

by Emily E. LB. Twarog and Leah Tritabaugh

Navigating conferences post #MeToo

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Attending an academic conference is a rite of passage for an aspiring scholar. We attend conferences to network, share our research, and position ourselves in the field. It is much more than showing up for our 90-minute panel and dazzling the participants with our research and findings. It is a public space that requires us to think about our public persona as a scholar.

Are you the conference butterfly who is ever present?

Attending every reception, networking in the lobby with senior scholars, shepherding mentees around, helping them meet the next right person, and coordinating dinners at restaurants you researched for months.

Or ...

Are you the introverted note taker?

Attending every panel, diligently taking notes and asking thought-provoking questions, joining colleagues for one drink and then heading to your hotel room for room service and more work, and arranging a series of key meetings with scholars you see only once a year at the conference.

Or ...

Are you the PhD candidate on a limited budget?



Emily E. LB. Twarog is an associate professor of history and labor studies at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign School of Labor and Employment Relations.



Leah Tritabaugh is a senior at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign School of Liberal Arts.

Overwhelmed by the possibilities, hoping for an invitation to dinner, and lingering at the receptions as you eat your way through the buffet and wondering whom you should be talking to.

Conferences are, for better or worse, an essential part of the scholarly journey. For doctoral candidates, junior scholars, and other early-career people, conferences are an opportunity to network beyond your workplace. This is critical to crafting your own professional identity.

Yet for many people — especially underrepresented groups such as women, people of color, and LGBTQ folks — navigating the conference scene can feel like a minefield of decision making and vulnerability. In this article, we will discuss some strategies for conference participation to help you get the most out of the experience while also feeling safe.

The unfortunate reality is that sexual harassment is a serious problem within academia. By the time you attend your first conference, you may very well have already faced some type of harassment in graduate school.

According to one study, 38 percent of female and 23 percent of male graduate students experience sexual harassment from university faculty and staff, and 58 percent of female and 39 percent of male graduate students have been sexually harassed by fellow graduate students (Rosenthal, Smidt, and Freyd 2016).

Academic conferences can be a particularly hostile environment. The #MeToo movement ignited a wave of women to speak out about their experiences with sexual harassment at conferences (Sulfaro and Gill 2022). But unfortunately, studying and working in such a toxic climate is nothing new for junior scholars. Sexual harassment at conferences shares many similarities with sexual harassment in other academic settings, such as college campuses.

In both the conference and campus contexts, there exists an unequal power dynamic that privileges heterosexual, cisgender White men at the expense of female and minority students and researchers (Foxx 2019). Men speak more in group discussions (often speaking over women), ask more questions, and are invited as guest speakers more often than women at conferences and universities (Foxx 2019; Yong 2017).

Another power imbalance exists in the unequal dynamic between senior academics and graduate students or researchers early in their careers. The difference in experience and expertise that is inherent in student–professor, mentor–mentee, and junior–senior colleague relationships yields the potential for senior scholars to abuse their position of authority (Herbenick et al. 2019).

These power imbalances are exacerbated by gender inequality and underrepresentation of women in academia, especially in

senior positions, as a result of decades of gender discrimination (Herbenick et al. 2019).

Conferences and college campuses are also characterized by social aspects that introduce new contexts for sexual harassment. While it may seem odd to compare the two, conferences are to professional academics as parties and social gatherings are to college students: an opportunity to meet new people and socialize with peers in a more informal setting away from their usual office or classroom (Morris 2019).

Conferences encourage socialization and networking, especially between junior and senior academics. The conference may provide alcohol and allow more casual attire (Herbenick et al. 2019). Attendees may relocate offsite after the event to an even more informal setting like a restaurant or bar (Foxx et al. 2019). These factors blur the lines between social and professional contexts, and some attendees may use them as a pretext to cross boundaries and engage in inappropriate behavior (Herbenick et al. 2019).

Victims of sexual harassment at conferences and college campuses share a common fear that coming forward could compromise their education or career. Graduate students and junior scholars rely heavily on the mentorship of senior faculty. Reporting widely respected faculty may tarnish victims' reputation and damage their relationships with other colleagues (Herbenick et al. 2019).

