Network in Progress: A Conference Primer for Graduate Students

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Introduction

Conferences are an integral part of academic life. They generate focal points for intellectual exchange and encourage professional socialization. They help scholars working on similar issues to identify others who might be part of their specialist community while also creating opportunities to learn about research that colleagues are doing in different areas of the discipline. In other words, conferences provide an opportunity for scholars to present their work in progress, to see what others are working on, and to network with their peers.

Graduate students—especially those who are just starting in their programs—may find the entire conference culture bewildering and intimidating. Understanding how to make the best of the conference experience does not come instantly, nor does it come naturally for most people. But given their centrality in the profession, it is important for graduate students to find their feet quickly and to learn to make as much of the conference experience as possible. Here is our primer for enhancing the conference experience both intellectually and professionally, based on our own trials and errors.

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Why?

Attending conferences is a smart idea. Presenting one's work to peers, getting feedback, and networking are all important when one contemplates going on the market. But attending conferences can also be useful and rewarding for graduate students at all stages of their programs, even those individuals who are not ready to present their own work. Conferences can provide a front-row seat to observe fresh and innovative research that might take months or years to find its way into a publication. They offer opportunities to meet individuals who are engaged in cutting-edge research and chances to engage them in dialogue. Seeing research in its "pre-published" form, still requiring revisions and polishing, can also be valuable for beginning graduate students who might see the leap from their own work to journal article as near impossible, but see the intermediate step of a conference paper as possible.

In addition, exposure early in a graduate program demystifies the conference experience. Graduate students can observe all of a conference's structures and rituals well before they are ready to present original work. For example, they can experience what panels and poster sessions consist of, note the average audience size, determine how formal the presentations are, observe how savage (or mild) the criticism from a discussant can be, and, perhaps most importantly, discover that many other graduate students also attend, and present successfully at, conferences (Figures 1 and 2). Such experiences can build confidence in one's own skills and intellectual capabilities: seeing other graduate students present on a panel or display a poster makes it easier to visualize yourself doing the same.

Of course, there are plenty of other tactical reasons for attending. Conferences offer one of the best ways to meet and network with others who share similar research interests. Conferences provide opportunities to see senior scholars in action, and give graduate students the chance to interact with a range of colleagues, from those who are well-established to other graduate students just beginning their work. Even people who dislike conferences will go to them for the practical benefits of networking and resume building. And, at the very least, conferences play a valuable role in the research and writing cycle: learning about others' work can encourage ideas about new directions to take your own project (or even help generate ideas about new projects).

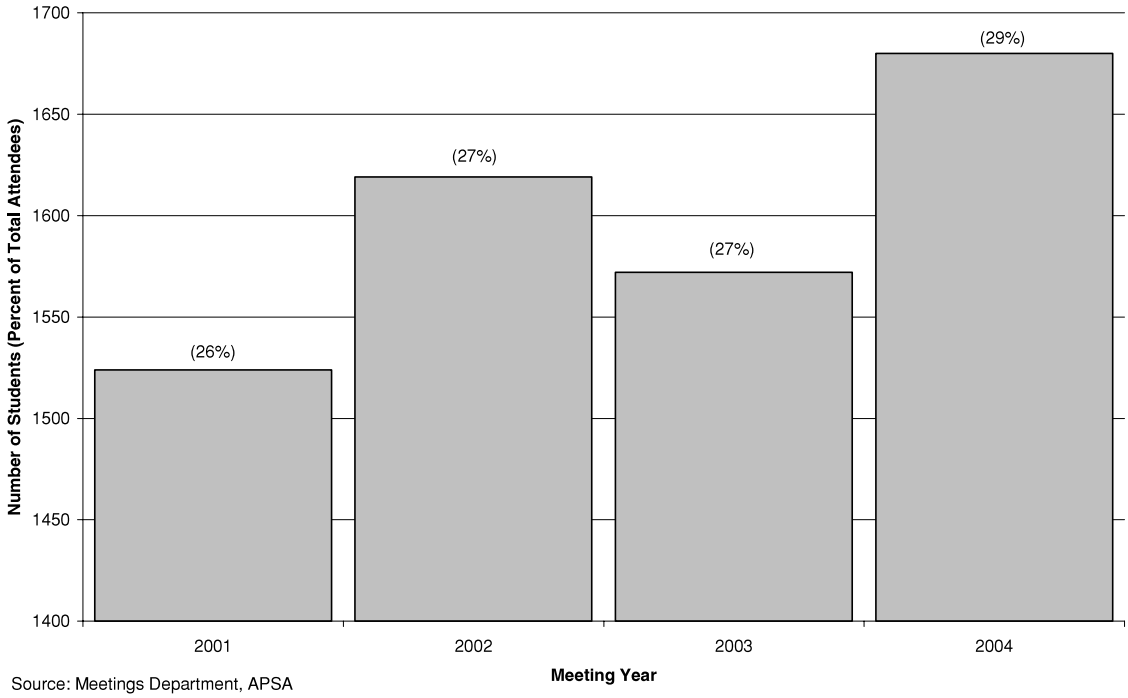
Finally, conferences help encourage and refine one's current work. Once a proposal is accepted, one has a firm deadline to meet and an obligation to fulfill. Incompletes can carry over from one semester to another, but conferences are a great incentive to be productive and act as a useful self-disciplining tool. And in presenting your work at conferences, you can try out your ideas on an audience that can offer a fresh perspective on your research. Ultimately, like them or hate them, conferences can benefit those who are prepared to take advantage of the opportunities they present.

