - Your peers might also not have the time when you approach them because they too are trying to meet people; again, make the effort and don't be discouraged if it doesn't work

- Female gender and minority status increase the importance of conferences
 - Both groups are likely to have lower visibility, less access to informal advice, and fewer colleagues who will take an interest in their advancement; meeting people at conferences improves all three
 - If you are a nontraditional academic, you many feel uncomfortable joining groups of white men
 - Consider having a small team approach: plan with a colleague what people you will try to talk to and how you will approach them

2. Which conferences and how often

- Attend one major conference and one smaller conference
 - The major conference is not necessarily the biggest one in your field, but it should be one where the major people in your field are likely to be present
 - The smaller conference might either be a regional conference (especially for junior investigators) or a more specialized conference
- After a conference, analyze its value in order to decide whether that is one of the conferences you should attend in the future
- Get advice from senior colleagues about which conferences to attend
- In deciding about which conferences to submit your work to, consider which research project is coming to fruition and decide
 - How well it matches the theme of different conferences
 - How well it matches the potential attendees
 - What your best options are for showcasing this particular piece of research?
- Attend not less than one and not more than 3 conferences a year
 - If you attend too few conferences, you will not keep up with current work and people will not keep up with you
 - If you attend too many conferences, you will spend too much time on conferences and not enough time publishing – which is always the main standard by which people are being evaluated

3. How to meet people

- Stay at the conference hotel (no matter how grim and alienating it is or no matter how expensive it is) to increase the opportunities for informal discussion
- Choose a few people whose work you are interested in; read their papers and check out their web pages
 - Email people whom you want to meet in order to set up time for discussion (coffee, breakfast, lunch, dinner); many conference attendees keep breakfast and lunch open for meeting new colleagues
 - Attending people's talks is a great way to break the ice and establish common ground when you approach them personally at the conference
 - At the conference, seek people out, especially those whose talks you attended, introduce yourself, and ask questions about your work
 - The most productive time at meetings is spent in one-on-one or small group conversations
- If you have difficulty approaching more senior people in your field, remember:
 - They were probably once in your shoes
 - They are often flattered by being approached as experts.
 - They are happy to talk with someone who is well informed about their work
 - Speakers and poster presenters, especially, expect to be approached for questions and discussion

- Use your current contacts to make new contacts
 - Attending a meeting with an advisor, mentor, or senior colleague can be helpful; they can introduce you to their colleagues
 - Having a pal is helpful, but be sure not to spend all of your time with people you already know
 - Meet the graduate students or post-doctoral fellows of the senior person you would like to meet; they can often help with an introduction
- Many scientific meetings have social events; these events are a good place for you to introduce yourself to others
 - Examples are mixers, cocktail parties, banquets, and activities or meetings designed specifically for women and underrepresented minorities all fall in this category
 - Even though it's a social event, it isn't purely social – it's still about work
 - don't steer the conversation away from work but don't press it if the person you're talking to seems disinclined to talk about work
 - be sure that people know what you're working on
 - don't be unnecessarily personal
 - people are going to remember the event in terms of what sort of colleague you might be
 - People may make quasi-commitments and –promises at social events but fail to follow up on them
 - You can follow up once
- Put your best foot forward
 - Prepare a brief description of your work so that
 - You can deliver a crisp, intelligent explanation of the problem you're working on
 - You can say why that problem is important
 - You can distinguish your approach from others'
 - One way to learn about another person's expertise is to share your own with them
 - Dress professionally and not too conspicuously
 - People should remember that you looked appropriately professional but no more
 - You want people to remember your work and you as the developer of the work; you don't want people to remember your costume
- Pay close attention to the papers you attend, taking notes
 - Consider the larger problem that each paper addresses
 - Evaluate the methods and the conclusions
 - Evaluate trends in topics to identify emerging 'hot' areas; see if your work can be extended meaningfully in that direction
 - Ask questions
 - Use a friendly tone that demonstrates your interest in the material

- Don't apologize for your question or label it as stupid or ask permission to ask the question; just ask it
- Write down your question to ensure a crisp and cogent delivery
- Follow up with people you have met or heard give a presentation
 - If people don't respond, you might try once more
 - Be sure to include content in what you write
- Follow up via email after the conference if that seems natural

4. How to get speaking invitations

- Volunteer to give a talk (remember, if you gave a good talk at the conference, this task gets easier)
- Discuss the possibility of organizing a conference session with other scholars
- Indicate an interest in visiting someone's lab or research group and a willingness to give an informal talk
- If you hear of a symposium that your work is relevant to, indicate to the organizers your willingness to present
- Ask a senior colleague to recommend you as a conference or colloquium speaker

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