

Preparing for the Annual Meeting: Advice for Graduate Students

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As a first-year graduate assistant in Fraternity & Sorority Life at Bowling Green State University, I was fortunate enough to attend the 2012 Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors (AFA) Annual Meeting in Indianapolis, Indiana. On the road trip to Indiana with my supervisors and fellow graduate assistants, I will never forget the excitement and nervousness that I felt bottled up inside of me. As a bit of a “Greek Life nerd,” I had been looking forward to the Annual Meeting for months—all in anticipation of getting to network and learn from other colleagues in the profession who were passionate about the same things as I was. I saw the Annual Meeting as the place where I could finally expand upon the casual conversations I was having between recruitment parties and house director meetings and late-night paper writing with the other graduate students and staff members in my office. But while that excitement was building on the drive south, my nerves were also kicking in at the same time. The thought of suddenly being surrounded by all of the professionals I looked up to, while trying to best represent myself and my institution, was completely intimidating. I was able to rely on the advice and guidance of mentors, friends, and fellow graduate students for my first Annual Meeting experience, so I have compiled a short list of things I benefitting from knowing as a graduate student.

Take full advantage of your time at the Annual Meeting. You will often hear mentors or supervisors tell you to use your time wisely at professional conferences—do not ignore this advice! While going to all of the session blocks, keynote speakers, and social events are important, try to think about the different layers of engagement that you can get involved in while there. Do not just attend sessions you are explicitly interested in—go to a session completely outside of your current interests or studies. Something that is not relevant for you now might become a hot issue for you in years to come. That unique session’s subject might even be the topic that a future employer decides to ask you about in a job interview down the line. While you are walking around the hotel, do not be intimidated by the “big names” or the profession’s past or present leaders—introduce yourself to them. When you see a past speaker or writer or board member that you admire, say something. I am sure that they will attest to the fact that they are not George Clooney, and they are more than happy to talk to a young professional in the field. (If you see Jeremiah Shinn, I am sure he can tell you about the embarrassing email I sent to him before the Annual Meeting last year where I thanked him for his “Minute with the Board” messages that year—like I said, “big Greek Life nerd.”) Reach out to those kinds of people at the Annual Meeting; it is an amazing opportunity to network with seasoned professionals and express your appreciation for their work.

Expect the unexpected...be prepared for anything. The Annual Meeting, or really any conference, can be an extremely busy couple of days, and you will need to pack and prepare for all kinds of circumstances. My personal advice is that you cannot over pack for something like this. If I could recommend any “must haves” for your bag or briefcase,

I would suggest mints/gum, business cards, pens, safety pins (these have come in handy in the worst of times in my experience), Chapstick, comfortable shoes, band-aids, cough drops, tissues, a lint roller, and your fraternity/sorority badge or pin! That is just a condensed list so feel free to expand and bring what you anticipate you might need. Once you are physically prepared, it is important to think about how you can be mentally prepared for this kind of experience—and that can entail quite a bit. Most importantly, at a conference like this you always want to be mindful of where you are and what you are saying or doing. This is an extremely public event, and you never know who is watching or listening. Be the best version of yourself and never trust that something you are saying in a bathroom or at the hotel bar will be private. In any circumstance involving a bar or alcohol, remember that you are a professional and should act as such—there is no room in this field for advisors who preach to students about appropriate alcohol use and then use this kind of experience to attach themselves to a drink all evening.

Be yourself, and be genuine. If I have learned one thing in this field since my first Annual Meeting, it is that this field looks for, and needs, professionals who are genuine and passionate. The attendees who are there just to get their own name out or to impress others with their experience or “expertise” are not going to go far. This profession and its members value those who are there to truly learn, engage, and ask questions. Be yourself and let your passion and interests shine through, not just your desire to “prove something” to the professionals you meet. Do not feel like you need to impress fellow attendees with your theory-to-practice ideas about Kohlberg and Panhellenic leadership decisions—just be engaged, ask questions, and absorb this experience for all it has to offer. Do not let the sometimes competitive nature of this field get in the way of being yourself and getting to know other graduate students and professionals. I have met some of my best friends through the Association and my interactions in the field, all by getting to know other young professionals on the Annual Meeting Graduate Staff, traveling consultants for inter/national organizations, or the friendly stranger behind you in line for coffee in between sessions.

If I can give one more closing piece of advice to graduate students, it is this: Do not limit your AFA experience just to the Annual Meeting each year. While the meeting is a fantastic opportunity to get to know other professionals and graduate students in the field, this conference is just a fraction of the important work you can contribute to as an AFA member. While participating in Nashville this year, consider all of the other ways you can contribute to the Association long term. Apply to be on Graduate Staff next year; submit an article for publication in *Essentials*, the *Oracle*, or *Perspectives*; participate in AdvanceU sessions; stay active in your regional business and try to attend a drive-in conference; or, apply to be an AFA volunteer or Annual Meeting Ambassador. There are so many ways to stay connected to the Association throughout the year—let the Annual Meeting be the place where all of those conversations, articles, and connections from the year come to life. Take the next couple of weeks to prepare, and pack up your excitement, your nerves, and your safety pins—I will see you in Nashville!