When?

We advocate attending conferences as early as possible. At first, your participation in a conference will probably not involve presenting a paper or a poster, but can include a wide range of other valuable activities: listening to others present their work, asking questions and contributing to discussions during panels, talking and networking with colleagues who are interested in similar issues, and

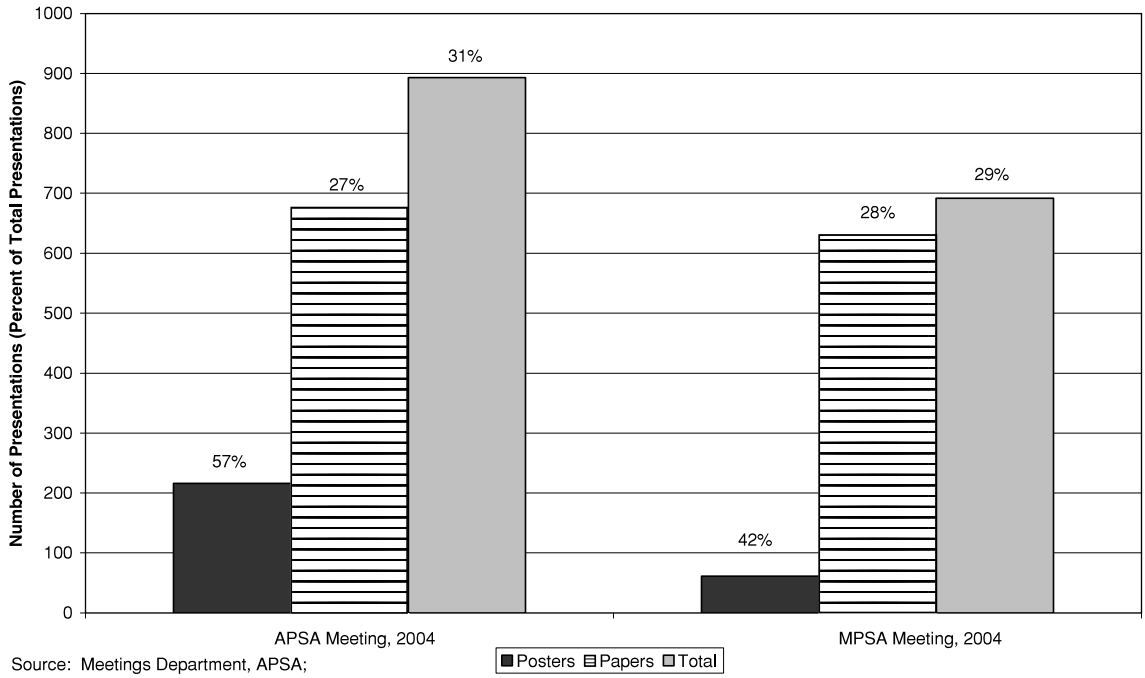
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Figure 1
Number of Students Attending APSA Meetings



Source: Meetings Department, APSA

Figure 2
Graduate Student Participation by Type of Presentation



Source: Meetings Department, APSA;
Conferences Department, MPSA

getting involved in the professional life of the discipline.

