

Maximizing the Academic Conference Experience: Tips for Your Career Toolkit

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Why Go to an Academic Meeting?

Career success can be launched via academic conferences. Effective conference participation can lead to achievement of professional objectives, such as acquiring new knowledge or skills, finding external mentorship, meeting topic experts, disseminating data, developing cross-institutional collaborations, and establishing a national reputation.¹⁻⁹ However, for trainees and junior faculty struggling to start a practice, define an academic niche, and balance myriad responsibilities, attending an academic meeting may seem unnecessary and even untenable. This Perspectives article offers a 3-phase framework describing strategies for optimizing the in-person or virtual academic conference experience: (1) preconference preparation; (2) active engagement during the meeting; and (3) post-meeting action steps (FIGURE).

Preparing for the Meeting: Before You Go

Choose your meeting wisely.¹⁰ To optimize limited time and funds available to attend many diverse conferences, reflect on what you are most curious and enthusiastic about. Discuss with colleagues and local mentors which meetings they find most valuable. In general, local meetings provide the advantage of lower cost and the potential for developing more geographically proximate mentorship. Regional and national participation can foster broader connections and recognition that may be useful in the promotion process.

Submit scholarly work to enhance your experience. Submission categories may be as varied as scientific abstracts, quality improvement projects, clinical vignettes, educational innovations, and workshops. Preparing submissions moves your scholarship forward. Presenting your work beyond your institution provides an opportunity to obtain feedback and to connect with potential collaborators or external mentors in the field.¹¹

Find funds to support your participation. While some registration fees may be waived for an accepted submission, grant support and continuing medical education funds may not cover the full cost of meeting registration, lodging, and transportation. Potential funding resources include foundations, organization travel grants, group discounts, or scholarships and discounts for certain membership categories.¹² Virtual conferences may be less expensive and offer free content.

Plan to network.¹³ Identify whom you want to meet (potential mentor or collaborator) and email these individuals in advance. Explain briefly why you are interested in meeting and offer to meet at their convenience or provide a few suggested times. Scan 1 or 2 papers or abstracts pertinent to the sessions that you plan to attend and by the authors whom you plan to meet. This preparatory reading can help fine-tune your meeting plans and provide content to enhance conversation when meeting a new colleague. Find out if anyone you already know will be attending the same conference. Ask a senior colleague if they would be willing to sponsor or proactively advocate for your involvement in the meeting or organization.⁶ However, going alone, without colleagues, affords the opportunity to expand your network and become your institution's expert in a unique area.

Bring meeting "giveaways." Offering business cards can serve as an efficient way to build academic connections. Printed copies of your abstracts and QR codes on a poster that link to the abstract with your contact information are often well received. Identify potential networking opportunities during the conference such as "meet the expert" events and Twitter meetups. For online conferences, set up a time to meet with colleagues via Zoom, Google Meet, or other methods during or at the end of the day as you would have done in person (TABLE).

Create a schedule. Use the program (print, online, or app) to plan out which sessions you will attend. Register in advance for interest groups, special trainee sessions, alumni receptions, or committee meetings in your field of interest as well as pre- and post-meeting events. For virtual conferences, it is important to



FIGURE

Overview of Key Implementation Strategies During the 3 Stages of Attending an Academic Conference

block out time and cancel conflicting responsibilities as if you were traveling. Too many competing demands can cause distractions and contribute to missing much of the meeting. Create an out-of-office message on your email.¹⁴

At the Meeting

Be an active learner. Ask questions during or after the session. Manage content overload by taking notes on ideas that interest you, papers you want to read,

TABLE

Variations in Strategies for In-Person vs Virtual Conferences

	In-Person	Virtual
Preparation before the meeting	- Review and sign up for desired sessions, interest groups - Add sessions to your calendar - Bring copies of your abstracts/posters - Add QR code to poster to link to abstract - Bring business cards	- Review and sign up for desired sessions, interest groups - Add sessions to your calendar - Cancel usual work, clinics - Create an out-of-office message - Ensure contact information is on your poster/presentation - Add QR code to poster to link to abstract
During the meeting: active learning and networking	- Step up to the microphone to ask questions - Approach a speaker after a session - Invite a new colleague to meet during a break	- Use interactive tools such as raising virtual hand, chat box - Email a question or kudos to a presenter after their session - Use the virtual platform internal messaging system - Twitter can be a good way to connect with presenters
During the meeting: social activities	Attend social gatherings, such as special interest groups, breakout sessions, breakfasts, and receptions	- Participate in scheduled online social gatherings such as a virtual happy hour, movie screening, or game night - Consider organizing a fun virtual activity such as a group Peloton ride
During the meeting: potential mentors and collaborators	- Bring your abstract and/or CV to a mentor meeting - Be prepared—know something about the person you have requested to meet	- Anticipate sharing your screen with a mentor/collaborator - Be prepared—know something about the person you have requested to meet
After the meeting	- Follow up with your new contacts by email - Invite a new colleague to speak at your institution - Prior to the next meeting, find out if your new colleagues will be attending	- Invite a new colleague to speak virtually at your institution - Offer to present (virtually and potentially for free) at a new friend's/colleague's institution

