Science Societies

Tips for graduate students attending virtual conferences

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Networking at the Societies' Annual Meeting is going to be different this year than in the past, but a virtual conference still has the potential to provide a similar level of engagement for attendees. It is important that graduate students understand the foundation for an effective and enjoyable virtual conference. The following article provides some tips for what students can do before, during, and after virtual conferences to make the most of the experience.

Before the Meeting

Basic steps can be taken to ensure you are prepared for the first day of a virtual conference. A common issue encountered by virtual meeting participants is a lack of preparation. In reality, the amount of preparation to get ready for a virtual conference is similar to in-person conferences. Attending a conference takes time away from a day-to-day routine, so making sure this time helps to build your skills, knowledge, and network is vital. Attendees should make personal goals for a conference to focus on what they want and/or need to accomplish. This is even more important for virtual conferences because there are few accidental meetings; all meetings and networking should be planned.

Take time to think about:

1. Who do you want to meet with (either in a group or individually)?
2. What do you want to attend (general sessions, student competitions, socials, etc.)?
3. How are you going to interact with other conference participants (create a framework for how to engage with others)?

Once you have identified goals for the conference, use social networking and the conference website (**www.acsmeetings.org** for the ASA, CSSA, and SSSA Annual

Meeting) to your advantage. The ASA, CSSA, and SSSA discussion boards[1] are also a valuable resource for connecting with others. You do not need to wait until a conference starts to begin networking. Posting on social media about attending an upcoming conference helps you connect with other professionals who will also be attending. Attending a virtual conference with other people can help you to better engage with conference activities. The conference website may have information regarding who is attending, allowing you to schedule meetings during the conference. Do not forget to sign up for the Graduate Student Networking Session "Building Professional Relationships," hosted by the ACS Graduate Student Committee and sponsored by Corteva Agriscience. This session will allow graduate students to have interactive conversations with mentors from industry, academia, and government.

Sources and Additional Resources

- 10 Tips for Attending a Virtual Conference (**https://bit.ly/3hnv4Wf**)
- Tips for Attending a Virtual Conference (**https://bit.ly/3bQiAFo**)
- Tips for Attendees: Making the Most of a Virtual Conference (**https://bit.ly/3hpYhjc**)
- 5 Tips for Attending Virtual Conferences (**https://bit.ly/3bSV6zl**)
- How to Network in a Virtual Conference Space (**https://bit.ly/3irbTfq**)

A week before the conference, be sure to test equipment (laptop audio and video settings) and video-conferencing capabilities to make sure you are ready to go. Familiarize yourself with the digital platform being used for the conference. Find a location for participating in the conference that minimizes distractions, and pay attention to lighting and sound.

During the Meeting

You have successfully prepared for a virtual conference, and now you are ready to begin! Set your schedule for the day, and keep in mind your virtual conference schedule should be similar to an in-person conference (i.e., include breaks for snacks/meals, reflection, and stretching). Additionally, make sure to leave time for meetings that you may schedule on short notice during the conference.

Invest time during the conference to explore resources, review notes during presentations, and listen in on presentations in scientific areas that interest you. Taking notes on physical paper has been suggested by some virtual conference attendees as a method to stay engaged. This also gives your eyes a break from being on a screen for multiple days.

Throughout a virtual conference, you will likely participate in live events (presentations, discussions, etc.) and have the opportunity to ask questions and converse with others. To some, a webinar setting can be more intimidating for asking questions or making remarks than an in-person event because of the inability to see the other participants (social cues). Self-consciousness can impede participants from interacting with one another during live, virtual events. Do not prevent yourself from getting the information/expertise you need to accomplish your conference goals. Creating a framework or practicing interacting with conference speakers prior to the conference (as suggested in the earlier section) can be beneficial to build your confidence for your first interactions. Remember, everyone attending the conference is there to learn and is at a variety of stages in their careers. If you feel you have a point or question relevant to the conversation, it will likely benefit others attending the event as well.

There are typically several methods for participants to interact through the digital platform used during a virtual conference (messaging functions, chat rooms, etc.). Having several ways to communicate in the digital platform helps participants

communicate in ways comfortable and effective for them. Use these to communicate during the conference, and post engaging content on social media to initiate further discussions.

After the Meeting

Congratulations! Now that you have attended the conference, you have virtually interacted with other conference participants, made connections, and caught up with old colleagues in addition to having immersed yourself in new science. The post-conference follow-up is just as important as the conference preparation. After the conference, take time to review your notes and digest all of the information, conversations, and science you experienced at the meeting. This may include reserving time in your schedule to re-watch oral presentations or review posters.

After taking a week to gather your thoughts, consider:

1. Following up on social media by connecting with other participants on Twitter and LinkedIn.
2. Sending a thoughtful message to new contacts or colleagues, such as a brief thank you note.
3. Reflecting on how your graduate research relates to other projects you learned about at the conference.

Continued connection through Twitter or LinkedIn allows for easy contact between you and your new and old colleagues, and a brief thank you note, handwritten or electronic, can leave a lasting impression. In closing, have fun! Take advantage of this exceptional opportunity to share your science, learn about ground-breaking research in your field, develop new relationships, and reconnect with old colleagues.

Dig deeper

Oleg Stepanov, Dmitry Taranovskiy, Experience of Conferences Organizing in Pandemic Conditions, Science Management: Theory and Practice, 10.19181/smtp.2022.4.2.16, **4**, 2, (183-200), (2022).

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