

Conferences: Why to Attend and How to Benefit

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As ISSPR and INPR merge into a new organization, graduate students and new professionals have the opportunity to attend an exciting and more diverse conference on a yearly basis. According to Caroline's recent informal survey of the INPR student membership, most graduate students members feel our conferences are useful as a method of meeting people who are interested in similar research areas, and cite the low-key and close-knit atmosphere of INPR/ISSPR conferences as a primary motivating factor for their attendance. Many new graduate students, however, may be unsure about whether a particular conference is worth the time and money, the anomie of traveling to an unknown place, and the anxiety of meeting new people. Other students and new professionals who have attended other conferences in the past may have felt that they earned few benefits from their attendance. In order to encourage new INPR/ISSPR members to attend the upcoming summer conference, we discuss some of the benefits of conference attendance, and offer advice as to how to get the most from these professional meetings.

Why are Conferences Useful?

- **Conference presentations require you to set research deadlines.**

Between the demands of classwork, teaching assistantships, and family obligations, it may sometimes seem as though your research is slipping through the cracks. To keep your research "on the front burner," it is useful to set deadlines for yourself, and a conference presentation provides an excellent way to do this. Don't feel that you can't present at a conference until you have completed your entire dissertation. On the contrary, a small slice of your eventual dissertation will be easier for you to prepare, will create a more focused presentation (which will typically meet with a more enthusiastic reception), and will serve as an effective motivator for you to tackle the next research hurdle. If you don't feel comfortable presenting a paper in front of a large audience, you can submit a poster presentation; this will force you to complete just as much research, without raising the spectre of public speaking.

- **Conferences help you feel integrated with the academic community.**

At conferences, you'll meet people who are interested in the same topic of research and discuss theoretical and methodological ideas. You'll talk to participants about their own schools and departments, gathering information about places where you might eventually wish to work. You'll learn more about famous names in your field, and find that they, too, are normal human beings, who were once graduate students like yourself. You'll attend a variety of presentations and learn more about areas of your discipline that are not researched in your home department. Many presentations will inspire you with new ideas, while a few will be obviously ill-prepared. Both types can be quite useful; as DesJardins (1994) notes, "You'll probably realize that your ideas are more significant, relatively speaking, than you thought. A common reaction is 'I could write a better paper than this!'" All these experiences will help you feel as though you are an active, knowledgeable, and valuable member of your professional field.

How Can I Make a Conference Most Useful to Me?

Despite the potential benefits of a conference, a few attendees will feel that the conference was a wasteful or painful experience. As Altschuler (1999) confesses, “That everyone seemed to squint at my nametag and ostentatiously move on was bad enough; worse was the knowledge that, except for a meal at a wonderful restaurant and an hour perusing the products of university presses, I was lonely and bored, unable to sit through even one panel.” Because the INPR/ISSPR conferences are smaller and more informal, students are less likely to feel alienated or bored than they might at larger conferences, such as the one Altschuler describes. In fact, most of the respondents to Caroline’s survey explicitly noted that the INPR/ISSPR conferences are “conducive to networking,” “student-friendly,” have a “personal and unique feel,” and encourage a “closeness of relationships among members.” Still, first-time conference attendees may feel intimidated by the prospect of networking and meeting others. The following tips on conference attendance, adapted from a list compiled through the Association for Support of Graduate Students’ DOC-TALK e-mail discussion list (Schmid, 1997), may help you find a comfortable interpersonal niche at conferences.

- **Prepare yourself in advance.** Is there someone you would like to meet at a conference? Send them an e-mail a few weeks in advance to ask about an upcoming publication or exchange research ideas; then ask whether they might be interested in meeting you at the conference. Alternatively, prepare a question that you will ask an admired person if you should happen to run into them at the airport or in an elevator. If you have a good question in mind when you see the person, you will be less tongue-tied and more likely to approach him or her and introduce yourself. In addition, make sure you have prepared a thirty-second spiel about yourself and your research, to provide ready-made conversational material for anyone you meet.
- **Stay at the conference hotel.** While it is less expensive – and perhaps less socially threatening – to stay with a friend who lives several miles away from the conference, this decision will result in more time with your friend and less time with conference attendees. Being at the conference hotel allows you to: (1) pop up to your room to catch your breath between rounds of social and academic activity, (2) spontaneously accept invitations to extra-conference social activities, and (3) meet new people in the hotel’s elevator, lobby, bar, or gym. As one of Schmid’s (1997) respondents explains, “I make a point of asking everyone . . . ‘are you here for the _____ conference?’ Often they are and it’s fascinating to learn why they decided to come – it’s likely that you have something in common and it’s a face to smile at across the room. Even if they’re not affiliated with the conference, you’ll probably have a chance to explain why you’re in town, and it will make it that much easier when you talk to someone at the conference.”
- **Act like a host.** At a social gathering, the host is responsible for keeping the guests interested and engaged with other people. Acting like a host will take your mind from yourself and your anxiety, and will help you interact with other people more naturally. Schmid’s (1997) respondents advise, “When you meet someone new, even if your interests are a million miles apart, you can always say ‘Have you met so and so? You should. I’ll introduce you when I see you together,’ ” and “Be as socially generous as possible. It almost never ‘costs’ anything to invite someone along, bring them into a conversation, introduce them to a colleague, connect them to someone of common

interests, etc., and these things (a) are always remembered, and (b) go around and come around.”

- **Be kind.** If you are acting like a host, you will be friendly to everyone you meet. Try to extend this principle to people you dislike. Many neophyte conference attendees have committed the capital error of loudly criticizing an individual or their research, only to discover that a bystander is the person’s student or colleague.

By attending conferences and becoming active in ISSPR/INPR, students and new professionals have the opportunity to participate in environments that are both rigorous and fun, scholarly and social. We hope these guidelines help you get more out of these conferences, and we look forward to seeing you this summer in Halifax!

References & Resources

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