

Optimizing Professional Networking through a Preparation Program for Students

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Introduction

Professional development conferences provide a new experience for students. Some may have attended leadership conferences, but few have experienced a true professional development activity. As a result, many experience anxiety about what to expect, what to do, and how to act. In addition, even if they are not anxious, most undergraduate students are not equipped to get the most from networking opportunities at these conferences.

This student need aligns with the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) career readiness competencies. The organization defines career readiness as “the attainment and demonstration of requisite competencies that broadly prepare college graduates for a successful transition into the workplace” (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2017, par. 3). The organization further explains eight competencies students should have to establish their career readiness. For this discussion, the competencies of oral/written communications and career management are the focus for student development (NACE, 2017).

The foundation for this idea came from researchers at Purdue University. The researchers at Purdue sought to determine if an organized preparation process would help students optimize their time at professional development conferences. The researchers implemented a formal course for students to help facilitate their experiences before, during, and after the conference. At the end of the course, researchers concluded, “formal preparation for attendance at a national scientific meeting maximizes the potential for students to benefit from their experience” (Flaherty, Day, D’Acunto, Zollner, & Quinn, 2017, p. 50).

Researchers for this study sought to determine if the same benefit could be realized for students who participated in a program associated with a student organization, rather than a formal class. For this process, the researchers worked with students in the Agricultural Communicators of Tomorrow (ACT) organization in preparation for Ag Media Summit (AMS). AMS is the professional meeting for two professional agricultural communications organizations as well as the national meeting for ACT and provides professional development and networking opportunities for students.

In addition to meeting the competencies of NACE career readiness, this innovative idea provides research opportunities aligning with the AAEE National Research Agenda, Research Priority 4 (Roberts, Harder & Brashears, 2016).

Program Steps

Eight undergraduate students participated in this inaugural program. Six were seniors, one was a junior, and one a sophomore; and all were majoring in agricultural communications. Three of the eight participants previously had attended AMS. However, none had participated in this type of program. The structure of the program was three-fold: before, during, and after.

Before: Students were asked to submit to advisers a brief statement explaining what they hoped to learn at the conference, a personal schedule of sessions to attend, and a résumé and cover letter to be critiqued by an adviser. In addition, they were asked to identify three people and/or companies to meet during AMS as well as contact at least one prior to the conference to schedule a time to meet. Finally, students and advisers met before the conference started to provide an overview of the event and answer any questions.

During: While at the conference students were expected to carry résumés and business cards with them, meet at least two ACT members from other universities, meet with the

people/companies they contacted before arriving at the conference, meet with alumni of Oklahoma State University at the scheduled alumni event, attend workshops, spend time in the Info Expo, post to the Optimizing AMS private Facebook group, and attend all ACT meetings and functions. The advisers also led a debriefing session each night.

After: When the conference ended, participants were asked to send follow-up emails to at least three professionals they met, share their experiences at an ACT meeting, and attend a debriefing meeting with all participants and advisers. For the research aspect of this process, the debriefing process was structured as a focus group.

Results

Results from the focus group indicate the program was a success. A reoccurring theme throughout the focus group discussion was that students were not as diligent with their preparation as they should have been, a decision they regretted after the event. However, all students benefited from the program, no matter what level of preparation they put in. “I think this provided a good blueprint for what to do when you go to another conference, even if it’s not AMS,” one of the participants said.

During the conference, students said the debriefing sessions were the most helpful. One student said, “having [meetings] every day, it’s like keeping a journal except you’re talking about it with people. But I think having it every day allows you to process all the events a little more thoroughly and likely more effectively than just meeting once at the very end.”

The last reoccurring theme for participants was the benefit of an alumni event at the conference. Students appreciated being able to approach someone they knew had a common interest: their alma mater. This connection helped them overcome anxiety about reaching out to someone they did not know.

Resources/Future Plans/Advice

No direct costs are associated with this program, only the resource of faculty members’ time, which makes its sustainability possibilities high. In the future, this program should be conducted on a yearly basis for AMS. In addition, the effectiveness should be measured for other professional development conferences. Time also should be spent on ways to show students the relevance of the preparation process before attending their first conference.

A suggestion for future implementation is for advisers and students to meet, whether in person or via technology, one-on-one before the conference. This meeting would be used to review their résumés and identify potential professionals to contact. Students from this program shared they were unsure how to find individuals to contact. While a registration list was shared with all attendees, the list only included names and companies. Job titles were not included, which is what many students looked for, as many were more interested in a specific position rather than a specific company.

The post conference discussion led to an unexpected finding about a gap in the department’s curriculum. Students shared a desire to receive more information about career opportunities with a degree in agricultural communications. Several students voiced their frustration of not being able to articulate what their future career goals are because they did not feel well versed in the possibilities. This discussion brings to the surface the need for discussion about agricultural communications careers as well as the need for finding a way to share this information with students whether in a formal classroom or through student organizations.

References

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