Moving from attendance to presentation is the next step. Individuals will vary in how quickly they can or will make this transition. There is no hard and fast rule about when graduate students should start presenting original work, and in general, one's advisors are best suited to offer specific advice about timelines. We encourage graduate students to talk with their directors of graduate studies and committee members to get tailored recommendations that take into account their own level of preparedness. That said, our own experience and observations suggest that many graduate students should start presenting their work by their third or fourth year of training. It is quite likely that a third- or fourth-year graduate student will have a favorite seminar paper or project that they have had time to revise and polish. Those conducting field research for dissertations might have collected some initial data that they can use as preliminary tests of their hypotheses or a

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theoretical framework in need of some feedback from others.

It's generally a good idea to start going to conferences and presenting your own work well before you go on the job market, and, preferably, with papers that don't all come from your dissertation. Showing versatility in your research interests is an asset on the market, and using conferences to highlight other research you have done or are interested in is an efficient and effective way to get that point across.

Where?

Knowing which conferences to attend can be initially tricky due to the number and variety of meetings available each year. Conferences differ based on their scope, ranging from broad, interdisciplinary meetings (e.g., the International Studies Association), to general political science meetings (e.g., the APSA meetings), to ones more narrowly focused on sub-fields or themes. Conferences also differ in scale: some conferences are national meetings and others are regional (e.g., the MPSA meetings) or even local. Conferences may have open calls for papers or they may be by invitation only. And some conferences seek out participation from scholars at all stages in their careers while others may restrict their participation (e.g., graduate student-only conferences).

To navigate through this diversity of conferences and pick the ones that would be most fruitful for your own work, we suggest the following steps. First, it is always a good idea to ask for recommendations from your own advisors who will be able to direct you to the meetings that are most important for your areas of interest. Second, look at different conference listings to learn about upcoming meetings that might be valuable. For political science conferences, the APSA web site (www.apsanet.org/section_181.cfm) has a very thorough list. We recommend that graduate students also investigate alternative sites, such as conference web pages maintained by professional organizations in sister disciplines. We have also found that many working groups, workshops, and research centers at universities maintain listservs that disseminate announcements about upcoming, issue-specific conferences.

Once you have identified potential conferences of interest, it is then important to do your homework to ensure that the conference is, in fact, an appropriate fit for your work and your interests. A few of the questions you might consider include: Is the conference multidisciplinary or will it be mostly a political science audience? Is there any preferred methodological approach for papers at the conference? Who has presented at the conference in past years? Thanks to online paper archives, a quick search of the prior year's paper topics can provide a quick overview of the kind of conference it is and the kind of work that tends to be accepted. APSA offers the most comprehensive such archive for papers presented at political science meetings through its Political Research Online (PROL) web site (www.apsanet.org/section_538.cfm). As part of this research step, graduate students should also note the application procedures (is it an open call for papers?) and other requirements or restrictions.

We also suggest that in thinking about relevant conferences, graduate students be creative in their scope. International conferences may be an excellent place to meet colleagues and encounter new work that has not yet made it to the U.S. For comparativists and IR types, international conferences may be more important than for those interested in theory and American politics, but this will not always be the case. Of course, doing your homework is particularly important with international conferences, particularly with respect to the norms and expectations of conferences in another country. In addition to the questions listed above, you should also investigate whether you will be able to present your work in English or in another language in which you are fluent. Will the presentation be in panel/discussant or some other format? What is the level of formality? Taking note of such matters before arriving at a far-flung destination will make attending international conferences more enjoyable and rewarding.

Conferences in sister disciplines can also be highly fruitful places to present work. Certain topics sit naturally at or near cross-disciplinary boundaries; those working on social movements might consider conferences in sociology, for example. Looking beyond the customary political science conferences might generate new networking opportunities and access to valuable research that is not represented in the main political science journals.

While your graduate advisors will be able to offer concrete advice about specific conferences based on their knowledge of your interests and abilities, we generally recommend that graduate students who are looking to present at a conference for the first time start small: submit proposals to regional conferences that are general in scope (such as the meetings of the Northeastern Political Science Association or the Midwest Political Science Association), events organized by and for graduate students, or those that focus more narrowly on a specific region or issue. Such conferences generally offer the same benefits as their national and international cousins, along with a higher acceptance rate. Large generalist meetings like those of APSA and ISA typically receive a higher volume of proposals, of which they are not able to accommodate many given space and time constraints. The average acceptance rate for paper proposals at the APSA Annual Meeting, for example, was 46% in 2003 and 53% in 2004. At the 2005 MPSA meetings, in contrast, the overall acceptance rate for papers was 88%, while the acceptance rate specifically for proposals from graduate students was 87%.