people to contact, or other actionable items requiring follow-up. The same strategies apply to virtual settings with the addition of online interactive tools such as a chat box, breakout rooms, and the ability to raise your virtual hand to interact.

Networking is essential to building your academic career.^{15,16} Spend quality time meeting in-person with attendees—these may be future collaborators, letter writers, or mentors.¹⁷ While numerous articles and books have been written to aid those of us who find networking a challenge, Casciaro and colleagues offer the following suggestions to facilitate effective networking¹⁸: (1) Demonstrate intellectual curiosity—visit a panelist after the session and ask a question or offer a comment; (2) Identify shared interests—ask about some aspect of the data presented that relates to your work; (3) Focus on what you can bring to a relationship—offer an introduction to someone at your institution with similar interests as your new colleague; and (4) Recognize the potential for collective benefit—propose working together on a project. These methods can ease discomfort associated with networking. Strategies will differ slightly for virtual meetings; however, it is equally important to proactively network (TABLE).

Be prepared to give your brief elevator speech. When you meet someone (at your poster, networking session, or other) whose interest overlaps with yours in any way, have planned a 3-line, 30- to 60-second summary to describe your institutional role, focus of your work, and if relevant, a key point about your poster or session. If they inquire further, then you can explain nuances of your methods, clinical implications, and how your work relates to other findings in the field. Ask this new colleague about their own work and practice active listening.

Sign up for mentoring programs. Attending academic conferences provides an excellent opportunity to explore organizations' mentoring opportunities. Two examples from among many include the Women in Medicine Commission Career Advising Program established at the Society of General Internal Medicine annual meeting and the Association of American Medical Colleges Group on Faculty Affairs Mentoring Circles. These types of programs have been shown to be effective in supporting career advancement, fostering mentoring relationships, and increasing local and national participation in leadership roles.^{4,5,19-21}

It's OK to be social—keep it professional.³ Enjoy meeting new people and discovering new ideas. Some of the most important networking happens during social events.²² Bonding over a shared extracurricular interest may facilitate more congenial, productive, and even lifelong collaborations and friendships. Of note, many organizations have guidelines when

interacting with commercial interests. And remember that strangers are still strangers; thus, consider personal safety.

After the Meeting

Maintain your academic momentum—follow up on those new contacts and ideas! Review your notes and follow through on the action items. If a presentation sparked your interest, send a question or specific tailored feedback to the speaker. Start a conversation with the people you met—do you need advice? Do you have a surprising result that you would like to discuss with a colleague? Initiate or continue discussions on project collaborations—research, a future workshop submission, or an educational intervention. If one of the colleagues you met publishes something of interest to you or receives a recognition, email a short note. Demonstrate that you are an engaged academician who is attentive to the field.

Summarize the meeting highlights and educate colleagues at your home institution. Offer to lead a session for your division or department on the meeting's highlights or provide a 1-page summary of key lessons learned. This practice solidifies your own understanding and retention of the material and opens an opportunity for you to demonstrate scholarship. Consider publicizing conference take-home points via social media channels such as Twitter or LinkedIn to demonstrate that you paid attention and to provide additional visibility to speakers.

Conclusion

Academic meetings frequently provide attendees with energizing inspiration. Senior mentors and program directors can guide trainees and junior faculty on how an organized approach to academic conference participation can benefit their careers. Certain skills described above may not come naturally for all individuals. However, these strategies—prior preparation, proactive engagement at the conference, post-meeting action steps—can be learned and refined with practice. By incorporating this framework into routine practice, one can make academic meeting experiences meaningful, build networks of colleagues and mentors, tap into projects beyond one's own institution, and in turn, foster academic success. And what could be more fun than meeting talented colleagues, hearing about exciting new discoveries, and developing your own career?

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