

Attending the WDCAG 2011 Conference: Advice For Students, By Students



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What exactly are academic conferences, anyway?

On one level, academic conferences are meetings for academics to present and discuss their work. On another level, they are so much more. PhD/post-doc/faculty positions are offered, reputations are made (or tarnished!), ideas are hatched, professional partnerships, research collaborations, and new projects are established, and colleagues are transformed into friends (or the odd enemy!) at conferences. If you have even the slightest interest in joining ranks of academia or contributing to research in the future, you should attend conferences.

What types of conferences are there?

There are several types of conferences. Most academic conferences are categorized geographically by regional, national, or international borders. Generally, smaller/regional conferences are very open to graduate students and novice researchers, and provide ample opportunities for networking on a personal level. Of these, some are targeted toward, or only open to, graduate students, while others may have an extremely specific sub-discipline or interdisciplinary focus. Contrasting with these smaller or more specialized conferences are the high-profile, international conferences (e.g. the Association of American Geographers), which are more competitive in nature. Many people take the opportunity to vie for face time with 'big name' scholars in the discipline and try to make a name for themselves at these high-profile conferences. Mid-size national conferences (such as the Canadian Association of Geographers Annual Meeting) fall somewhere in between. Additionally, there are conferences oriented towards policy or industry, and may involve government, NGO, or private-sector representatives.

As a grad student, it's a good idea to attend as many types of conferences as funding allows so you can get a handle on how the academic world works. It should be noted that some conferences are virtual and take place on-line, which can be a great opportunity to participate in a conference without having to spend money on travel and accommodations.

What "type" is the 2011 WDCAG and why should I go?

The 2011 WDCAG is the 53rd Annual Meeting of the Western Division of the Canadian Association of Geographers (WDCAG) and is open to any scholar or interested person in the region who identifies him/herself as a 'geographer' – physical, human, and GIScience geographers included. It is a relatively small, regional conference, meaning graduate student participation is encouraged. If you have never presented at an academic conference before, this would be a great first opportunity. Several excellent geography departments fall within the region, so a few 'big name' scholars are likely to show up. More importantly, many fellow graduate students and beginning faculty members will be attending, and will be eager to discuss your research in addition to their own.

The WDCAG is great for networking in a relaxed professional atmosphere and getting feedback on your research. You can also take an idea/presentation for a 'test-drive' before presenting at a larger, more intense conference like the Association of American Geographers (AAG). At the very least, you will get exposure to the theories, methodologies, and hot topics in your discipline while meeting your peers and/or future colleagues!

How can I afford to attend a conference?

Graduate students can cover the costs of conferences such as the WDCAG 2011 in various ways:

- *Submit an abstract for a presentation and apply for funding.*
 - Many departments and graduate societies provide financial support for graduate students **who are presenting**. Ask your grad chair and senior grad students for advice on funding opportunities.
- *Ask your supervisor (nicely) for funding.*
 - The worst they can say is no!
- *Travel cheaply.*
 - If a group of grad students from your department are going together, share and split the cost of hotel/hostel rooms. Some departments subsidize the cost of group travel to regional conferences (e.g., borrowing a departmental van, carpooling), and some conference organizers arrange for free 'homestay' accommodation among grad students. You can always try out other 'homestay' accommodation at your own risk (<http://www.globalfreeloaders.com/>, <http://www.hospitalityclub.org/>, and <http://www.couchsurfing.org/>, <http://www.airbnb.com/>). Sometimes people at conferences go out to eat at pricey restaurants; don't be afraid to suggest a less expensive alternative. Again, ask your grad chair, your fellow grad students, and the conference organizers for advice.

What can I expect at the WDCAG?

The WDCAG will consist of a few days of planned activities. Usually, everyone attends the keynote speaker's address on the Friday evening, but the rest is up to you. There will be a poster session and several sessions of papers (presentations) occurring concurrently on Saturday. You get to decide which ones to attend based on your interests (or which friends you want to support!). There are also a number of exciting fieldtrips on Friday that provide an excellent opportunity for conversation among attendees. Do not feel nervous about registering for and attending a field trip even if you are attending the conference on your own, there are sure to be others in this same position. In fact, field trips offer a great way to meet other people and make plans to attend conference events together. There are also opportunities to socialize and network, including the icebreaker event on Thursday evening and the reception on Friday evening. Many conference attendees eat meals during and after the conference together in smaller, informal groups. Use this as an opportunity to meet new people.

