

Student Notebook: Making the Most of Academic Conventions

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Academic conventions represent important parts of academic life. Going to an academic convention is an exciting opportunity to connect with colleagues and exchange stimulating ideas; however, conventions can easily feel overwhelming and intimidating. That, in combination with the stress of leaving behind classes, labs, and ongoing projects to fly across the country and navigate a new city, can leave many attendees feeling anxious, distracted, and stressed.

The first national academic convention that I attended was the 26th Annual APS Convention in San Francisco, as a middle author on a poster. I attended several symposia and explored poster sessions, but I felt unsure of where I fit in or what I was supposed to be doing at the event. Now, after attending many other conventions, I have gained insight into how to make the most of the academic convention. Here are some tips that I learned along the way.

Develop Community

Conventions help you build your academic community by connecting with people in your field that you may not normally have the opportunity to meet. Take advantage of this time to hear fresh perspectives, debate important topics, and understand how research is conducted in different settings. This is also a time to meet senior members of the field that you may like to collaborate with in the future, or program officers from major grant organizations. Take a chance and introduce yourself. They may remember you in the future when your CV is on their desk.

Keep in mind that many of the opportunities to connect with people may be embedded in preconference events, post-symposia windows, and gatherings after the day's sessions are over. Rather than pack your day with sessions where you sit quietly and then rush out, seek opportunities to genuinely connect with other members in your field. I recommend planning a smaller set of key sessions and events where like-minded individuals and senior members of the field are likely to attend, leaving yourself time before and after to make meaningful connections through more in-depth conversations.

Finally, when you get back from a conference, send a follow up email to the new people that you met, especially potential collaborators, and connect with fellow students on social media. There's no reason someone you meet at a convention should be a one-time contact. Reach out to congratulate them on a recent publication, see if they're going to another popular convention in your specialty or to the next APS convention. Over time, these individuals may become an integral part of your community.

Get Feedback on Your Research

Academic conventions are also an important venue to gain feedback on your research. Presenting your work gives others in your specialty the opportunity to ask challenging questions on areas that you may not have thought of yet. These discussions, when taken seriously, may lead to deeper and more

thoughtful research. Furthermore, feedback may bring up important points that you may see from reviewers down the line, giving you a chance to address concerns or prepare rebuttals.

Find Inspiration

Sometimes, we get bogged down by the minutia of our everyday lives in academia. Be it coursework, department politics, or challenges in data collection, we can occasionally feel discouraged about our work. Academic conventions have a way of combating these feelings with a surge of new ideas, fresh perspectives, and contagious energy. Take advantage of these opportunities as great speakers, interesting symposia, and diverse convention attendees can leave you refreshed and ready to take on your challenges anew.

Recently, I came away from a specialty convention in my field feeling inspired. I attended the meeting in the middle of November, with upcoming finals, manuscript submission deadlines, and a myriad of other responsibilities on my mind. I had been especially bogged down by a grant proposal that I was writing, trying to figure out how to express my desire to study the interaction of PTSD, alcohol use disorder, and sleep disturbance. While at the conference, I had the opportunity to speak with trauma researchers from around the world, attend special interest group meetings, and hear about novel and emerging work in my field. I also had the opportunity to specifically discuss my grant ideas over a meal with colleagues from a previous institution. At the end of the convention, I came away with fresh perspectives and renewed inspiration to finish my projects and meet my deadlines.

Awards

Conventions are a great way to get recognition for all your hard work. Many conventions, including APS, honor members in the earliest stages of their careers as well as accomplished leaders within the field of psychology. These awards can be a great way to build your CV and to gain some positive reinforcement for your time and effort in the lab.

APS gives several awards specifically to students. The Student Research Award, for instance, promotes outstanding research conducted by student members. The RISE Research Award acknowledges outstanding research related to under-represented populations or conducted by students from diverse backgrounds. More information on APS student awards and grants may be found at www.psychologicalscience.org/members/grants-awards-and-symposia.

Treat Yourself

An important reminder for all graduate students is to have fun. We often find ourselves feeling overworked, overwhelmed by deadlines, and anxious about the future of our careers. Take advantage of academic conventions to explore a new, or familiar, city. Travel disrupts your routine and creates a sense of novelty. Suddenly, instead of being buried in the reference section of an upcoming manuscript, you get to think about navigating new neighborhoods, different transportation patterns, and diverse social norms. These novel activities may help to stimulate neuroplasticity (Kempermann, Gast, & Gage, 2002; Vemuri et al., 2014), which may carry positive indirect effects on the work waiting for you back on your laptop.

This may also be a great opportunity to connect with old colleagues and friends whom you may not be able to see often. Take time to reminisce, reconnect, and revel in each other's company. In addition to being healthy sources of relaxation and fun, these reunions may trigger renewed opportunities for collaboration and development, or they may spark a unique line of inquiry based on your shared interests. Overall, it's important that graduate students build in some positive experiences that help you to reduce stress and feel refreshed.

Learn what opportunities await you at the [31st APS Annual Convention in Washington, DC](#).

References

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