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## Making Contacts at Conferences

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Conferences serve many purposes, both professional and social. They aim to foster efficient information exchange, offer the opportunity to investigate employment possibilities, and provide a chance for old friends to get reacquainted. With a certain regularity and for a brief time a far-flung community comes together.

I am not the only one to have noticed, however, that many conferences serve younger professionals poorly. Graduate students and recent postdocs—the people who have the most to gain from attending a conference—often must overcome an array of organizational impediments and social obstacles before they can participate and benefit fully. The very structure of many conferences seems designed to separate the insiders from those not yet on the inside.

### A Price Too Dear

For example, one significant impediment is the high cost of getting to and registering for a conference. Travel expenses, especially for international conferences, are not trivial. While the expenses of a senior scientist are likely to be picked up by his or her institution,

graduate students must fend for themselves. Most of us did that in our time. But the price of participating in science conferences is escalating steadily beyond the budgets of senior scientists (see Alexander Kohn, "Science Meetings' Five Star Prices," *The Scientist*, January 12, 1987, p. 11). For the majority of younger people, international conferences are simply out of the question. Even if the meeting is national, the cost of travel, lodging and registration can prevent young people from attending. Is that really what conference organizers intend?

Most conferences are held in large metropolitan areas. There's a certain logic to that, since it allows easy access by rail or air. But large city locations also mean high-priced hotel rooms, which in turn can lead to a segregation of attendees: the senior people stay in the city close to the conference (and often in the same building), while the junior people are often forced to stay miles away.

Many professional societies now offer discounted registration fees for student attendees. Many more should do so, and all should extend that type of effort by arranging for discounted lodging for students so they are able to afford to stay where the senior people stay.

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Keeping attendees together and close to the main event, even after the formal program, is vital. The discussions that take place in a hotel lobby, over a drink or a meal, are at least as important as those happening during the organized events. Some years ago another commentator emphasized this as an important feature of a well-organized conference: "Interaction between all ages and interests must be made available by accommodation in close proximity and joint eating facilities." (H. Gutfrueud, "Discussion Forum: Are International Conferences a Waste of Time?," *Trends in Biochemical Sciences*, Vol. 1, 1976, p. 198-9.) It is worth noting the example of the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, N.J., where visiting scholars are encouraged to eat in a central dining area—in a relaxed atmosphere where interaction with those in one's own and other fields comes naturally.

Conference organizers should keep in mind that their planning of a "knock-out" luxury conference will likely knock out young people from even considering attendance.

### Information Encounter Groups

Even if the price is right and young professionals show up, social obstacles can isolate them. To the newcomer it can seem that everyone knows each other. The regulars break up into their own cliques, which is quite natural. The prospect of introducing oneself to strangers, especially eminent strangers, is rather daunting, as I well remember. (I still find it difficult to do so.) The student's advisor, if caring and alert, will do the introductions and also make certain that the young person meets other young people. Unhappily, some advisors fail to do their duty outside the classroom or laboratory. We can and should make the social setting of conferences less intimidating for young professionals and newcomers.

I have suggested that part of the first day of any conference be devoted to information encounter groups. Each attendee would be randomly assigned to a small group of about 30 people. In the morning each person would speak for about five minutes, providing biographical information and outlining the problems, intellectual or professional, that he or she hopes the meeting will help solve. This procedure would allow both the established professionals and the young conference goers to make contacts, and will give them some information upon which to base an approach later in the conference.

A somewhat similar solution to the problem of isolated neophytes might be the use of computer information centers. When conferees register, they would indicate their areas of interest, particular questions, and the names of those they wish to meet. The computer would match people and even schedule meetings—a sort of dating service for scientists. The benefits for the young would be great, and even the senior participants would gain something from the exercise. The day of the computerized conference is on the horizon, but it has not yet dawned. We should be working on this and other strategies to help attendees make the most of their time at conferences.

Many in the scientific community profess to be concerned that fewer and fewer young people are choosing a career in science. Members of that community, especially senior members, ought to make sure the initial steps along that career path are not discouraged, either through overt exclusion or unknowing neglect.

We must ensure that our younger colleagues can afford to attend conferences and that when they do we make them feel welcome among us. See you at the next conference. I'll be sporting a button that reads, "I'm approachable." Maybe you should, too. ■