Attending an Academic Conference: What to Expect

Congratulations! Presenting your research at an academic conference is a great honor, and a tremendous opportunity. Academic conferences can be confusing experiences, though—especially for first-time conference-goers. Like any social setting, academic conferences have their own norms and expectations. Understanding the etiquette will not only help you have a more enjoyable conference experience, but will also help you make the most of your conference opportunity!

- **Preparation is Paramount!** This may seem obvious, but remember that presenting your research in front of a new and unknown audience, in a new venue, is very different from presenting to a class or at a university event where you know the audience or at least are in a known environment. You will be nervous, and that is natural. When you are nervous, you will be more likely to pepper your talk with “ums” and verbal stumbles, to speak quickly, and to use animated hand motions. **Take the time to think through and write out your presentation in advance, and then practice it at least 10 times with a timer and in front of a mirror!** At the conference you should not read your presentation. However, writing out and practicing your presentation in advance will help you eliminate the verbal stumbles, will ensure a clear, articulate presentation, and will help you present within the allotted time limit.

- **It’s not all about you!** You are probably thinking first and foremost about your own paper and presentation as you approach the conference. This is good, as conferences are the primary venue for presenting our research and for interacting with other scholars in your field. However, be sure to keep things in perspective. Your presentation is one among hundreds, if not thousands, that will be given at the conference. You should take your 15 minutes very seriously, but remember that the larger purpose of an academic conference is to network: to meet other students and scholars who share your interests, to discuss your research and theirs, and to build your network.

This means that you should attend other panels and seek out other presenters who share your research interests. **Always be thinking about what you can learn from others** who have researched similar topics: have they used different methods than you? Have they based their research on different theories? How does the research from other presenters help shed new light on your own research? **As you attend other panels, make sure to ask questions in these panels. Then, make sure to follow up with presenters who share your interests after their presentations; ask some more questions, exchange contact information, ask for a copy of their paper, and ask about other conferences that they might be attending in the future.** Academic conferences are outstanding opportunities to learn from others, and this opportunity should not be wasted!

- **What Questions are Good Questions?** The core of any good research project is the research method, along with the evidence used to support the author’s claims. Thus, the best questions are ones that concern **method and methodology** (How did you select your cases? Why did you choose a large-n study? Are your findings generalizable? What data sources did you use? Avoid questions about narrow factoids of a particular topic or case, and avoid speculative questions.
- **Remember that you are representing American University and the School of International Service!** This might seem obvious, but remember that you are not attending the conference just as an individual. You are presenting your own research, but your research also represents the work that you have done at AU/SIS and the professors at AU/SIS. Of course that means that you should conduct yourself in professional fashion at all times. It also means that you should remember to mention AU/SIS when you introduce yourself, and to have that information on the title and/or conclusion slides in your presentation. Even as you discuss your research, you are an ambassador for AU and SIS!

- **Share your research!** Your audience will only get a taste of your research from your presentation. The real substance is in the paper that is the basis for your presentation. You should make sure that you are prepared to share your paper when asked, as interested audience members or fellow panelists will likely ask for a copy. You can go the “old school” route of bringing printed copies of your paper with you to your presentation. However, there are many easier, and more eco-friendly options. For example, make sure that your email address is on your presentation slides. If you have business cards, make sure to offer them to those who ask. If you are technologically inclined, then you could even set up a simple website (a description of your research project and a .pdf version of the paper for download) and then have cards with a QR-code at the conference for mobile device scanning. One way or the other, you should use each available moment at the conference to tell people about your research and to offer them the opportunity to read more!

- **Method and methodology are important!** In your presentation you will probably be tempted to report the many interesting details that you found over the course of your research. You might even feel the need to report some “dramatic” or flashy findings. Avoid these temptations! As much as your findings matter, the hallmark of a good research project is attention to detail. Be explicit about what you did, as well as the difficulties that you encountered, and don’t overstate your findings. This means that you should discuss, in detail, the research methods that you used to investigate your topic and reach your conclusions. The proper application of research methods to any question or topic is what distinguishes good research from casual conversation or journalistic writing. In fact, you may find that people on your panel or in the audience know the “facts” of the case even better than you do! The way to make your research stand out is to demonstrate that you have conducted a systematic investigation that builds on existing research and that also offers directions for future research. You are not expected to have “solved” your question; you are expected to be careful, precise, and even modest in your presentation of methods and findings.

- **Take feedback seriously!** Be open to feedback and see it as a gift! Audience members, panel discussants, and fellow panelists will ask you some tough questions. They might disagree with you outright. Take this feedback seriously, insofar as each question or disagreement is a chance for you to improve your project. Of course, there will be some instances where somebody simply misunderstands you or is not quite clear on the basic facts. In most cases, though, the questions and feedback you receive will be indicative of places where you can make your presentation more clear and/or of areas where you could conduct more thorough research to sharpen your findings. Remember: questions are not a “threat” to you, they are opportunities to improve your research! Make sure to follow up with the people who ask you tough questions!
- **Build bridges and make friends!** Don't forget that an academic conference is, at the end of the day, a *professional* experience. This brings us back to the bit about networking mentioned above. You should approach an academic conference as a chance to interact with other students and scholars. Once you’ve met somebody, make sure to exchange contact information so that you can continue the conversation about your shared research interests. At the least, you have one more person interested in your research, and one more person from whom you can learn. But you might also have just found a future co-author or somebody to work with you on a larger collaborative project! Always remember that presenting your research project is just one more step, albeit an important one, in the overall research process!

With these tips in mind you should have a more exciting, more stimulating, and more rewarding conference experience. Happy conference going!