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Getting past common obstacles to effective networking early on the tenure track (opinion)

Submitted by Stephen J. Aguilar on June 28, 2018 - 3:00am

Like many of my peers, I worked in various industries for a few years before I began my Ph.D. During my working years, I found networking to be vital, especially during a brief stint of unemployment.

When I began graduate school, however, I was somewhat shocked to learn that many academics saw networking as unseemly and to be avoided by “real” scholars. One’s work, the logic went, speaks for itself. Thus, if your research is not getting enough attention, or you are relegated to the outskirts of a community, you should double down and make the work better. Only then will you be rewarded and become well-known.

That is largely nonsense.

While the idea that one’s work can garner attention has some truth, it is a grave mistake to assume that “work speaks for itself” and that networking isn’t important. In fact, I will go so far as to say that networking isn’t just an important component of a successful career, it is *vital* component of it.

It is vital for reasons that vary based on your goals and position. For graduate students, networking is an integral part of getting that first academic job. For early-career scholars who need to show their work is worth supporting, networking can be a way to learn about the various funding priorities of foundations and agencies, as well as how such priorities align with one’s research agenda.

That is why I say to you now that you should network. Just do it. Even if up until now you haven’t done it, even if you find it insufferable, even if you think you’re awkward, even if you secretly believe that you’re somehow above it. Just do it. Do it and open yourself up to the possibilities that follow from getting to know students, peers, mentors and rivals (yes, them too) in a professional capacity.

The Ins and Outs of Networking

Now that I have presumably convinced you of the value of networking, it is important to discuss what networking is, what it isn't and how to go about doing it.

Networking is about building relationships. First and foremost, you should not conflate networking with self-promotion. Networking is about building relationships, not telling everyone who will listen about your new paper/grant/book. This isn't to say that you should avoid talking about yourself and your achievements -- far from it. Instead, allow those achievements to arise naturally through the course of conversation.

A way to ensure that you are networking and not just promoting yourself is to make sure that you are actually taking the opportunity to get to know the person you're speaking with by asking questions. We have all been subjected to one-sided conversations at conferences or meetings that seem pointless. Don't be that person. There is no need to add to your colleagues' suffering by myopically focusing on stories centered on yourself. Ask questions. By the end of the conversation, you should be able to walk away knowing something new about your colleague -- be it a new project, an accomplishment or even a setback that you helped troubleshoot.

Note that conversations do not have to always be about work. It is perfectly reasonable to ask about hobbies, interests and the like -- as long as you maintain professionalism. What that means will largely be dictated by the norms of the field and your relationship with the person.

You should avoid "humble bragging" at all costs. Not only are humble braggers the worst, they are also not fooling anyone into thinking they're actually humble. They are, in fact, communicating that they are the worst kind of self-promoters: the ones who lack the confidence to own an accomplishment.

If you just accomplished something great, like winning a grant, then by all means mention it! It's OK to say that you are excited and can't wait to start. Don't muddy the waters by saying that you didn't think you'd win it or "It wasn't very good!" No one wants to hear that.

If follow-up questions about an accomplishment are asked, then obviously answer them, but don't linger. Learn to distinguish between polite follow-up questions and genuine interest.

A concrete strategy that makes networking easier is being somewhat familiar with the work of those you are likely to meet. Knowing the expertise of a person, or reading a recent paper of theirs, can help when gaps in conversation occur. Don't overdo it, however. Make a clear distinction between navigating a conversation with knowledge

about a person in hand and being creepy about what you happen to know. Focus on work, not personal details.

In every interaction do your best to allow the conversation to flow naturally -- and to end naturally. Find your “out” phrase, such as, “Well, it’s been great catching up -- I should go say hi to such-and-such before they leave.” I find that having a few phrases in my back pocket lessens the likelihood of awkward goodbyes.

Network with distal goals in mind, not proximal ones. Networking is not the same as chatting someone up for a few minutes in hopes that you’ll gain an immediate return on your invested time. In fact, if you network in that manner, it is likely to backfire. Most people can detect when they are being seen as resources to be used and will respond by distancing themselves from those who they perceive as using them.

