



Education News

Getting the Most Out of Academic Conferences

By Uyen Chu and Members of the Mentoring and Career Development Committee

Whether you have attended conferences in the past or Experimental Biology (EB) 2015 is your first foray into scientific meetings, most people find large scientific conferences daunting. As a budding scientist, conferences are one of the few opportunities you have to meet other scientists in your field, present your research, and build new research collaborations. It is also a chance to interact with representatives from pharmaceutical and biotechnology companies who could become your future employer. ASPET's Mentoring and Career Development committee has developed the following guide to help you be proactive at conferences, expand your network, and build professional relationships to develop your career as a scientist.

Preparing for the Conference

Lodging: *Should I stay at a hotel that is farther away but has a great price or one near the convention center but costs a little bit more?*

There are many advantages of staying at a hotel close to the convention center. First, a nearby hotel allows you to take short breaks when you have a full day. Second, many of the social/networking events occur in the evenings. These events are a great place for meeting new people but may end late. If you choose a hotel more distant from the convention center, be sure your hotel has safe transportation options. If you are tight on traveling funds but still want to stay at a hotel nearby, consider getting a roommate. EB has a roommate matching website that you can use – it's also a great way to meet new friends. A complimentary shuttle service will be provided at EB 2015 between the Boston Convention

and Exhibition Center and the contracted EB hotel community. For more information, visit www.aspet.org/Annual_Meeting_EB_2015/Experimental_Biology_2015_Shuttle_Service/.

Attire: *What should I wear and pack for the conference?*

At EB you'll find a spectrum of business casual to informal attire. Wear comfortable but professional clothes (and shoes) because you will be interacting with people 10–12 hours on average each day for the duration of the conference.

Business Cards: *Should I bring business cards?*

Business cards are useful to give your contact information to people you meet. If you don't have professionally prepared business cards, you could prepare your own in advance of the meeting. It is a good idea to carry a small notebook and pen with you at all times to jot down information about people you meet.

Science Pitch: *Is a science pitch (or elevator speech) necessary?*

That depends on how comfortable you feel giving a spiel of your work to a complete stranger in less than five minutes. Remember that the purpose of a science pitch is to get your audience interested in your science so that they want to learn more about your research. The California Stem Cell Agency held a Science Pitch Competition a few years ago and archived the contestants' entries on a website. Follow the link at the end of this article for examples of science pitches to help you prepare yours.

Itinerary: *How should I spend my time at EB?*

The key purposes for attending conferences are to expand your knowledge of current science, expand your professional network, and build collaborative relationships. Scientific conferences are where leaders from many fields gather together to present cutting-edge research, discuss the current trends and future directions of science in each field, and determine strategies to promote research funding. It can be overwhelming, and it is easy to lose focus of your goal. Thus, it is useful to have a checklist of people you want to talk to and events you want to attend before you get to the meeting.

Below is a general overview of key features and events that take place at EB.

1. **Scientific lectures/talks** (ranging from 15 minutes to 1 hour) organized into nanosymposia, minisymposia, and symposia. These symposia are generally focused around a specific scientific topic.
2. **Poster presentations** sectioned first into their sponsoring societies and grouped into scientific topics.
3. **Exhibitions** hosted by pharmaceutical and biotech companies, publishers, funding agencies, scientific societies, and science equipment vendors.
4. **Career development events** organized by participating societies on a wide range of career topics.
5. **Recurring career development workshops** hosted by the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology (FASEB), including grant writing, negotiating for your start-up package, writing an effective resume, etc. These events and job postings are located at the "Career Center" in the exhibition hall.
6. **Social/networking events** organized by participating societies inside the Conference Center and at nearby hotels in the evening.

Considering these events, an agenda of your meeting schedule might look similar to the following:

Science-Related Events

- Present your oral/poster presentation and connect with people who show interest in your research.
- Attend talks by scientists in your research area and connect with them at the meeting.

- Attend award-winning talks to expand your scientific knowledge.
- Attend your division's annual meeting and networking events.
- Learn about a science technique that you are interested in for your research by connecting with people (either at a different institution or at a company) who are experts in that technique.
- Connect with members of the ASPET Council.

Career-Related Events

- Attend ASPET's Graduate Student-Postdoctoral Colloquium and connect with other graduate students/postdocs.
- Attend ASPET and FASEB career symposia and workshops (depending on your interests and needs).
- Check the job bulletin board every day (if you are in the job market).
- Connect with people outside of academia in career paths that interest you.

