

CSC 595 - Research Skills

How to Conference

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Value of Connecting with Other Researchers

- It's fun to have friends around the world
 - Hangout buddies when visiting cities around the world
 - Hangout buddies at conferences
- You will interact again and again at conferences
- Useful for professional reasons
 - Potential collaborators and academic event co-organizers
 - If you advance in the field, people that might help you find reviewers
 - People you can ask “dumb” questions

Value of Connecting with Other Researchers

- Is this “Networking”? It *can* be viewed that way, but...
- ... it doesn't have to be viewed as Networking
- Networking (cynical view, which some people have, myself included)
 - Making connections to gain a benefit from others (transactional)
 - Or to feel important from interacting with important people (personality issues, megalomania)
- Some advice: connect with others for fun, but enjoy the positive side effects on your professional career

How to Connect with Other Researchers

- Difficult primarily for introverts (many of us) but to some extent extroverts
- Difficulties:
 - Might not know anyone
 - Can feel like everyone already has a group, so what about you?
 - Lots of times (coffee breaks, lunches, dinners) where the normal thing is to interact with others

How to Connect with Other Researchers

- Easy mode (requires already knowing *someone*):
 - Follow around a social, more senior person (e.g., senior PhD student)
 - Follow a more social friend/labmate
- Also a good strategy:
 - Follow around *any* senior person who is OK with you doing that

How to Connect with Other Researchers

- What if you're on your own?
- Two main difficulties:
 - How to approach other people (awkward!)
 - What to say when you approach them

How to Approach Other Researchers

- Coffee breaks
 - May seem intimidating: seems like a bunch of closed conversation circles, each with tight-knit people
 - Reality: Most of the people met just today or yesterday, and they will welcome you in
 - Advice for extroverts:
 - Try to enter these circles!
 - Advice for introverts:
 - Many other introverts at computer science conferences
 - Those introverts are also alone. Where? Coffee line, standing alone, etc.
 - Try talking to one of them! They'll be happy if someone approaches them (they probably don't know anyone!)

What to Say When Approaching Other Researchers

- “So, what are you working on?”
- “Are you presenting something at the conference?” (note: if they aren’t, be prepared to say something which doesn’t make them feel awkward for being at the conference!)
- Find something that ties you together with someone else: easiest thing is research interests
- Tell a fellow grad student about how you read their paper and liked it. Ask them questions about their paper or ongoing work on that problem
 - A more junior or same-level-as-you researcher feels good if you read their work
 - A more senior researcher hears this stuff all the time (so, it’s less meaningful, but still better than nothing!)

Approaching Professors at Conferences

- Common to think there are rules:
 - Students do not approach professors
 - Students that are not well known do not talk with rising stars (senior, famous students)
- These “rules” DO NOT EXIST!



Approaching Professors at Conferences

- Problem: Don't know how to approach well-known Professor X. Conference might have thousands of people. Why should they take time to talk to you?
- Part of problem is mindset:
 - “Professor X can talk to many people of higher status than me. Why should they talk to me?”
 - “Professor is at a higher intellectual level than me. Is it worth their time to talk to me about my ideas?”
- How to fix the mindset. Remember:
 - Professors are intellectuals. They good ones value **ideas**, NOT status
 - They are open minded. The good ones like connections (recall: “Great Researchers”)
 - They advise students. They talk to students all the time!
 - “You miss 100% of the shots you don't take.



Approaching Professors at Conferences

- Problem: Not sure how to approach well-known Professor X. Conference might have thousands of people. Why should they take time to talk to you?
- Another part of problem is confidence:
- How to boost confidence? Make it about ideas or *other* people:
 - Have a reason to talk: deep question, connection they might not know about
First impressions are important!
 - Have you read an obscure paper of Professor X? Older people like to reminisce about their past works and often have fun stories about those works
 - Do you share a personal connection they don't know about (someone in common, which becomes *something* in common). This can even be their student!

Approaching Professors at Conferences

- Even with right mindset and with confidence, approaching Professor X might be logistically difficult
- How to get access to them:
 - Do you know (or could you get to know) one of their students? Pretty easy to meet someone once you can casually chat with their student.
 - Does your advisor know them? Could your advisor schedule a lunch with your lab, Professor X, and their students?
- Are there workshops?
Can you figure out which workshop Professor X will be hanging out in?