Most incidents go unreported out of fear of doubt, blame, humiliation, or retaliation (Foxx et al. 2019).

Sexual harassment also serves as a serious barrier to women's education and career development (Fitzgerald et al. 1988). Women disproportionately experience sexual harassment as undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty (Foxx et al. 2019; Wood et al. 2018).

Experiences of sexual harassment push victims to leave their area of study, and the horror stories that spread through informal "whisper networks" dissuade junior scholars and graduate students from entering academia (Herbenick et al. 2019). Not only does this result in a major loss of talent to the academic community, but it also perpetuates the underrepresentation of women in academia (Fitzgerald et al. 1988; Foxx et al. 2019).

But the reality is that we must continue to navigate these spaces despite the persistent issue of harassment. What are some things you can do to thrive at your next conference while also feeling safe and empowered to address any issues that may arise?

Before you arrive at the conference, consider some advance planning.

- **Advance networking:** Read the program thoroughly and pick the panels and events that are on your "must do" list. Reach out to peers and find out who is attending the confer-

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ence and ask them if they would be interested in meeting up for a reception or event that is on your list. Decide on a time to meet up so you can attend together. This will allow you to comfortably enter a space that may be filled with people you do not know with more ease.

- **Harassment policy:** As a result of the #Me Too movement, most conferences have their harassment policy printed in the program. Read this ahead of the conference and know who the contact person is if something does happen. Harassment can come in many forms and from a variety of people. It could be someone from your conference, or it could be another hotel guest who is unaffiliated with your event. Regardless, you should feel empowered to go to the conference contact person and share your experience. They will want to help you.
- **What to wear:** Wear what you want and feel comfortable in. While some conferences have expectations for dress such as business casual, the most important thing to remember is that you should be comfortable. If you dress up to teach, then you will likely want to dress up to give your presentation. This should be clothing that reflects who you are and not what other people expect. It took me years to embrace my own professional style. When I wear what feels best to me, I always feel more confident and secure.

For many people, the conference landscape might be daunting and confusing to navigate. Social expectations vary from space to space. From panels to the hotel bar to the exhibit hall to the swanky receptions, the social expectations vary significantly from one place to another.

The primary purpose of attending a conference is to share your work and build relationships, but many people are also looking to relax and enjoy themselves away from the demands of their day-to-day lives.

- **Networking:** Review the program in advance and identify a short list of people you want to meet or talk with. If you know them, it might be best to reach out ahead of time to arrange a meeting. If you do not know them, a conference is an excellent time to introduce yourself. Receptions and the exhibit hall are good places to introduce yourself to someone you have been wanting to meet. They are well populated, and people tend to mill around on their own allowing for a moment to approach someone. If you are uncomfortable approaching someone on your own, you might want to ask another conference attendee to introduce you.

• **Conference-sponsored social outings:** If the conference has pre-planned outings, this is a good way to get to meet other people in a controlled environment. For example, the conference may have a block of tickets to a local sporting event or a planned tour of a neighborhood. It can also be a safe way to navigate a city that is unfamiliar to you or if you feel uncomfortable traveling alone.

• **Take a break:** It is absolutely okay to retreat to your hotel room for a break from the conference. Attending a conference can wear you down and leave you vulnerable to making choices that may not feel comfortable.

• **Hotel bar:** A lot of socializing and networking happens in the hotel lobby and bar. This is an optional space. If you feel uncomfortable going into the bar on your own, ask someone to go with you. If someone suggests the bar, but you would feel more comfortable in a less crowded space, suggest you take your drinks to the lobby to enjoy them or offer to get something to eat in the hotel restaurant.

• **Being an ally:** If you are a confident conference attendee, be an ally. Broaden your circle of scholarly colleagues. Take the time to be aware of your junior colleagues, first time attendees, or underrepresented folks in the room and invite them to be part of your cohort.

• **Evaluation:** Always complete the end-of-conference evaluation and share any suggestions you may have on how to make the conference more inclusive in the future. Conference planners want all attendees to enjoy themselves and they can do this only if they are aware of the needs of the attendees.