For those who may be nervous about their conference debuts, starting with smaller conferences and building up to the bigger events is a logical way to develop the skills and composure of more experienced conference attendees. Moreover, regional and issue-specific conferences often have a larger proportion of graduate students in attendance, which can make for a more comfortable and informal atmosphere for those attending conferences for the first time. For example, while graduate students comprise roughly one-third of all APSA Annual Meeting attendees, around 41% of those at the Northeast Political Science Association conference last year were graduate students.[1]

Finally, before submitting a paper proposal to a conference, you should determine if you can afford it. Many graduate schools will help you with the costs when you are admitted to the conference, but sometimes these funds are insufficient and may not be enough to cover all of your expenses—especially for conferences that require extensive travel. Study the funding policies in your school and department. It may be possible that your department may be willing to pick up (some or all of) the bill, or provide supplemental travel money that can help cover the balance of the tab. Some conferences also offer a limited number of travel grants for graduate students to help defray the cost of attendance. Be advised, such grants are highly competitive and often require an application well in advance of the conference itself. Check the web page for the organization or conference to see if such grants are available, if you are eligible, and the requirements for application.

How?

Submitting paper proposals is usually a standard procedure, requiring an abstract of the paper to be presented and,

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in some cases, supplemental information such as a CV. Many conferences encourage online submissions of paper abstracts and almost always provide detailed instructions for novices. Abstracts of papers should state the central puzzle of the paper, provide a clear and succinct summary of the answer, and note the kinds of evidence and methods that the paper uses to arrive at the answer. In addition, abstracts work best when they are fairly concrete, state their relevance to the field, and make a clear and direct tie to the conference theme (if any). We suggest that graduate students work with their advisors to craft abstracts that are tightly written and succinct. We also recommend that students look at abstracts from past conferences—usually available online as part of past conference proceedings—to get a good sense of what abstracts have been successful at communicating the main point of the research in a clear, concise, and interesting way. Remember, the abstract should indicate that the paper contributes to some important scholarly debate, that it does so in a way that would be compelling to an audience, and that the research is far enough along that the paper will, in fact, be ready for presentation by the time the conference occurs.

Many generalist conferences, such as APSA's, offer participants the choice of submitting proposals to different thematic or disciplinary divisions. In such cases, it pays to be strategic when deciding to which conference division(s) one should submit an abstract. For conferences that have many proposals and many divisions, a well-matched submission to a suitable division may make the difference between a paper being accepted and one that is rejected. At the APSA Annual Meeting, for example, divisions typically get a predetermined number of panel slots, which means that the number of papers that can be accepted for a given division at a given Annual Meeting is limited. If a paper proposal can fit into more than one division, it generally pays to apply to the one that is likely to have the fewest papers for the greatest number of slots. Knowing which division offers you an advantage is not necessarily self-evident, so some legwork can help. A paper dealing with electoral support for far-right political parties in Western Europe could fit into a number of divisions at the APSA Annual Meeting, for example: Comparative Politics, Comparative Politics of Advanced Industrialized Societies, European Politics and Society, or Race, Ethnicity and Politics. Submission to the large and undifferentiated category of comparative politics may not offer the best shot at getting accepted in this case—especially when more specialized divisions exist. Matching the paper to the best division can be a critical step in getting a paper proposal accepted at larger generalist conferences. In addition to asking for guidance from your faculty advisors, you may also want to study the work of the conference division's chairs. You can increase your chances by submitting your proposal to the chair whose work or methods falls closer to yours.

Graduate students who have developed some comfort with conferences and who have started to build a network of peers might also consider the option of putting together a conference panel rather than submitting an individual paper proposal. While undeniably more work, organizing a panel submission offers some particular benefits. First, panel proposals tend to have a much higher rate of acceptance than individual proposals, as conference organizers need not worry about putting similar papers together into coherent groups—the panel organizer has done this legwork for them. Second, panel organizers select the panelists, the chair, and the discussant; they can use this perk to include individuals whose work they admire and to ensure that the panel is integrated with a unifying topic rather than the result of vaguely similar paper proposals strung together by a division chair. Third, it allows organizers to exercise networking skills by asking people whose work is of interest to participate on a panel. In our experience, organizing conference panels has helped put us in touch with scholars in our areas of interests. In general, even senior scholars have been flattered by the invitation to participate in panels that they found intellectually appealing. In cases where they declined, we generally found that they were willing to suggest students and colleagues able to take part, which also helps extend one's network of contacts in the profession.

