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Developing Professional Identity and Networks at Conferences

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Abstract

Professional conferences play an important role in the development of health behavior researchers. These venues are essential for applying academic coursework and advancing or strengthening skills in professional settings. Attending meetings enables students and early career scholars to interact with researchers and practitioners in the field for the purposes of sharing research findings, discussing practice strategies, and exploring career options through networking opportunities. Conference experiences can be enhanced by proper planning and execution before, during, and after the event. This editorial provides recommendations to junior conference attendees related to a variety of topics including time management, presentation etiquette, networking, locating mentors, and post-meeting follow-up procedures.

Keywords

conferences, networking, professional development, students, early career scholars

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Developing Professional Identity and Networks at Conferences

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Abstract

Professional conferences play an important role in the development of health behavior researchers. These venues are essential for applying academic coursework and advancing or strengthening skills in professional settings. Attending meetings enables students and early career scholars to interact with researchers and practitioners in the field for the purposes of sharing research findings, discussing practice strategies, and exploring career options through networking opportunities. Conference experiences can be enhanced by proper planning and execution before, during, and after the event. This editorial provides recommendations to junior conference attendees related to a variety of topics including time management, presentation etiquette, networking, locating mentors, and post-meeting follow-up procedures.

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Introduction

Conference attendance can be a transformative event in terms of professional development and developing academic identities for student trainees and early career scholars in the health behavior field (Forsetlund et al., 2021; Mata et al., 2010; McAlpine et al., 2009; Shambaugh, 1999). However, there is a paucity of peer-reviewed literature about the value or return on investment of attending professional conferences, including the amount of learning taking place at such events, from the perspectives of graduate student trainees and early career scholars (Chapman et al., 2009; Walsh et al., 2014). Instead, a number of articles target program administrators or mentors and focus on the relative importance of conference attendance in terms of issues such as mentorship, professional identity development, and post-graduate professionalism in various disciplines (Elman et al., 2005; Goltz & Smith, 2014; Lee et al., 2007; Reed et al., 2008; VanDerLinden, 2005). Existing research from the perspectives of trainees and early career scholars highlights the homogeneity of this population in terms of their exposure to professional conferences (i.e., first time versus regular attendees); goals and expectations for attendance; and learning and professional outcomes, including the creation of new social and professional networks (Becerra et al., 2020; Chapman et al., 2009; Ghosh & Githens, 2009).

Social identity and network theories provide a framework for how professional identities and norms are developed and reinforced during academic conferences and other professional development activities (Goltz & Smith, 2014). However, few guides exist to facilitate professionals' initial forays in networking at these events in the realm of health behavior. There are several general articles available on how to maximize academic conference attendance for trainees and professionals at all stages of their career (Becerra et al., 2020; Denard Goldman & Schmalz, 2010; Fisher & Trautner, 2022; Sousa & Clark, 2017). Additionally, professional societies can play a critical role in building a network and providing a supportive environment for professionals to thrive throughout their careers (Ansmann et al., 2014; Stobbe et al., 2013). For

example, professional organizations can provide opportunities for mentors and mentees to establish impactful connections (Baldwin et al., 2017; Serwint et al., 2014), such as the formal American Academy of Health Behavior's Research Scholars Mentoring Program (Smith et al., 2019).

Therefore, the following editorial offers a stepwise guide to maximizing conference-related networking and professional development opportunities for health behavior scholars who are students, trainees, and early career scholars. Mentees are encouraged to prepare their efforts in a strategic and chronological manner before, during, and after meetings.

Before the Conference

1. Assess your stage of professional development by asking yourself:
 - a. What year or stage are you in your program (e.g., newly admitted, doctoral candidate) or career (e.g., post-doctoral fellow, junior faculty)?
 - i. For students: Are you seeking employment inside or outside of academia (e.g., university versus government)?
 1. If you are seeking employment or a new career opportunity in academia, do you primarily have a research or teaching focus?
 - a. Those with a research focus should begin working on a research philosophy statement and prioritizing Carnegie-ranked Very High/High Research Activity institutions as potential employers
 - b. Those with a teaching focus should begin working on a teaching philosophy statement and prioritizing master's and baccalaureate institutions as potential employers
 - c. Regardless of primary focus, candidates for faculty positions will benefit from developing clearly articulated statements highlighting their research and teaching experience
 - ii. For students: Are you considering a post-doctoral fellowship?
 1. Begin web-based searches for potential fellowships (e.g., Robert Wood Johnson, Veteran's Affairs, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)
 2. Create spreadsheets containing information about fellowship sites, eligibility criteria, deadlines, and necessary application materials
 3. Determine if fellowship administrators and/or past recipients will be attending the conference (e.g., reviewing conference website or posted agendas)
 - iii. For early career scholars: Are you interested in seeking a different position?
 1. Begin web-based searches for potential open faculty, industry, or government positions
 2. Create spreadsheets containing information about the open positions, required and preferred qualifications, deadlines, and necessary application materials
 3. Determine if professionals from the respective organizations will be attending the conference (e.g., reviewing conference website or listed sponsors)

