



CONTRIBUTIONS

Commentary

The National Meetings: A Primer on Professional Development and Etiquette for Graduate Students (and Others)

Attending the national meetings is a real opportunity and highlight in our careers; it is our chance to learn about the newest developments in the field. Presenting your own work is a crucial, and rewarding, experience for graduate students as well. However, it can be quite intimidating to attend your first several meetings when you don't know what to expect. This piece is meant to introduce you to some things you will want to think about when attending your professional society's meetings. There are many models for how best to contribute to and gain from the meetings; this represents just one collection that I hope will provoke some thinking.

Your presentation

Probably the most important thing you can do for your career, your advisor, and your institution is to give a good, solid, interesting presentation, whether oral or a poster. You want to start to generate the expectation that your work is interesting and worth hearing about. Here are some suggestions to ensure that this can happen.

1) Work with your advisor and other coauthors several months ahead of the abstract due date (in January for the ESA meeting) to figure out:

- if you have results to present, and what you think you'd present,
- what your timetable would be for completing the work necessary for the presentation,
- what the authorship would be,
- what format you would like to present (oral or poster). An oral presentation can give you a great deal of exposure, but you can sometimes get more feedback and interaction giving a poster. Posters may take a bit more work, but may be a good option if you want more one-on-one interaction, or are nervous about presenting orally.

2) Be sure to submit the abstract on time, and in the proper format!

3) Sign up for the Buell (oral) or Braun (poster) awards. Winning one would be a real feather in your cap, and would reflect positively on your institution. Besides, this assures you that at least two judges will be at your presentation or poster.

4) Review your presentation material with your advisor and coauthors at least several months before the meeting. As you finalize the presentation, be sure to involve these folks. Don't forget to ask for input often.

5) Practice your oral presentation or give your poster a practice float with your lab group at least a week or two in advance of the meetings so you have time to fix the material or your delivery. In most places, this will be a group of graduate students and postdocs under a group of advisors who work together. If your graduate experience does not have a group like this, get together with your advisor and other students and figure out how to get a group going. You will probably want to practice alone before practicing for the group, so that many of the rough edges are smoothed out. Encourage your listeners to supply constructive criticism of all sorts, on your conceptual organization, the presentation (text, size of graphics, colors, etc.), data presentation, conclusions, your allocation of space (posters) or timing (oral), and your delivery. Be sure to have your oral presentation timed. Receive the criticism well, and implement the suggestions that your group provides.

- Remember that everyone gives a better talk if it is practiced and criticized. Advisors should participate in the practice sessions as well; we all can use the input.

- You should have a short talk practiced to give at your poster, to guide interested viewers through. Make your poster highly visual, with large, readable graphs and pictures.

Be realistic about how much someone will want to stand there and read.

6) If you are presenting a poster, you may want to have a business card or synopsis of your poster to hand out. It can be hard to compete for time at a poster, and many scientists appreciate being able to take something away with them. Be open to interested viewers coming up who may be waiting for you to speak to them.

7) If you have little experience and are nervous about presenting, you may want to take advantage of opportunities to present in classes or at smaller regional symposiums before attending a large national meeting.

Professional development

Meetings are your opportunity to be exposed to the breadth and depth of ecology; use it well! There are many strategies for allocating time at the meetings, but the most important thing you can do is to listen and interact. As your career goes on and you know more people, it will also be nice to catch up with old friends. But your highest priority should be to find out what neat science is being done and to meet scientists (professors and students alike) to talk about science. You will find that there are lots of ecologists who are very interested in talking with students; take advantage of this time. Reading the program well ahead can help you to plan which sessions to attend and which papers to attend within those sessions. Although it can be unavoidable, you may want to limit how much you move between individual talks since it is definitely distracting to have major inflow and outflow of audiences. You may want to think ahead of time about individuals whose papers you've been reading and would like to meet, or with whom you would like to discuss potential further graduate work or postdoctoral positions, and ask your advisor to introduce you to those people.

If you are farther along in your career, assist others with their professional development as much as you can. If you are already somewhat well

connected, introduce students to ecologists they would like to meet. This can be especially helpful to international scientists. If there is an opportunity to volunteer for judging of talks or posters, this is a great way to hone your critical thinking and listening skills.

Etiquette

There are many models for appropriate etiquette; what I say here was inherited from my advisor and lab groups along the way. I share it not as dogma, but as some ideas to provoke thinking about how we influence others and create a culture in our groups.

1) Stay for the entire session that your talk is in, if at all possible. It is a simple courtesy to show that you are interested in hearing what others have to say, as well as giving your own presentation. For me, the only exception would be if one of my students was speaking in another session. In that case, I would tell the other speakers ahead of time why I was leaving, and then I would come back. (Stay for at least half the session (i.e., before or after break). Similarly, in a poster session, find out what the poster presenters around you have done and show an interest in their work.

2) Support members of your current group by going to their talks/posters if you can. Even if you have heard the talk or seen the poster in practice sessions, it is really nice to support your colleagues. Of course, sometimes there will be conflicts with other talks that you feel you must hear. In addition, depending on how broadly you define your "group," it could be difficult and even insular to try to attend all those talks. If this is the case, support your colleagues in whatever other ways you can.

3) Try not to talk about nonscientific matters with a friend giving a poster when they have others who are interested in their science waiting to talk with them. Remember, this is their chance to share their science and network with ecologists they haven't met yet.

4) Dress so that you feel comfortable in meeting professional standards of the organization, particularly on your presenting day. This can be difficult to gauge; ESA meetings have become relatively informal and it is as possible to feel over- as underdressed. Different organizations have very different cultures: try to adjust to them.

5) If you are moderating a session, stick to the schedule for the talks and apply the same standards to every speaker, regardless of stature. Help speakers by warning them at particular intervals (many moderators will stand with 2 minutes left, for instance, and gradually move toward the podium), and then find a polite way to make sure that speakers end on time. It is very difficult to manage concurrent sessions unless they stay in synch, and it is your responsibility to see that your session stays on time.

Summary

More important than any of these small tips and etiquette details is simply taking advantage of every chance to attend professional meetings as a graduate student. The sciences are unique in creating venues for the equal meeting and exchange of ideas by first-year students and seasoned veterans. The wealth of ideas, experience, and exposure to be gained from attending and presenting at a meeting cannot be overstressed. Keep your eyes and ears open and have fun.

Acknowledgments

Special thanks to the following ecologists at CSU for their help in reviewing this paper: Suzie Bird, Bill Lauenroth, Rebecca McCulley, Dan Binkley, Peter Adler, Carol Adair, Bohyoung Sohn, Penny Sinton, Adam Dreyfuss, John Bradford, David Smith, Jason Kaye, Amanda Myers, and Dani-Ella Betz.

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