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The Zen of Annual Meeting Attendance and Conferencing

Jeffrey Senese

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Academic Leadership Journal

I have attended and been involved in dozens of annual meetings and conferences across the United States over the past decade. My experiences at these events, I am certain, are likely to be very similar to those of most readers. At these conferences the basic format involves a large number of people coming together to presumably learn something new, to interact with colleagues, to network and meet new colleagues within the context of bringing what is learned back ones institution.

In my view many annual conferences/meetings allow one to accomplish these objectives albeit much less perfectly than they could and certainly not in proportion to the time, resources and effort it often takes to travel to these meetings. Don't get me wrong, I continue to attend because there is enough value in them for me and especially meeting colleagues. I just believe at this point that they could be significantly enhanced and could be more impactful as a result. So my purpose in writing this essay is to suggest ways that conference organizers and individual academic leaders who attend can improve the relevance of these meetings as important events in our professional lives.

Anyone who has been to an annual meeting or conference that is particularly dull or unproductive knows well the dissatisfaction which may lead to meditation about all sorts of things and especially the decision to attend. Yet conferences need not be boring or dull. They can be productive if one can refocus on how one takes them in. It is also important that everyone who attends annual meetings takes the time to attempt to influence the conference organizers even if that is after the fact as well.

It is a bit wasteful of ones energy and time to go to a conference and not really think about the purposes and objectives for going. Prior to deciding to attend an annual meeting one should consciously review the conference program. One way to accomplish this is to use the conference schedule or previous year's listing and attempt to plan what you would attend at the conference. If there are only enough presentations for a half day plan that half day and only a bit more time or decide not to attend. In my case, I try not to attend annual meetings of one organization or the other every year but attend every other year. In that way the conference becomes just a bit less routine and less familiar.

If I am in a session and it is dull or worse the presenter is disrespecting the audience by reading their paper or slides, I simply walk out or work on something else if that is not possible (i.e., always have something to read or do if this happens). Conferences should not be a waste of time, not even one session. The point of this is not to dictate how one should approach conferences so much as I hope to provide a context for thinking about attendance and to encourage everyone to work to help to put pressure on conference organizers and presenters themselves to make annual meetings better experiences and able to achieve the goals I stated earlier.

Pre-Conference Preparations.

So, one of the ways that I think I have increased the value of attending annual meetings is to do a bit of research on the presenters and especially when I am particularly interested in a session so that I can better prepare myself to take advantage of an opportunity to learn something or to make a connection

or it has particular relevance to my institution. The research I conduct is very simple today with the Internet. I search the presenter's name on Google, the Chronicle of Higher Education and go to their organization's home page for information. Often times today there is a resume, bio, articles or like information about them. I take these materials to read on the plane on the way to the conference and I have typically done only a few of these "dossiers" for each conference. The background information has been very helpful from time to time. The benefits of having such preparation have, in my mind and experience, far outweighed the effort. The key is not a meticulousness but an intentionality about a few of the presentations at the conference and the presenters and what I am interested in achieving rather than passive "take it as it comes" conference attendance.

I also keep the conference agendas of the conferences I attend because I typically attend them in the future. I make notes about the very few presentations that I have walked out on or found less useful and about presentations that I found valuable. I do review my notes on the immediate previous conference I have attended and have benefited from that system of reminders of valuable presentations and presenters.

Phone, Texting, E-mail.

I personally love the technologies of communication that are available to us today and can't remember how I got by without them. I virtually never power down my smart phone with the exception of flying. I receive on average 100 or so business e-mails per day and if I did not have a handheld for reading these and answering some of them, while attending annual conferences (like in the not so old days of the 1990's) my time away from campus would be that much more difficult. That said it is important that smart phone use not interfere with conference attendance and engagement. While one can monitor e-mail or texts during sessions, one should endeavor not to answer unless of course it is the campus president or other VIP that must be answered.

In these very few cases take care of business on the phone, text or e-mail. Sitting in a session and engaging in lengthy e-mail or text discussions is not productive use of ones conference time. I would suggest that few of us would do that in most meetings on campus, so we should not engage in that sort of communication at conferences. Similarly, walking the halls of the hotel looking at your smart phone for a few moments and occasionally peering ones head up from the screen in a prairie dog fashion is not engagement. Sit down, deal with your home campus business, and walk non-session areas of the conference ready to network with friends and to meet new friends.

Networking Approaches at Conferences .

One of the key activities at conferences is networking with colleagues both old friends and making new ones. It is important even just for a moment to say hello to colleagues from one's past, past institutions or past conferences. There is less reason to go physically to conferences if one does not see it as a key opportunity to meet or re-meet colleagues. Too many conferences do a poor job, in my personal opinion, of thinking about real and comfortable opportunities for people to meet each other. While there are sometimes cocktail parties or receptions and dinners certainly, it has been my experience that most attendees sit comfortably with colleagues they know rather than take it as an opportunity to meet new potential colleagues. These events are not set-up to encourage networking in the vast majority of cases.