What is the difference between a paper and a poster presentation?

A poster is usually a large sheet of paper containing a summary of a research project and relevant graphs/pictures/maps/diagrams. If you submit an abstract for a poster, you will not have to give a presentation. Instead, you will attend a 'poster session' where you will stand next to your poster in a large room and answer questions from people passing by as they view the posters. Usually, your poster is then left hanging for some time before and after the poster timeslot so that others may view it at their leisure.

A paper is a 20 minute presentation in which you present and discuss a research project or idea verbally. When you submit an abstract for a paper presentation at the WDCAG 2011 you are not required to submit an actual journal-style paper in addition to a presentation at the conference. Typically, you will be scheduled to present during a thematically-organized “session” with other relevant presentations. The vast majority of presenters choose to use a PowerPoint presentation, but this is not required. Some read from a script or simply speak without notes, while a few use props, show videos, or incorporate other creative forms of conveying their ideas. After your presentation, a short discussion will follow (if time allows). This usually consists of 2-3 questions, but academics notoriously go overtime! You need to account for discussion in the time allotted for your presentation (20 minutes), and so it is typically ideal to plan to speak for about 15 minutes, thus allowing 5 minutes for questions and discussion.

Should I submit an abstract for a paper or a poster?

Ask your supervisor, as only they know for sure. The prestige of posters vs. presentations varies across sub-disciplines. For the WDCAG 2011, a poster may be best if you prefer to engage in conversation with only a few people at the same time, rather than speaking to a larger audience.

What should I do if I’m terrified of public speaking?!

It’s normal and okay to be nervous, but public speaking is an important skill and an inevitable aspect of most professional occupations at some point or another. As this is especially the case for researchers and academics, you’ve got to learn! The WDCAG is a supportive place to practice your public speaking skills. Some people hear horror stories about mean-spirited questions during the discussion period following your presentation (one being “How is this geography?”) but these types of questions are actually rare, especially at a small and supportive conference like the WDCAG. Mean spirited or aggressive lines of questioning are often more about the questioner’s ego than the presentation and, trust us, this will be obvious to others in attendance. Preparation is the best way to calm your nerves. Try not to worry *too* much about your presentation – after all, it’s only 20 minutes of your life, which in the grand scheme of things is just a flash! We promise those minutes will fly by much faster than you think and you’ll soon be thinking: “That’s was *it*?!”

Do’s and Don’ts, or What We Wished We’d Known Back Then!

- **Before the Conference:**
 - *Do register early.*
 - Conferences often have early-bird registration prices which can save you some money if you take advantage of them. It’s a good idea to check out a conference’s website as soon as possible to get a sense of the registration deadlines.
 - *Do submit your abstract on time.*
 - Help keep your stress to a minimum by submitting your abstract on time. Frantically trying to touch base with conference administrators in an

- effort to sneak your submission in past the deadline is no fun for you, and it earns you the ire of the organizers on the receiving end of your emails.
- *Don't submit edits of your abstract to conference organizers after the abstract's been submitted.*
 - When you submit your abstract, make sure it's a coherent final draft that provides a good description of your presentation. Requesting edits to your abstract after you've submitted it to the conference organizers is poor form, as it creates extra work for organizing committee members who are typically volunteering their time. Edits may not even be incorporated, which could result in an inapplicable description of your presentation in the program – poor form indeed.
 - *Do prepare adequately for your presentation.*
 - Conferences are for learning, networking, and having fun – not stressing out over an underprepared presentation! Trust us!
 - Make sure that you practice your presentation several times and that you can finish it within the 15-17 minute time frame (which will allow for 3-5 minutes for questions and discussion).
 - *Don't submit special requests for your presentation timeslot to be changed.*
 - Everyone has a preferred time, but chances are high it's neither in the early morning nor the late afternoon. If your presentation is scheduled for a time you don't like, roll with the punches and don't submit a request for it to be changed. Keep in mind that the organizers devote many hours to structuring the program to achieve balance in the sessions and to having sessions on related topics being offered at the same time. Your 'simple' request to change a presentation time may actually involve very major changes to the program overall, which is why it is best to avoid such requests.
 - *Do your research.*
 - Take the time to read about the department hosting the event (in this case, SFU) and other nearby geography departments to see which faculty members and graduate students match your research interests. They'll be eager to talk to you and you'll make a great impression if you know something about their research!
 - *Don't forget anything.*
 - Remember: a USB stick for your slideshow, business cards (if you have them – most students won't, but some will), a notebook for taking notes, professional and casual clothes, and a watch (so you aren't late for anything and can time yourself while you are presenting).
 - **During the Conference:**
 - *Do attend sessions.*
 - You will quickly realize that 8:30 AM sessions are not exactly popular. Some people view conferences as an excuse for drinking, staying up late, and sleeping in the next morning (and sometimes afternoon, too), while others simply ditch the conference after their presentation/poster