- iv. For early career scholars: Are you interested in expanding your professional networks?
 1. Begin web-based searches about the professional organization and whether there are faculty development programs available
 2. Assess professional development opportunities (e.g., workshops) or general and targeted social events that will be offered at the upcoming conference
 3. Create spreadsheets containing information about professional development opportunities offered by the organization and at the respective conference (e.g., reviewing conference website or listed sponsors)
2. Identify and prioritize expectations and anticipated benefits of conference attendance (Denard Goldman & Schmalz, 2010)
 - a. Curriculum Vitae (CV) development or enhancement
 - b. Knowledge/content about a specific health issue and/or population
 - c. Opportunities for interaction or collaboration
 - d. Opportunities for involvement or leadership in the organization
 - e. Opportunities for obtaining “breaking news” within a profession/discipline (e.g., upcoming grant funding mechanisms, calls for special issues of journals)
3. Identify the conference venue best suited for your expectations and benefits (contact conference planner for details) (Denard Goldman & Schmalz, 2010)
 - a. State, regional, national, or international
 - b. Conference theme and scope
 - c. Location, lodging, transportation, and cost
 - d. Potential for onsite interviews or formal networking events
4. Investigate the conference online (Denard Goldman & Schmalz, 2010)
 - a. Program from previous years, including continuing education credits (e.g., Certified Health Education Specialist)
 - b. Attendee characteristics (audience)
 - c. Speaker credentials
 - d. Pre- and post-conference workshops
 - e. Exhibit hall and vendors
5. Plan for time, effort, and costs associated with conference preparation (e.g., travel, presentations) and follow-up (Denard Goldman & Schmalz, 2010)
 - a. Apply for local (university or external) and professional organization funding
 - b. Consider volunteering at the conference in exchange for waivers on registration fees, if applicable
 - c. Monitor travel websites to purchase lower cost airfare, ground transportation, and lodging
 - d. Use university resources, when available, to obtain cheaper printing of posters, handouts, CVs, and business cards, as well as hardware and software
 - e. Monitor sales to purchase inexpensive, but durable, business and casual attire and accessories

6. Begin pre-conference networking procedures (Denard Goldman & Schmalz, 2010; Radius & Tran, 2012)
 - a. Who is planning to attend from your existing network? (e.g., students, current faculty, members from past institutions)
 - i. Do your “homework” about potential mentors and collaborators
 - ii. Can informal introductions be made on your behalf prior to attending?
 - b. What leaders in the field are planning to attend?
 - c. Are there special events in which you can attend? (e.g., business meetings, subsection workshops, socials)
 - d. Are there opportunities to plan informal activities (e.g., coffee, lunch, dinner, nightlife)
 - e. Do formal mentorship networks exist?
 - f. Will organizations be interviewing on-site?
7. Plan your session attendance to maximize interaction (broad versus narrow focus perspective) (Denard Goldman & Schmalz, 2010)
 - a. Make sure to attend new member and student meetings/special interest groups (SIGs) and professional development workshops
 - b. Plan for time to meet with potential collaborators/mentors between sessions
 - c. Mix in smaller, more focused presentations with broad, panel, and keynote presentations
8. Create an ‘elevator speech’ tailored for various audiences. Practice it so it seems natural. Be reactive.* (Pawlak, 2022; Radius & Tran, 2012)
 - a. Create brief (e.g., under 30 seconds), intermediate (e.g., between 30 seconds and 1 minute), and long (e.g., 1-3 minutes) versions of your ‘elevator speech’
 - b. Elements of your ‘elevator speech’ should include:
 - i. Name
 - ii. Position
 - iii. Department/Institution
 - iv. Research interests
 - v. Relevant experience (teaching, research, or service)*
 - vi. Future plans*
 - vii. Collaboration opportunities*

*Provide varying levels of detail depending on whether you are using your short, intermediate, or long ‘elevator speech.’