That said, individuals should see cocktail parties or receptions at these annual meetings as one of the key ways to meet people. Say hello to people next to you in the bar line, ask to sit at a table with others whom you do not yet know or look for other opportunities to meet people. Approach people in the room at the cocktail party/reception and introduce yourself and say hello. You would be surprised how many people you can meet and interesting conversations you can have by being first with a simple hello. If you say hello and it is met with a “who the hell are you” response or look, wish them a good conference, walk away and go meet someone else. For academic administrators this practice is really a key role as relationships drive success and conferences are great opportunities to exercise and perfect this skill. Every opportunity to meet people and make useful connections is to the benefit of one’s institution.

Last, when I return to campus, I send personal notes to those of these folks I have met and with whom I want to build a networking relationship. I send them a note to let them know I enjoyed meeting them or some other sort of follow up that is relevant to them, me or our conversation. I contact many of my colleagues with whom I network annually (I schedule these follow-up contacts on my Outlook task list so I do not lose track). Openness and connections are important but one should also, not give one’s business card to everyone one meets. Give it only to people you connect with or want to build a networking relationship with over time.

Advice for Presenters .

I have seen many truly wonderful presentations over the years. The best are not about eloquence or even content for me but about passion, delivery and ability to connect that made the difference. I have also endured several very painful presentations and walked out of a few truly horrendous sessions over the past 10 years or so.

Presenters please do not read your presentations under any circumstances. If you need to read portions do so, but engage the attendees while doing so. PowerPoint[®] is intended to enhance presentations not to “BE” the presentation. This practice is deadly boring and exceedingly unnecessary. No matter how good a presenter’s paper or PowerPoint[®] is reading tends to shut attendees down and they will pay less attention. Do not, present more than 5 or 6 slides per hour of the presentation (no more than 6 or 7 lines of text each) and ideally they should be visually appealing including pictures and video if appropriate. This should keep them interesting, focused and supportive of your presentation rather than a fire hose of information that the audience will ignore. Simple elegance is the goal not dozens of excruciatingly detailed slides that only you really understand.

While readings can be interesting, most of us are just not that talented to do readings well enough. It goes without saying that if you are presenting at an annual meeting that you need to do your homework and know well your topic and presentation. Think about how to make the presentation more interactive or discussion-based. It is the presenter’s responsibility to engage the attendees of the presentation. The opportunity of the presentation is not yours to show how smart you are so much as it is about presenting your topic for the attendees because you think you can help them or that your experiences, analyses, data or other information that will be valuable to others.

The other aspect that presenters should keep in mind is that the attendees at the vast majority of annual conferences are adult or non-traditional students. Adult learning theorists suggest that learning needs to be in context such as the workplace or socio-culturally. Engage and connect with the attendees of your

sessions in context. Learning occurs through connection with the mind, body, spirit and emotions (Merriam, 2008). Your presentation therefore needs to be compelling and engaging to adult students.

Advice for Conference Organizers .

Conferences in distant cities are wonderful experiences. I have served on a few arrangements committees for these and as a result I have a sense for how much effort it takes to help the organization that really “runs” the conference plan one and successfully execute that plan. That said more should be done to help attendees have real networking opportunities. There should be opportunities beyond formal presentations or breakfast discussions for people to connect and those opportunities should be more openly stated or promoted. For example, many conferences have a room for universities seeking new faculty to interview with candidates. Perhaps conference organizers could consider creating a “networking” room wherein individuals who are interested in meeting people from other Universities or settings could get together for networking purposes. Contrived yes, but given the limited time of a conference, it would be helpful. This could be done in a more comfortable setting with say coffee in the morning and perhaps drinks in the late afternoon. Conference organizers should take seriously this value of conferences and while the content of sessions and plenary speakers is important so too are the social and networking aspects. I would argue that the latter is the true value-add of attending.

An example of an approach to this comes from the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC) Annual meeting for Chief Academic Officers which I have attended a few times. They arrange for “dine-around” dinners which basically, are a simple sign-up system for dinners with other conference attendees. This is done at the conference check-in area and 10 or 12 individuals can go to dinner together at a local restaurant and the CIC makes the reservation for the group. It is a great way to get to know people in a nice setting.

Another suggestion is that conference organizers should consider creating ways for people to connect prior to the conference. I have on occasion been contacted prior to conferences by various vendors or consultants for a meeting while I am attending. Is it possible for there to be connections invitations for attendees with a few people ahead of the actual conference? Perhaps this could be an option on the registration form? There should also be consideration of follow-up to the conference as well. Many post the papers or materials on their websites. It might also be more effective to have interactive blogs or discussions after the conference which could extend the connections and value of the meeting.

Post-Conference Reports.

I have a habit of writing conference experience reports after I return from any annual conference that I share with Deans and other academic leaders. During the conference I write simply on my notebook before any session starts: “What is useful for us?” Inevitably there are always one or two things that come to mind when the speaker is talking. For plenary sessions I often write impressions, reference the books of the person or find a link to a report discussed so that the readers of my report can get quickly to richer content if they would like. I focus these reports on the aspects of sessions and the conference that I think have most relevance to our situation at my University. These reports often result in conversations or actions but mostly give others a sense for what is going on at the national level and as such connect in less direct ways to our plans and actions. Still, it takes work and I have to believe that it can, over the long run, influence those who take the time to read the reports I write.

Merriam, S.B. Adult Learning Theory for the Twenty-First Century. New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, No. 119, Fall, 2008.

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