Attending the Conference

Present Your Research

As graduate students and postdocs, giving a talk or presenting a poster may be one of the few opportunities you have to showcase your work to people outside of your department or institution, and these events may be the only impression they have of you and your work (i.e., your reputation). Practice giving your presentation with lab members in advance. However, keep in mind that your audience at national conferences may not be familiar with your area of research so be deliberate in conveying the importance of your research. Know your presentation day and time and invite potential postdoc advisors and people you meet to attend your talk or visit your poster. If you brought business cards, write this information on the back before you hand them out.

Attend Oral and Poster Presentations:

Attend presentations by scientists in your field: It is important for the growth of your career to recognize key figures in your field and learn about their work. Be proactive in introducing yourself to these individuals at the conference. If you are interested in working with them in the future (e.g., for postdoc training), consider scheduling a meeting with them in advance and invite them to your talk/poster.

Attend award-winning presentations: Award-winning presentations are good ways to expand your scientific knowledge in areas outside of your fields. These talks generally are given by researchers who are pioneers in their fields and often are quite inspirational. Consider making an impression by asking insightful questions at the end.

Attend career talks sponsored by ASPET: ASPET (and other participating societies) organizes many career development talks and workshops each year. This is a good way to learn about nonacademic careers and to connect with scientists who followed interesting career paths. It is also a venue where you will meet peers from similar graduate programs at universities around the world. These people may be helpful in future job searches.

Attend your sponsoring society's business meeting(s) and consider getting involved by volunteering for committees: Scientific societies are similar to many organizations; there is a governing body and many committees made up of scientists who volunteer their time to organize events for the conference. There are committees that tackle contemporary issues affecting the scientific community, such as how to train future scientists, how to promote diversity, best practices in undergraduate and graduate science education, etc. It is useful for your career to understand the workings of such societies and to get involved to make the changes you want to see. Volunteering to serve on a committee is one way to network with scientists who are as passionate as you about similar issues and a great strategy to build relationships with colleagues outside of your department or institution.

Visit exhibition booths from companies, publishers, government laboratories, and scientific societies: For many graduate students and postdocs who do not live in cities that are home to pharmaceutical and/or biotechnology companies, it can be difficult to network with scientists in industry. Exhibits from companies are good opportunities to meet and learn from scientists and nonscientists working in companies ranging from small start-ups to large pharmaceutical companies. Connect with these individuals to find out about the culture of their organization and the benefits and disadvantages of working there. Don't be shy about asking them to connect you with colleagues within their companies who have a job that you are interested in learning

more about. Perhaps you are interested in career paths related to publishing, government, and/or the military – also consider visiting these booths to learn more about these career paths.

A few words on networking etiquette:

- **Food and drinks:** As mentioned earlier, organized networking events happen in the evenings, normally with an abundance of free food and drinks. A caution on eating and drinking at these events: know your limits! Remember that you are likely to see these people in the future if you stay in the field, and you want to leave the conference with a good impression.
- **What should I talk about?** Start with your research, then talk about conference activities, interesting talks you attended, your career goals, and interests outside of science – scientists are people with interesting hobbies outside of work, too. Finally, you don't always have to talk. Listening is a key skill for successful networking.

Following Up After the Conference

Consider revisiting your checklist of individuals you set out to connect with at the meeting and send follow-up emails after you return home. Also follow up with people you met at networking events and your poster/oral presentation. If you get the chance to attend the next EB meeting, send an email prior to the meeting requesting a meeting. Building a professional relationship takes time and effort, especially with colleagues you see only once a year.

These guidelines are a first step to getting the most out of a meeting such as EB. If you find these techniques to be valuable, share them with your colleagues and use them to build professional relationships even at your own institution. The best way to be good at something is practice!

Additional Resources

Ferrazzi K and Raz T (2005) *Never Eat Alone*, Crown Business, New York.

California's Stem Cell Agency Science Pitch Competition. We recommend the following science pitches: William Kim, Lina Nih, Mirina Bershteyn, Andrew Goldstein, John Zaia, Deepak Srivastava, and Carrie Micella, Stanley Nelson. www.cirm.ca.gov/our-progress/stem-cell-videos?&&field_voc_video_event_tid%5B0%5D=746.