obligations are finished. Do yourself a favour and get your money's worth at the conference. Think of Woody Allen: "Eighty percent of success is showing up." Remember, you're not just attending sessions to hear the presentations, you're attending to see who is doing what in your field, network, and participate in discussions.

- *Don't forget to explore the area and have some fun, too.*
 - That being said, you don't have to attend every session, especially if the conference spans several days. Conferences are a rare opportunity for stuffy academics to cut their tethers to computers and live a little. If there's really a timeslot where nothing interests you in the slightest, take an hour or two to chat with a colleague or see something new. If you want to explore the region and you have the means, you should also schedule an extra day or two before or after the conference to do some sightseeing.
- *Do dress professionally.*
 - Remember the saying, "Don't dress for the job you have but the job you want?" The same goes for conferences. Academics are notoriously poorly-dressed and there is debate over what is appropriate. In all honesty, anything other than jeans and a t-shirt will pass at a small academic conference, but to pass with flying colors, err on the formal side, especially during your presentation.
- *Do act professionally.*
 - Don't forget that conferences are first and foremost professional functions. Even when you are socializing you should remain professional. While some supervisors or colleagues are more laid-back than others, as a rule never say or do anything you wouldn't feel comfortable saying or doing in front of your entire department at a conference!
- *Don't be late.*
 - Especially to your own session! Conference organizers and session chairs work hard to make things run smoothly. Many activities are crammed into a short time frame, so do your best to be on time.
- *Do network.*
 - Don't be afraid to talk to grad students and professors alike. If you've done your research (see "Before the Conference") you should have something worthwhile to talk about. Be confident and say something specific and thoughtful to open up a conversation: "Hello Dr. X, my name is Y and I'm a graduate student at XXX. I just wanted to tell you how impressed I was with the graph on your last slide. The results were interesting in light of my own research..." Don't be pushy, but *carpe diem!*
- *Don't stay glued to your friends/people you already know.*
 - Did we mention that you should network? You can talk to your friends anytime. Meet new people! Take a risk! Eat lunch with strangers! Remember, conferences are teeming with people who are just like you:

students fascinated enough by geography to make terrible life choices by pushing themselves through graduate school. ☺ You probably have a lot to talk about, especially if you ask “so, how’s the funding at YOUR school?”

- *Do be inquisitive and supportive.*
 - You’re a student because you like to learn, right? Support your own intellectual community. Ask questions about your colleagues’ research and be supportive rather than competitive. If you feel you can offer a tip, suggest a reading, or share an experience, be generous with your knowledge!
- After the conference:
 - *Do follow up on your promises to email/contact people from the conference.*
 - If you say you’ll email/send a paper/get in touch with someone at a conference, do it!
 - *Do review your notes and apply what you’ve learned to your research.*
 - Hopefully you’ve picked up one or two new references to use in your thesis or a new method you want to try. Look them up before you forget!

But don’t just take our word for it...

“Beginner’s Guide to Attending Conferences”

<http://www.quicksprout.com/2009/09/16/beginners-guide-to-attending-conferences/>

“Definitive Guide to Maximise Benefits of Conference Attendance”

<http://www.bhatt.id.au/blog/definitive-guide-to-maximise-benefits-of-conference-attendance/>

“How to attend a conference”

<http://wooga.dr bacchus.com/how-to-attend-a-conference>

“You’re Just Not That Into Me (the introvert’s guide to attending a conference)”

<http://www.lisapetrilli.com/2010/05/16/youre-just-not-that-into-me-the-introverts-guide-to-attending-a-conference/>

“Academic conference” (via Dr. Wikipedia)

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Academic_conference