When organizing a panel, it's always best to start close to home—use people who you already know and whose work might be a good fit for the panel's topic. Ask other graduate students for recommendations and contacts that they might have, and always ask advisors for their suggestions. Use these initial contacts to develop a list of other possible panelists. Make an effort to include a variety of individuals on the panel—in other words, don't submit a panel of all graduate students or members of a single graduate program. In writing the panel proposal, demonstrate how the individual papers all fit together on the panel and how the panel fits with the overall theme of the conference. And if you can convince a well-known scholar to appear as chair or discussant on the panel—here is where your advisor's contacts might be especially useful—all the better. Do not hesitate to contact senior scholars. Many times they'll be happy to join the panel if you are willing to do the work of organizing it. They might even suggest other professors who may want to join in. Even if this person declines the offer, you have still established a channel of communication with a senior scholar in your field—a link that might come in handy down the road.

You Got In—Now What?

Prior to the Conference

When you commit to going to a conference, whether as a presenter or as a general participant, there are a number of activities you can do to prepare and to get the most value out of your experience. Start by looking through the conference program in advance and marking the panels of greatest interest to you. Most of the time, preliminary programs are available online or in print, allowing you to flag worthwhile panels well in advance of arriving at the conference. See if papers from those panels that interest you are available online before the conference and scan them to see if they are relevant (sometimes panel titles seem attractive but the individual papers are not useful for your own work). In many cases, you may find several interesting panels scheduled at the same time. Don't panic—you can always get the papers from the other panels from the conference web site and then contact the author(s) with comments and questions after the conference is over. Doing so enables you to stay for an entire panel session and participate in the discussion without feeling guilty about missing an interesting paper in another session.

General Suggestions for Attendees

At the conference itself, there are a number of activities that we have found to be worthwhile regardless of whether one is presenting a paper. Receptions organized for graduate students or by different working groups offer chances to meet and interact with colleagues who share your academic interests. Attending business meetings for working groups or divisions of interest to you create opportunities to get involved in the governance of the discipline itself. Attending keynote speeches, short courses, and workshops can extend your skill set and generally be intellectually stimulating.

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Finally, be sure to check out the exhibition hall—where academic presses display their new titles for browsing attendees. Even if you choose not to buy anything at the conference, keep an eye out for discount sheets that you can take with you. Most vendors offer conference discounts that are valid for some period of time after the conference ends. Ordering books with these sheets can save you between 5–20% off the price—a quick way to recoup some of the conference's registration fee. And strike up conversations with representatives of the academic presses. They may remember you when you are ready to submit your first book proposal.

If you feel particularly lost and alone, arrange to meet with others from your program for meals, but don't schedule yourself to the hilt. Sometimes, the most rewarding conference experiences occur when you get involved in a chance conversation after a panel which turns into an extended discussion over a cup of coffee. In the same vein, make sure you attend the panels that seem interesting to you, but don't simply load up on panels from morning to evening. Some of the most valuable exchanges at a conference occur outside the panel rooms.

Recommendation for Presenters

For those who are presenting papers as part of a panel, go to your assigned room before your session and survey the layout. Make mental notes about where you will be sitting and where needed equipment like the overhead projector is located. Arrive at the room early, especially if you need time to set up (and especially for those using PowerPoint). In a panel session, the chair will usually give you specific guidelines for the length of your presentation, but typically you should expect to speak for about 10–15 minutes. The paper presenters will often speak in the order listed in the program, though the panelists may agree to go in a different order if the papers themselves suggest a particular grouping. When presenting your work, don't read the paper to your audience. They can do that much better on their own. Instead, present only the main arguments and what is most compelling about your research. If you have overheads of small charts or graphs, consider making photocopies of the relevant transparencies available to the audience.

