

Getting More Out of ASA: Advice for Students and Other Newcomers

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Academic conferences can be fun and rewarding experiences. They provide a wonderful opportunity to learn about the latest research activities, find resources for your own research and teaching, touch base with colleagues and friends, and meet others in your field. The sheer size and breadth of the ASA annual meetings mean that this conference offers more of all of these benefits than smaller conferences. Yet that same large size leaves some newcomers feeling overwhelmed. In particular, students and other junior members may feel isolated and find it difficult to meet people. As the student representatives to the ALC Council, we'd like to help newcomers get the most out of ASA. We looked around for the best advice we could find, and here we summarize many pages of hints and suggestions from both senior and junior members of the ALC. We hope you find something useful!

Planning ahead

What you do before the conference can substantially enhance your experiences once you're there. If you know you'd like to talk with a particular person during the conference, try emailing them a couple of weeks in advance to set up an appointment. Explain why you want to meet with them: for instance, you may have a quick methodological question, or hope to get their input on a project that is related to something they've done, or want to know more about their program.

Students, consider talking to your advisors about the conference. He or she probably knows some of the senior level people you'd like to meet and can be sure to introduce you or to invite you along for dinner plans with them.

Before the conference, go over the online program to identify activities that you want to be sure not to miss. The program lists presentations as well as scheduled receptions and business meetings. Don't forget to mark the ALC Section sessions and business meeting! (See pages 4-8 of this newsletter.) Plan to go to a variety of activities; interspersing paper sessions with roundtables, poster sessions, exhibits, meetings, and breaks helps to maintain your energy and interest level. Look up listings for the people you would most like to meet. You might want to review their latest articles ahead of time, and think about a quick question or two you could ask them that would show both interest in and familiarity with their work.

Meeting people

Students sometimes focus on meeting "famous" people at conferences, but fellow sociologists who are less well known may make better contacts in the long run. Keep an eye out for other section members, who are likely to have similar research interests, and especially for other students and junior faculty working in your field. Don't underestimate the importance of making contacts with other people at your level: these are the colleagues you will be seeing at conferences and working with on projects and committees for the rest of your career!

Some ASA activities are better for meeting people than others. Take advantage of the many receptions held every evening. Get more involved by coming to Section business meetings and social events. This year the ALC Section is hosting an informal reception on Monday evening, so don't miss it! (See page 4 of this newsletter.) Also, we would personally suggest running for student representative on the Section Council as a way to become more integrated.

Roundtable and poster sessions are probably the best options for getting useful feedback on your work, and attending them is another great way to meet people. Sessions within your section(s) are an even stronger choice. When watching paper presentations, try to think of interesting questions to ask in the Q&A afterwards; the presenter will remember you and could be more likely to speak with you after the session or later in the hall. Don't be shy about exchanging papers and email addresses, or continuing a conversation started at a roundtable over coffee or lunch later that day.

According to our informal survey, the best times to introduce yourself are: at receptions and other events, such as Departmental Alumni Night; after the person presents; before or after section meetings; at roundtables or poster sessions; while browsing poster sessions or exhibits; when the person is talking with someone else you know; or when the person is alone flipping through his or her program or papers. One contributor suggests that before sitting down at a paper presentation, see if you recognize anybody, and sit down two seats away from him or her and strike up a conversation. By contrast, the worst times to introduce yourself are: just before the person presents; when the person is at a meal or sitting down conversing with a small group; or as the person is rushing out the door to catch the next session or meeting.

Introducing yourself

The conference setting means you already have much in common with other junior attendees. If you noticed the person at a presentation, talk about the session topic and ask if he or she is working in that area. If you're starting from scratch, ask people whether they're

presenting at the conference and on what topic, what interesting sessions they've seen, and if they've figured out yet where to get a decent bagel and coffee near the hotel that won't break a modest budget.

Starting a conversation with a senior person can be a bit more intimidating, and it's good to be prepared. Be sure to say your name very clearly, and position your name tag so that it's easy to see. State your institutional affiliation and any other connections that may be relevant, such as your advisor's name, or the research center where you work. Many advisors encourage students to have a brief statement ready that clearly summarizes their main interests in one or two sentences. It may sound silly, but practice that statement ahead of time: you will probably find that your first attempts are either not very informative or are much, much longer than you want. Then mention something you found interesting about a recent book or article of theirs, and ask what they're working on now.

If you have a longer question for someone – for instance, you could use their advice on a topic related to their work – don't expect to get into a long conversation about it right there. Instead, tell them that you'd really appreciate their feedback and ask if they would mind if you emailed them later about it. They may suggest meeting for coffee to talk about it later, but don't put them on the spot.

Try not to take it personally if you are rebuffed by someone when you try to strike up a conversation. That person may have been busy, or thinking about something else, or just not good at meeting new people. Finally, be patient: becoming integrated takes time.

Meal plans

It can seem to newcomers that everyone else at ASA is having exciting conversations over breakfast, lunch, and dinner every day. How can you get in on those plans? One option is to start conversations with small groups of people talking in the hall shortly before meal time (this works best if you already know at least one person in the group). Another good option is to arrange with friends to bring along people they've just met, or colleagues from their new jobs, to dinner. Most meal plans are flexible, so take advantage of spontaneous opportunities. Unless this is an official meeting or interview, it's usually considered fine to bring an extra person.

Instead of hoping to be included in someone else's plans, start your own group for dinner. Try researching the nearby dining options early on, and have at least two suggestions in mind: just knowing how to get to that recommended Cuban restaurant puts you a step ahead of most people. Be sure to clarify when and where everyone will meet to leave for the restaurant, and give people your business card so they remember your last name and can leave a note at the ASA message center if their plans change.

Things to avoid

Although people differ in what they like and don't like in a conference, a few things kept resurfacing as disappointing experiences. One potential mistake is spending most of your time away from the conference or with people from your current institution, and not meeting anyone new. Students often try to save money by getting cheaper hotel rooms far away from the conference hotels. Try squeezing more people into a hotel room closer to the action, and you'll probably get more involved in the conference. Newcomers also may regret spending most of their time attending paper sessions and skipping the more informal events, which can leave you feeling burned out and isolated.

One of the biggest mistakes you can make is not following up on contacts you've made. Be sure to send out any papers you promised, or email people with the question you said you wanted their feedback on. If you spoke at length with someone about a topic, follow up with an email within a week in which you give them the references you talked about, or a copy of your working paper, or the URL of the site you discussed. Or ask them for references that they mentioned in your discussion – it's hard to recall details at the conference, but when they're back at the office, it should be relatively easy for them to find, copy, and paste a few citations into an email.

Have a great conference!

We hope that you found an idea or two here that will help you get more out of your ASA experience, and we heartily thank all the people who contributed their suggestions for this piece. Here's another trick for meeting new people: come introduce yourselves to us – we're looking forward to it!