



(<https://www.insidehighered.com>)

---

## Essay on importance of meeting people when networking for academic jobs

Submitted by Christine Kelly on September 29, 2014 - 3:00am

I attended a conference recently and stayed at a hotel that required me to take a shuttle to get to my events. On my first shuttle ride back to the hotel I chatted with another hotel guest who was attending a different conference and also not staying at his conference hotel. We chatted about a variety of things before we got to that pivotal point where I was very glad I chose this particular hotel.

It turns out he worked for a company not far from where I work, and when I learned that piece of information my next question was, "Do you hire graduate students?" I told him I worked with graduate students at the University of California at Irvine and would love to help his company connect with our students. We exchanged business cards and when I got back to work I sent him an email and information about our Career Center and reiterated that I could help his company connect with students. Since then I've also been able to introduce students to his company. This happened because I ignored what my mother told me and I talked to a stranger. As we approach conference season I want to encourage graduate students to talk to strangers and I offer this primer to those who hate to network.

You don't have to be extroverted, you just need to be interested in connecting with others. Networking is about developing a mutually beneficial relationship with people. It is a learned behavior and there are a few simple things you can do to start building your network. First, think of who you need in your network. There are different types of contacts who will have different types of information you need and different skills that will benefit you. If you are planning an academic career you need to find contacts in a variety of university types. While your adviser can give you great advice on how to prepare for a job at a doctoral-granting university, they are probably not as useful if you want to be at a teaching-focused university. And if you want to work in industry, you need contacts in multiple companies and multiple positions. So it is helpful to think about who you need to know so you can make the best use of your time and have the right kind of connections when you need them.

Once you know who you want in your network, think of what you will say when you introduce yourself to a contact. If you think in advance about what to say you will be less anxious about approaching people. This is your elevator speech — a 30- to 60-second statement that gives the other person an idea of who you are and makes them want to learn more about you. This might take a few attempts, and the key is to say something that encourages the person to ask you more questions. Make sure your introduction is intriguing enough that the person wants to have a conversation with you. You can also introduce yourself to the person by bringing up an observation about their research. Most academics enjoy talking about their research, so that's generally an easy topic.

If you are hesitant to approach new people, try to find someone you know who can introduce you. If you are very anxious about networking, then make it a goal to meet at least one new person at the conference with no help from anyone else. There are always vendors at conferences and they are usually very friendly folks and potential employers. I've worked with a number of graduate students who met their future employers in the vendor area of their national conference.

Always have business cards/paper/writing implement/smart phone with you so you have a way to record the person's information. When I met the gentleman on the shuttle neither one of us had business cards on us, so when we got to the hotel we agreed to go get a card and meet in the lobby. Fortunately it was only a three-story hotel and we both came back to the lobby, but this is why you should always have business cards with you. I also made sure to follow up when I got back to the office, which I wouldn't have been able to do if I hadn't gotten his information.

When I conduct networking workshops, one question that always comes up is, "How do I follow up? What can I say, what reason do I have to reach out again." This is usually easy to do right after you meet a person. You can tell them you enjoyed meeting them and maybe mention something you learned from the encounter. But a contact you meet once and never speak to again, or only connect with yearly at a conference, is not a very useful connection. If you were deliberate in developing your network, the issue of how to follow up will be easier since you will know why you wanted the person in your network. But even if you just randomly meet people, there are still a few simple things to think about that can help you make the best use of your network.

If the person is an academic, you could always consider the possibility of a collaboration or future working relationship. If you are in a field that requires a postdoc before moving on to a faculty position and this person is a PI, postdoc or graduate student in a lab of interest to you, you can reach out to ask questions about the lab and determine if it's the right place for you and what the funding situation is like. If your goal is to have a non-academic career and you meet someone in the vendor area whose company is of interest, you can follow up by asking for a longer conversation where you can pick their brain about what career options their company may have for how you and how you can prepare for these careers.

I also like to make a note when I meet people of what they tell me about their interests, since that can help me follow up. In fact, today I just sent a couple of articles about professional development for graduate students to a faculty member who I know is interested in that topic. And I frequently come across articles I've sent on to people or I've introduced people to each other because we had a conversation about their interests. Basically, if you think about your network as resources for researching and preparing for your career you can always find ways to reach out and connect with your network.

So ignore what your mother told you and, this conference season, talk to strangers. In fact, on the way to the conference, practice on the person sitting next to you on the plane. I know a graduate student who did that and ended up meeting someone who connected him with his future employer.

### **Author Bio:**

*Christine Kelly is career consultant for graduate students at the University of California at Irvine and president of the Graduate Career Consortium.*

---

**Source URL:** <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2014/09/29/essay-importance-meeting-people-when-networking-academic-jobs?width=775&height=500&iframe=true>

undefined  
undefined