The Many Parts of a Conference

- Main conference
 - Poster sessions: great energy, large (could be hundreds) of posters in each session
 - Talks - Common situation is many oral sessions happen in parallel. Must make tough choices of which oral sessions to attend
- Workshops
 - Relaxed, far fewer people
- Tutorials
- Industry Stuff
- Lunches, Dinners. Also, events hosted by moneyed interests

Some Things To Avoid

- Making yourself seem like a big deal:
 - “I’m connected with Famous People X and Y. Yup, you’re lucky to be talking to me 😎 ”
 - “I was invited to give a keynote at Top Conference Z, so yup, I’m pretty busy with that 😎 ”
- Gossip and negativity:
 - Not good in general, but especially bad when someone is forming first impression of you
 - People are here to share knowledge, to power up. Meant to be a positive experience

Some Things To Avoid

- Have fun, but not “too much” fun
 - LOTS to learn. Try to take conference seriously
 - Many opportunities for non-academic events (run by industry, some are parties). OK to try one or maybe two. But consider: “Will these events make me stronger?”
 - You’ll have fun automatically :-). Good opportunities for socializing: dinners, last night of the conference

Planning

- Why form a plan ahead of time?
 - Planning on the fly not ideal due to limited free time at the conference (many interesting things to see)
 - Others might accompany you if you have a plan
 - Avoid FOMO: a talk you missed because you didn't look at the schedule
- What about the role of serendipity?
 - It's OK to change plans on the fly, but default plan better than no plan

Planning

- Each night, spend some time to plan out the next day (make it a habit)
 - Make it fun (easier to adopt habit). Do this with labmates in your hotel
- Posters:
 - For each of next day's poster sessions, identify a few "must-visit" posters
 - For a few posters, look at papers closely so you have good things to discuss with the authors
 - Note: Ideal to do this *before* the conference even begins. It takes time
- Talks:
 - For each of next day's oral sessions, form a default plan of which ones to attend
 - Identify a few talks you're very interested in. Try to look at the papers and think of good questions ahead of time.

Strategies for Poster Sessions

- *Explicit* point of poster sessions:
 - Learn about papers by having authors explain posters
- *Hidden value* of poster sessions:
 - Opportunity to talk to authors, about pretty much *anything*
 - Deep questions about their work
 - Asking about their intuition
 - Chatting about *other* research they did, or that might be related
 - Chatting about totally random topics (if you get comfortable with them)

Strategies for Poster Sessions

- How to have meaningful discussions at a poster:
 - Come prepared! (Recall: Planning)
 - If you read the paper and have good questions, no need to listen to poster presentation. Launch immediately into a discussion! Most authors will appreciate this

Strategies for Poster Sessions

- Problem: Stressed by large crowd of unfamiliar faces
- Solution: Visit posters with a labmate/friend until you get relaxed

Strategies for Poster Sessions

- Many posters often have large crowds, but many posters are being visited by just one person, or no one
- **Strategy 1:** Follow the Leader (follow the crowd)
 - Benefits: see how others (newcomers, experts) ask questions
- **Strategy 2:** Go to sparsely attended posters
 - Easier to have relaxed conversation, go at your own pace.
If you know something about the work (came prepared), could be a lunch/dinner buddy and maybe a future collaborator!

Strategies for Talks

- Talks are a major part of any conference. Some conferences ONLY have talks (no posters)
- **Strategy A:** Sit at the front
 - Feel connected with the speaker
 - Be close to other serious researchers that are paying attention
 - Ask questions. How to have great questions? Recall: Planning
- **Strategy B:** Scan the room for someone you know or recently met, sit next to them
 - If the talk is good, someone to talk to if you missed something
 - If the talk is *not* good, you two might leave together

Strategies for Meals

- Don't overthink it. Sometimes fine to go solo and just eat!
- How to be social:
 - See who you met so far. Try to exchange contact info (WhatsApp, etc.). Randomly ask people if they have plans for lunch, dinner, etc.
 - Be open to others joining. Let serendipity play a role. Chance connections can lead to exciting places

Relax

- Conferences are multiple day, full-day events. Can be exhausting
- Conferences ultimately are about ideas, and hopefully help you with your ideas as well
- So, remember to relax:
 - It's OK if you only saw 10 posters in a session that had 500 of them.
 - It's OK if you didn't see every talk in an oral session
 - Sometimes it's more interesting to talk to someone in the hallway outside an oral session rather than be in the oral session ("Hallway Track")

Taking Notes

- Conferences are reservoirs overflowing with ideas
- Some ideas you see may directly plug into your research
- You may think of new ideas at the conference
- Other ideas may trace exciting paths you could follow for future research
- So, ALWAYS carry around small notebook (one that fits in pocket or purse)
 - A place to note down ideas and references
 - A place to record upcoming posters, talks, and events you're interested in
 - A place for drawing diagrams or writing equations for other people in restaurants

Social Aspects

- Academia is unique. We have fewer rules:
 - OK to mix “professional life” with social life
 - Many of our friends are other researchers, spread all over the world
 - We get ideas (related to “professional” part of life) at all times, including during social part of life