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
    o 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
    o You want to do your best for your work; making sure that people know about it is part of that
    o 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
    o 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
    o You can develop new collaborators
    o You can learn how to improve your current projects
    o 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
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    o 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
    o be sure that people know what you’re working on
    o don’t be unnecessarily personal
    o 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
    o You can follow up once

• Put your best foot forward
  • Prepare a brief description of your work so that
    o You can deliver a crisp, intelligent explanation of the problem you’re working on
    o You can say why that problem is important
    o 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
    o People should remember that you looked appropriately professional but no more
    o 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
    o Use a friendly tone that demonstrates your interest in the material
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- 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

References


