It was exactly ten years ago, in 2009, that I attended my first professional conference – the annual convention for the American Psychological Association (APA). As a first-year doctoral student in school psychology, I really did not know how to feel about presenting my poster. Ultimately, I had mixed feelings. I was nervous about whether I could answer questions adequately from a group of highly educated researchers and practitioners. Would I sound like I know what I’m talking about? I was also excited to mingle with experts from various fields of psychology, whose work I had cited and revered. Presenting my research at a national conference was a symbolic presentation of entry into academia – I had made it! At that time, I did not know that I would continue to attend professional conferences for the next decade.

There is a sense of intellectual stimulation at professional conferences that is unmatched by other experiences. For 3-4 days, you are immersed in the world of research. By attending talks from “experts”, I have learned to think about research from a multitude of perspectives. It is the provocative research questions that always peak my interest. However, the most valuable experience to me as an early career professional is dialogue with others, a dialogue that can only be achieved by attending the conventions annually. Each year, I leave annual meetings feeling rejuvenated and inspired. I am eager to return home with new ideas for impactful papers and innovative grants.

My experiences at professional conferences have not always been so meaningful. In the past decade, I have transitioned from a passive receiver of information to an active seeker of connection. Early in my career, I attended conferences to obtain information. I attended all the relevant presentations. I attempted to cram in as many talks as I could. I even took notes! Over the years, the scale has tipped in the opposite direction. The number of talks I attend have steadily diminished and the number of other activities I engage in have rapidly increased. I’m not sure when the switch over happened, but it was likely a slow process given that I was never “trained” in how to effectively attend conferences. Below are some tips that I picked up along the way as I transitioned from graduate student to post-doctoral fellow to an Assistant Professor.

Identification
- Identify a conference that is aligned with your professional goals and aspirations. Conferences often have reputations for targeting researchers or practitioners. They may be content- (e.g., autism focus at the International Society for Autism Research) or context- (e.g., school focus at the National Association of School Psychologist) specific, or broad-based meetings. (e.g., American Psychological Association).
- The conference chosen should match budgetary constraints, as well as feasibility of travel. Many national conferences switch coasts every year. Therefore, if you’re unable to attend one year because of funds and/or location, you can target that conference the following year. For students and trainees, sharing hotel rooms is often an easy way to keep costs to a minimum. Know the target audience. Conferences may attract local, national, or international attendees. The targeted audience should be the people that you’re interested in connecting with. Identifying the appropriate conference has an impact on the entire experience.

Application
- Advanced preparation is needed to apply to a conference. Conferences often have deadlines six months or more in advance of the meeting dates. Collaborative proposals
require even more preparation as they involve presenters from multiple institutions. Think of your ideas in advance, and start contacting collaborators sooner than later.

- Select a presentation type (poster, presenter on symposium, chair of symposium,) that matches your professional identity. Students or early career trainees are generally not expected to chair conference symposia. However, advanced trainees or early career professionals are encouraged to take on this role. It is customary to have senior scholars serve as discussants on panels.
- Familiarize yourself with the norms associated with particular conferences. For example, competitive conferences may only select symposia from presenters across multiple institutions. Some conferences require three presenters per symposium, whereas other conferences encourage four presenters. Symposia may be designated as 50 minute panels or 1 hour and 50 minute panels. At some conferences, the chair may have a presentation, and at other conferences, the chair is independent from the presentations.
- Being part of a collaborative symposium is an ideal opportunity to network with others. For instance, inviting an “expert” as a discussant may open the door for future collaborations. This also provides a “reason” to connect with senior scholars, rather than sending a cold email. Finding other presenters for the panel also enlightens you about others who may be doing similar work.
- During or post application, seek out travel funds either directly from the conference or your institution. Student travel funds are the most readily available. Many conferences also have opportunities for early career professionals. The goal is to encourage more junior level scholars to attend. Conferences often have diversity awards or merit-based scholarships (e.g., best dissertation award). Sometimes, there are awards for first-time attendees. Your institution may also have designated funding for conference travel.

**Preparation**

- Regardless of the modality of presentation, conferences require preparation. Posters must be completed at least a week in advance in order to leave adequate time for printing. Do not print your poster at the conference location. Also, do not have your poster printed and sent to the conference location. There are too many opportunities for a fatal flaw to occur in these situations. It is best to have your poster printed at your home institution. Sometimes, there are organizations within the institution that print posters. Other times, it may be necessary to print your poster from professional printing companies.
- It is important to have a two-minute summary of your poster prepared in advance. When developing the poster, the emphasis should be on the graphs and tables. This is the information that attracts attendees. The text should only reflect essential information in the form of bullet points. Paragraphs are extremely difficult to read. They are also not aesthetically pleasing to people passing your poster. Keep business cards or a printout of the poster with your contact information handy for future communications. It is customary to print institutional logos on posters.
- Similar principles apply for oral presentations. Slides should present only pertinent information. Conference attendees are taking in a lot of information. It is important to think about the 2-3 “take home” points from your presentation. Do not read from your slides. Use the bullet points as a guiding framework for your talk. It is important not to become dependent on the notes for each slide. Conferences often have their own audio/visual/computer equipment set up, which may or may not have presenter mode.
- Practice your presentation in front of colleagues who are not directly in your field. It is your responsibility to capture the interest of attendees in and outside of your field. Also,
practice answering questions. Answering questions adequately is as important as presenting information.

- When booking conference accommodations, consider staying at the designated conference hotels. This creates an ideal opportunity to engage with potential colleagues in an informal setting.
- Know your schedule in advance. Many conferences are moving toward online platforms to disseminate the conference schedule. These user-friendly apps provide attendees with an opportunity to create their own schedules on their smartphones.

**Attendance**

- It is important to attend talks on familiar, as well as unfamiliar but related topics. Conferences are an opportunity to think about your research interests from multiple perspectives.
- Regardless of your familiarity with the topics, think about questions to ask at the end of the presentation. If you're not comfortable asking questions in front of a large crowd, you can approach the presenter individually after their presentation proceedings. Have business cards readily available to exchange contact information.
- Attend any and all social networking events, especially those designed for early career professionals. Make a concerted effort to engage with people outside of your field. These social networking events are often designed for attendees to meet with expert scholars, renowned practitioners, distinguished program officers, and established industry workers.
- Know the people you're trying to connect with in advance. It is important to network with someone just above your professional level. For example, undergraduates should connect with graduate students. Graduate students should connect with post-doctoral fellows. Post-doctoral fellows should connect with Assistant Professors. People are generally interested in talking about their work, and therefore, are usually willing to have a cup of coffee to chat about overlapping areas of interests. Email people in advance to schedule these informal meetings, so it is already on their conference calendar.
- Prepare a brief "elevator pitch" about yourself. This brief introduction should include your name, position, interests (as it may relate to the person that you’re connecting with), the aspect of their work that you’re interested in, and a relevant question that links your interests with their work.
- Become involved in conference committees. Attending a conference can be an overwhelming experience, especially large conventions that attract thousands of people. Becoming involved in conference committees (e.g., early career committee, diversity committee, etc.) is one way to find your niche at national or international conferences.

**Enjoy the experience!**