After all of the papers have been presented, the discussant will usually provide feedback on the papers for some amount of time (again, typically between 15–20 minutes). Following the discussant, the presenters have a chance to respond in turn to the comments raised. Always be courteous and direct in answering questions. It may be a good idea to focus on the most significant issues that the discussant has highlighted rather than respond point by point to everything mentioned (you want to leave sufficient time for others to respond as well). Even though criticism may be hard to take, don't be defensive in your responses; treat feedback as an opportunity to learn about where your argument could be stronger and where your presentation of your ideas can be clearer. The same applies to answering questions from the audience in the general discussion—always be courteous in your answers and if you can't answer a question, acknowledge that perhaps you need to do more thinking on the issue. You might even ask an individual raising a tough question to speak more about the point after the session ends—it could provide an opportunity for you to meet people who are interested in your topic and whose critique can strengthen your analysis.

For graduate students, it is quite possible that rather than in a conventional panel session, your paper will be presented as part of a poster session. In fact, a large percentage of poster presenters are graduate students—57% of posters at the 2004 APSA meeting and 42% of posters at the 2005 MPSA meeting were presented by students. Posters are a visual summary of your paper's main puzzle, arguments, and evidence. A poster session usually takes place in a large convention room in which each presenter is given space to display a poster (typically around $3' \times 6'$ or $4' \times 8'$, though the dimensions may vary). Unlike a traditional panel that typically has between three and six papers, a poster session makes it possible for many presenters to showcase their work and for other attendees to view a range of research projects.

You never know who will show up to see your poster, however, so make sure you do a decent job, with a clear, legible, and visually attractive display. You want people who are walking by your poster to stop, look, and engage you on the content, and this probably won't happen if you choose to post 20 pages of densely typed (or worse, handwritten!) 12-point text on a board. Don't overwhelm the viewer with too much information. Your poster should serve as an introduction to your work and findings—a trailer, if you will—that will stimulate further discussion. You can browse last year's posters at http://archive.allacademic.com/publication/browse.php for ideas and examples. If someone is interested in your work, you can always give them a copy of your paper. You should be prepared to talk through your main argument at a poster session, though such a presentation is likely to be more informal and shorter than in a panel. Prepare some talking points that highlight the central puzzle of your paper, your main arguments, and how you went about collecting and evaluating the evidence to support your arguments. Some individuals will be satisfied with a quick look and your talking points. Others will linger to engage you in more detailed discussion about your work.

As much as we hate to admit it, sometimes conferences are not the best place for getting feedback on your work. This is especially true for those 8:00am sessions, or the afternoon panels on the last day of the conference. Poster sessions may face similar problems. Since many posters are by graduate students, many scholars find the competing panels (or networking in the hallway) more tempting. Some divisions, like the Teaching and Learning in Political Science division, assign a faculty member to visit the division's posters and provide insightful comments, but this is hardly the norm. To get more feedback on your work, we suggest the following steps. First, make sure you provide your email address on your paper (which will be available on the conference web site), on any handouts you make, and on the poster itself. You want to make it easy for people who find your work after the conference is over to contact you with feedback or comments. Second, if presenting on a panel, ask the discussant and chair if they have written comments that they would be willing to send you after the conference. We have found that in several instances, discussants had more detailed comments on a paper, but truncated their responses during the panel due to time constraints. In such cases, the discussant may be willing to send you more feedback after the session. Third, make use of your existing contacts to others working in your area and invite them to your panel or poster. Fourth, when discussing topics of mutual interest with your colleagues in a session or over coffee, mention the work that you have done and, if your colleagues seem interested, offer to send a copy of the paper to them for comment. Remember, feedback from a conference does not have to be restricted in time; you can get good criticism well after a conference ends.

Networking at Conferences: The Art of Shaking Hands

Conferences offer an unparalleled chance to network with others in the profession. While some people seem to

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network effortlessly, for others—particularly graduate students who may feel intimidated by the very idea of meeting with established scholars—networking can be the source of much anxiety. While networking, like any other skill, requires practice to master, there are some small steps that any graduate student can take to meet and establish links with others attending the conference.

First, read the conference program carefully and identify not only interesting panels and papers, but interesting people you want to meet. Attend their panels and participate in the discussion by raising a suitable question or comment about their work. If the paper is available online, read it ahead of time so you can raise intelligent questions or comments. After the panel is over, approach the person and introduce yourself. Don't expect to be the only one who wants to talk to the presenters, especially if you want to approach some of the biggest names in the field. Have patience and be prepared with a succinct description of your own research interests, but don't just talk about your own vita; engage people in a discussion about their work as well, and perhaps how you found it to be relevant for work in which you are currently engaged. Ask for other examples of their work if it seems really interesting.