That is why you should network with distal goals in mind. A concrete example may help. Last year, during my flagship conference, I attended one of the many receptions held during the weekend. While there, I met a graduate student who was obviously looking for a job. The problem? It was April, and they needed something by the fall. I could do nothing to help them. Not only that, I had no idea who this student was, and most of my colleagues didn’t, either. This is a problem in a field as specialized as mine.

Although employment in academe is precarious at the best of times, its general cycle is quite predictable. Jobs come up in the later summer and fall and are usually filled by the spring. As a student, you should not only know that, but you also should plan for it. Those in your field should know at least one year in advance that you will be on the market. For example, if you are defending your dissertation during the summer or spring of 2020, then you will be on the market in the fall of 2019, which means that you should start hinting/saying that in 2018 -- or even as early as 2017, if you’re confident in your future defense date. Doing so ensures that your network knows when you will be looking for a job.

That is what I mean when I say that you should network with distal goals in mind. It takes years to develop relationships. You can’t assume that someone you just met will be willing to give you inside information or let you know about a job they’ve heard of.

Build a reputation, not a brand. You are not a product. You do not sell anything, so you should not “build your brand.” Instead, build your reputation. What do you want to be known for, and what sorts of things do you want to be associated with? Whatever it is, whatever they are, make sure that everything you do aligns with your goals and avoid actions that communicate the opposite.

A nonexhaustive list of things that contribute to your reputation, in no particular order:

- your institutional affiliation;
- your advisers (for grad students);
- the outlets you publish in;
- the awards you win;
- the organizations that support your work;
- the amount of funding you receive;
- your online presence;
- the quality of your presentations at conferences;
- the quality of your posters (if your field does posters);
- the company you keep;
- how you dress in professional settings;
- how you respond to criticism;
- your writing (both formal and informal);
- how you deal with conflict;
- how, when and whom you choose to help;
- how, when and whom you choose to ask for help;
- your email habits;
- if and how often you show up to professional gatherings; and
- your CV.

The list above may contribute to your reputation, but no one item *defines* it. Some of the items, unfortunately, are out of your control, while others are the result of good or bad luck. Others are the result of good planning. That is why you should make sure that you maintain control over the things that you *can* control.

An easy thing everyone can do to help their reputation, for example, is to answer emails quickly. Yes, emails are annoying, but you know what? So is waiting for a reply. Avoid being seen as unreliable by simply answering emails in a timely way. Note: that does not mean that you should answer them within 30 seconds of getting them. Instead, be predictable. If I were to email you, can I reasonably expect a one- or two-day turnaround? Whatever is reasonable to you and your field, stick to it.

Regardless of what sort of reputation you would like to have, you should start developing it early. Reputations takes time to build, so the earlier you start, the better.

Network everywhere, not just at conferences. When I was in graduate school, I attended many conferences. While the sessions were often interesting, I found that I enjoyed having conversations with scholars at receptions, impromptu or scheduled coffee dates, and business meetings much more.

My friend and mentor summed it up nicely by saying, “It’s not which sessions you attend -- it’s who you miss sessions to meet with.” I find that to be 100 percent true. When you’re at a conference, make it a point to schedule meetings with folks you only have a chance to see at that conference. Be mindful of the time you are taking up. Show up on time and end the meeting on time.

With that said, don't just network at conferences. Get on "academic Twitter" and find like-minded colleagues to chat with. Chances are you will find peers who are at the same stage as you to collaborate with or scholars who tweet opportunities or interesting reads.

Make sure to send update emails to your advisers and mentors with your successes. No one wants to open up an email with a long list of problems. (Those sorts of things, assuming you have that kind of relationship, are better handled on the phone or in person.) Emails with good news, however, are a joy to read.

Also, it is perfectly reasonable to "cold email" anyone. Email once with a short note that warrants a reply. Wait two to three weeks for a reply, and if none arrives follow up *once*, then let it go. No one is obligated to respond to you, but you will be pleasantly surprised by the number of responses you receive.

Finally

Hate networking? Do it anyway. Love networking? Find a way to do it better. In short, understand that networking, properly done, is vital to your success as a scholar.

Stephen J. Aguilar is assistant professor of education at the University of Southern California Rossier School of Education. He leads the Learning Analytics and Psychology in Education Lab (LAPeL). You can follow him on Twitter @stephenaguilar.

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