Conferences have the potential to be a lot of fun if you feel safe and seen. Keep in mind that most people in academia probably show up at a conference with a certain amount of anxiety and trepidation. You are not the only one. We need to move away from the unhealthy power dynamics that push historically marginalized people away from professional spaces. ■

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Navigating networking with confidence:

A guide to safe and inclusive conference engagement

Planning your networking and social experiences for a conference in advance can help you make the most of your time while also ensuring your comfort and safety. This guide offers practical strategies to support meaningful connections, avoid uncomfortable situations, and foster an inclusive professional community.

PLAN AHEAD

Explore the program and connect in advance

Review the conference schedule ahead of time and identify the panels, sessions, and social events that are on your “must-attend” list. Reach out to peers to see who is attending, and suggest meeting up for a reception or event. Having a planned meet-up helps ease the pressure of walking into a room full of unfamiliar faces.

Know the code of conduct

Take a moment to review LERA’s Code of Conduct Policy before arriving. Know who the designated contact person is and how to reach them. You can find these details on the LERA website here: <https://www.leraweb.org/coc>. Save this information in your phone so you’re prepared in the unlikely event you need support. Your safety and dignity are priorities at LERA.

Dress for confidence and comfort

Conference norms often suggest business casual attire, but your personal comfort should come first. Wear what helps you feel confident and professional. Whether that means dressing up or dressing more casually, your clothing should reflect who you are—not just what others expect. When you’re comfortable, you’re more likely to engage with ease and self-assurance.

If you’re established in the field

Your presence can help set the tone. Use your visibility to model respectful behavior, demonstrate awareness of power dynamics, and help create a welcoming environment where others feel empowered to engage.

SET BOUNDARIES WITH CONFIDENCE

Navigating the hotel bar and lobby

Hotel bars and lobbies are common places for informal networking, but participation is optional. If going alone makes you uneasy, ask someone to join you. If someone suggests meeting at the bar and that is uncomfortable, suggest taking your drinks to the lobby or heading to the hotel restaurant, or bring along a friend or colleague. Your comfort matters, and it’s okay to advocate for it.

Practice saying “no”

You’re never obligated to accept invitations or continue conversations that don’t feel right. Having a few polite phrases ready — like “I’m heading out, but I hope to see you at the next session!” or “I promised to meet my colleague and need to go now!” — can make it easier to exit situations gracefully.

If you’re established in the field

Respect others’ boundaries without needing an explanation. If someone ends a conversation or declines an invitation, take it graciously and move on. Your professionalism helps reinforce a culture of respect and safety.

ENGAGE THOUGHTFULLY

Make the most of receptions and events

Receptions and events are ideal spaces to meet people informally. These areas are often less structured, making them a good place to introduce yourself to someone new. If approaching someone alone feels intimidating, ask a colleague or friend to make an introduction.

Attend conference-sponsored outings

Planned group events offer a structured and safe way to build your professional network. These outings are typically well-attended and offer natural opportunities for conversation and connection in a more relaxed setting.

Take breaks when needed

Conferences can be overwhelming. It’s perfectly okay to retreat to your hotel room to recharge. Taking time for yourself helps you maintain energy and boundaries, and reduces the chance of overextending yourself in social situations that may feel uncomfortable.

If you’re established in the field

Be mindful of how much space you take up in conversations, physically and verbally. Make room for others to speak and look for opportunities to listen actively, especially to early-career professionals or those from underrepresented groups.

BE AN ALLY

Expand your circle

If you’re a confident attendee or returning participant, take the opportunity to welcome others. Be mindful of first-time attendees, early-career scholars, and individuals from underrepresented backgrounds. Invite them to join your group, introduce them to colleagues, and check in if they seem isolated. Inclusion is a shared responsibility.

OFFER FEEDBACK

Help improve future conferences

Always complete the post-conference evaluation. Your suggestions can help LERA planners make future events more inclusive, welcoming, and responsive to the needs of all attendees. Whether your experience was positive or highlighted areas for improvement, your voice matters.

For details and contacts:
<https://leraweb.org/coc>