During the Conference

1. Time management issues (Denard Goldman & Schmalz, 2010)
 - a. Commute time to and from the hotel (and airport)
 - b. Consider multi-site conference venues
 - c. Double-booked presentations (yours and those of others)
 - c. Capitalize on opportunities to experience new cities (e.g., use off time to determine relocation potential)
 - d. Plan for appropriate “down time” to process social interactions and ensure consistent self-care (e.g., “bio breaks” for food and restrooms)

2. Attending presentations (Denard Goldman & Schmalz, 2010)
 - a. Consider pros and cons of presentation types (e.g., oral, poster, roundtable)
 - i. Oral: one-way interaction; great for face/name recognition
 - ii. Poster: more personal interaction; organization is often conducive to networking
 - b. Consider pros and cons of the ‘buddy system’ (i.e., mingling along with others in your cohort)
 - c. Arrive at the sessions/presentations early and engage with other attendees
 - i. Attempt to sit next to someone you do not know
 - ii. Introduce yourself using a brief “elevator speech”
 - d. Take note of other attendees who ask “good” questions during sessions
 - e. Engage session moderators and discussants in an inquisitive and respectful manner
3. Selecting who to engage (Radius & Tran, 2012)
 - a. Consider pros and cons of meeting everyone you see versus purposive interaction (There are opportunities missed in either scenario)
 - b. Avoid only attempting to meet ‘big names’ or the leaders in the field
 - i. Consider the size of the conference
 - ii. Become familiar with the work of those you aim to meet (read publications, view university websites)
 - iii. Distinguish between mentors and the next generation of leaders
4. Making conversation (Denard Goldman & Schmalz, 2010)
 - a. Avoid using technology whenever possible (e.g., cell phones, computers, tablets)
 - b. Adhere to established health/safety protocols (e.g., social distancing, masking)
 - c. Greet and make eye contact
 - d. Be prepared to ask questions beyond, “where are you from?” or “who do you work for?”
 - i. Attempt to find some common ground before ‘talking shop’
 - ii. Listen to what is being said instead of waiting for your turn to speak
 - iii. Remember that although you need to ‘sell’ yourself, making a connection is more important
 1. Be informative during your interactions, but avoid bragging about yourself
 2. Be concise and avoid unnecessary elaboration
 3. Have an ‘elevator speech’ on-hand to deliver when the time is right
 - e. Remember it is a small world! Make sure ‘small talk’ and interactions are appropriate
 - i. Avoid divulging information that may be considered ‘too personal’
 - ii. Avoid complaining about your current situation or colleagues
 - iii. Avoid gossip
 - f. Introduce others and make everyone a part of the conversation
 - g. Be prepared to respectfully exit a conversation
 - i. Avoid making it seem that you have somewhere else to be or that there is something more important you must do
 - ii. Avoid letting the conversation ‘fizzle out’
 - h. Be prepared to distribute business cards (or other materials)
 - i. Avoid exchanging contact information just for the sake of doing so

- ii. Remember you are not trying to build a collection of business cards; rather, create a meaningful network of colleagues
 1. Write meaningful messages on the back of business cards (e.g., where you met, common interests, topics of discussion, materials to be exchanged)
 2. Be prepared to follow-up on business card contacts (e.g., write pertinent details on the backs of cards during breaks or, at minimum, the end of each conference day)
5. Attending social events
 - a. Utilize your existing network and those of your colleagues (often socials are hosted for university alumni)
 - b. Remember etiquette associated with ‘crashing’ events
 - c. Monitor your consumption of food and other substances (e.g., alcohol, medication)
 - d. Be prepared to pay your way (avoid expecting someone more ‘senior’ will pay for the tab)

After the Conference

1. Reflect on your conference experience (e.g., what went well, opportunities for improvement)
2. Reassess your plans, goals, and expectations
 - a. Reconsider career goals and trajectory, coursework, and other aspects of your post-graduate plans
 - b. Revise your research and/or teaching statements
 - c. Explore your “footprint” on the Internet and social networks and work on “impression management”
3. Follow-up with those you met (the largest ‘missed opportunity’) (Denard Goldman & Schmalz, 2010)
 - a. Email is often best. Consider pros and cons of social networks (e.g., Twitter, LinkedIn)
 - i. Create a message template
 - ii. Include specific details (e.g., conference, session/presentation, topic of discussion)
 - iii. Include a purpose (e.g., position, collaboration, material sharing, ongoing connection)
 - b. Follow-up with correspondence you receive from other attendees in a timely fashion (< 1-week post-conference)
4. Consider leadership opportunities
 - a. Student representatives
 - b. Early career scholar opportunities
 - c. Section/division positions and SIGs
 - d. Committees and workgroups
5. Plan your next conference experience
 - a. Identify forthcoming conferences and associated themes and meeting locations
 - b. Begin targeting travel/meeting funding opportunities
 - c. Utilize existing or newfound collaborations to produce high-quality research and resulting abstracts

Conclusion

Professional conferences play an important role in the development of health behavior scholars who are students, trainees, and early career scholars. Experiences can be enhanced by proper planning and execution before, during, and after the event. Conference attendees are recommended to identify and prioritize their expectations for receiving content and networking with other professionals to achieve predetermined goals related to their professional and academic development.

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