Second, contact people you want to speak with in advance of the conference and ask whether it is possible to meet for coffee or a quick conversation during the event. We find it works especially well with young faculty (how can anyone resist a "pickup" line like "I read your dissertation and thought it was brilliant!"). If you are able to set up a time to chat, do your homework about that person's current research and be able to talk engagingly about what you find to be interesting or compelling about it. Networking is a give-and-take process, and while it may seem that graduate students have little to offer faculty in this exchange, it is possible to raise a new idea or angle, based on your own work, that your networking partner may find useful or significant. Remember, you are joining a community of scholars and, while you may not have the name recognition or experience of others just yet, you can and do bring something valuable to the table. Respect yourself and have confidence in your work.

Third, take the time to get involved in special groups or divisions at conferences, such as the Women's Caucus, the Political Communication division, or the Presidency Research Group. The number and type of groups and divisions at conferences will vary, but, in general, identify the ones that seem to fit your scholarly interests or offer a chance to get involved in a community that appeals to you at a professional and personal level. In some cases, newer or smaller divisions may offer graduate students the opportunity to take on leadership roles. In any event, participation in these subunits of the conference can help you identify others with similar research interests and can also be valuable in the future for pulling together conference panels. Such divisions generally hold business meetings as well as social events during the course of the conference. Attend these meetings and use them as opportunities to meet other people. The same holds for school meetings and your department's reception—a great place to meet alumni and to get to know those who survived your program before you.

Fourth, take the time to meet other graduate students. They are your future colleagues, readers, and co-authors. It may seem less daunting to meet other graduate students, and once you have met them, it may be possible to get an introduction from them to their own faculty contacts. Some conferences even host graduate student receptions that make such networking easier. Eventually, "my network is your network," and vice versa.

Fifth, ask your advisors to introduce you to their peers. Some faculty members do this naturally and without prompting, while others may be less likely to think of it on their own. It never hurts to ask, though, especially if the person you would love to speak to is a close friend of a faculty member. When speaking with someone, you can also bring up people you both know or the person you study under as a way of introducing yourself.

In all networking situations, be prepared: Always wear your name tag, have business cards handy, and ask if the other person has one. Dress appropriately (usually business formal or business casual, depending on the conference and the situation) and wear comfortable shoes—you will likely be on your feet for much of the conference. Write down the person's suggestions or comments. If it doesn't seem appropriate to do so during the conversation itself, write the comments down at the earliest possible opportunity. Be a generous networker: offer to send others citations you think might be useful or some of your own work that might be of interest to them. Start practicing the give-and-take nature of networking. Be proactive in social settings and attend events or panels where your preferred contacts are likely to go. Sometimes, introducing yourself in a more casual setting—in the exhibition hall or in the lobby—can lead to a longer conversation over coffee. Recognize the person's boundaries, though. Stalking your contact through the conference is never a good idea; neither is interrupting other conversations, networking while the person is trying to eat, or, even worse, trying to using the facilities. Have a sense of social appropriateness and use your best judgment. Most people will be happy to network with you if you don't badger them. Remember, they are there to network too. Finally, stay in touch with your contacts. Email them to thank them if they have helped you in some way. If you have offered to send someone a paper, data, or a citation, do so promptly. In this way, you can build up a network of contacts over time without fuss or pain and become an active member of the profession.

Conclusion

Conferences are part of the academic landscape and, as such, it pays to know how to get as much out of them as possible. For graduate students, building a degree of comfort with conferences offers many benefits—they are the sites at which new research can be found, where constructive criticism and diverse ideas are on offer. We go because we want to hear what our peers are working on, and what our peers think of our own research. They also are important for networking, getting contacts, and making others aware of your contributions to knowledge. These are vital aspects of conferences too, and no one apologizes for them. Learning how to play this game can generate professional and intellectual rewards that can be considerable and well worth the time and effort.

Note

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1. Data on conference participation for the APSA, MPSA, and NPSA meetings were generously provided by Melanie Ciolek, meetings department, American Political Science Association; Azzedine Layachi, first vice president and program chair, Northeastern Political Science Association and St. John's University; and Tamara Speelmon, conferences manager, Midwest Political Science Association. We thank them for their kind assistance.

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