Establishing Professional Networks at Meetings

Note: Disciplines vary in their socialization norms, so ask your faculty mentor(s) for advice.

- Which professional groups do recommend I join? Which division or interest group?
- What can you tell me about the culture of the group? What are the meetings like?
- Which state, regional, or national meeting should I attend to begin networking?
- Does MU or our department have travel funds for students who make presentations?
- Can you recommend any e-networks or professional listservs to follow?
- I would like to present at a national meeting. Are you available to co-present with me some time?
- What other things do I need to do to establish professional networks?

How to Maximize Opportunities at Meetings

- Study the preliminary agenda. When will there be time to network? At social events? Luncheons?
- Study the hotel layout. Where are the meeting rooms, convention hall, lobby, elevators or other areas for “happenstance” networking?
- Ask your mentor when will be the best times for you to meet prospective employers.
- Ask your mentor who would be good to meet (agency liaisons; funders; alumni; collaborators; coauthors)
- Should I leave my resume or business card with a person at an informational or vendor booth?
- Do businesses/agencies actively recruit at this event? Is there a job board? HR screening representatives?
- If you are not yet on the job market, try scheduling an “informational interview” with a prospective employer. *An informational interview is NOT a job interview, but a meeting to learn more about a business or agency.*

Time for Targeted Networking will be Limited - Plan Ahead

- Review the participant list, speaker list, session descriptions and schedule of small group meetings.
- Select sessions that will help you extend your thinking about your discipline and where you will meet professionals from other institutions who have interests similar to yours.
- Secondarily, select a session presented by a leading author in your discipline, particularly if you have an interest in working for his/her company or agency.
- Ask your mentor to look at the list of sessions you might attend and provide suggestions.
- Update your resume. Take at least 10 copies if you are on the market. Take at least 25 business cards.
- Practice introducing yourself. Be able to explain your expertise in 30 seconds or less.

Strategies for Engaging with Others

- Start at the airport. Look for business logos on clothes or luggage, or someone reading the preliminary agenda. Ask if the person is attending the same meeting. If so, start a conversation.
- Ask a faculty member if you can join him/her at lunch to meet prospective employers.
- Introduce yourself to the speakers (briefly) at the end of a session. Mind if I send you an email?
- If a speaker is highly interesting to you, ask about meeting for breakfast to learn more about presentation, the company, agency, etc. Also try: “Would it be possible for me to join your table at lunch?”
- If offered, attend meetings for graduate students. Professionals who attend student meetings will be approachable and can offer advice about the culture of the organization.
- If your mentor thinks it is okay, locate scholars who have coauthored with your mentor. Introduce yourself as being his/her student.
- Look at your program each night. Figure out where a person of interest might be the next day!
- Walk through poster sessions. They allow plenty of time to interact with presenters.
- Look up former graduate students (alumni) from your department, school or college.

Note: *See conversation tips on the next page.*
Social Hour Conversation

- Generally, view this as a social event, not a recruiting marathon. Keep conversation light.
- Read nametags. Introduce yourself to faculty and administrators from places you might apply.
- Whether we admit it or not, most of us like to tell stories or talk about ourselves. Try to listen more and talk less. It pay dividends on both ends of the conversation.
- Don’t start with a long explanation of your studies. If asked, offer the 30-second description of that you practiced at home. People will ask you follow up questions. Give short, clear answers.
- Do not take your resume to a social hour. If asked for a copy, make arrangements to get it to the person before he/she leaves the meeting. (Follow up later with an email.)
- Keep 5-10 business cards in your wallet or purse. Depending on your discipline you may be asked for a card. If asked for your email address, offer your card. Ask your mentor for advice on how business cards are viewed.
- Don’t ask for a business card unless you have a compelling reason to follow up with the person.
- Be mindful of established groups. If people are talking – don’t butt in. Work the room. Come back later.
- Find other grad students in the room. Ask who they might know and if they could introduce you.
- Be prepared with conversation starters. Try: I see you work for [XZY]. What division or department?
- Show a genuine interest in learning from other people. They will be able to see that quality in you and they will remember it!
- You may run into a pompous individual or group of intellects trying to impress one another. It happens. Be attentive. Don’t try to impress. Exit gracefully.

Social Hour Etiquette

- Best advice: Don’t drink alcohol. Choose club soda, tonic water, soda, sparkling juice. No one will know that it is non-alcoholic. If you elect to drink, limit yourself to one. Sip slowly.
- Eat something before you go so you are not hungry. You need to spend your time talking, not eating.
- Consider an alternating pattern of drink-eat-drink. By holding either a plate or glass (not both) you are always free to shake hands. Hold a napkin under the plate (or glass).
- Take only a few hors d’oeuvres on your plate—NEVER mound food because it may spill.
- Avoid items like broccoli or rolls with herb bits or tiny seeds that can get stuck in your teeth.
- Dips and sauces can end up on your shirt or blouse. Try to avoid.
- Select items that you don’t have to cut or that require 1-2 SMALL bites.
- Take small bites so that if you are asked a question, you can swallow in hurry to respond!
- Look for the proper place to dispose of your plate and glass.

Meeting Follow Up

- If you have someone’s business card, write down key points from your conversation that night in your room.
- Allow several days for people to travel and caught up at the office.
- If you are requesting information: In the first line, re-introduce yourself, when you met and what you discussed. In the second line, thank the person for taking the time to talk with you. In the third line state the reason for your email.
- If you are sending out information (e.g., handout, CV): In the first line, state that you were pleased to meet him/her at the conference. In the second line, state that you are enclosing the document(s). In the third line, thank the person for their interest. Caveat: If you are applying for an open position, you need to send a professional cover letter, not an email note!
- Remember names and faces. Reintroduce yourself at the airport or next conference.