

Getting the Most Out of the Annual Meeting

Whitney Swesey, RISE Partnerships

This is it—the AFA Annual Meeting (AM)! This could be your best opportunity for professional development all year. Here are a few ways to take advantage of it.

“You have to get out there and connect with people. It’s not called net-sitting or net-eating. It’s called networking. You have to work at it.”

–Dr. Ivan Misner

Connect. In this field, it pays to network. If this is your first Annual Meeting attend the first-time events; ask your mentor, supervisor, and friends to introduce you to the other professionals they know; and, take the time to make connections with other attendees. If you are an AM veteran, make plans in advance to reconnect with the professionals you have known for years, but save time to make new connections as well. Do not just spend your time with the professionals you have known for years; set a goal for yourself to meet a new professional in an educational session and become a mentor to them. This may be the only time you see colleagues you consider family, but invite new professionals to coffee or lunch as well. Make the extra effort to connect!

“It’s not enough to be busy. The question is, what are we busy about?”

–Thoreau

Focus. Why will you be attending the Annual Meeting? Imagine that embarrassing moment when your supervisor asks, “what did you learn?” and you are panicked trying to find something more to say other than “Nashville is a nice place,” or “I went to a couple of sessions, but I didn’t learn anything new.” What can you learn that will impact your campus, students, or organization the most? When you begin to plan a program you write learning outcomes first and then you design the program around your learning outcomes. Consider using this same approach by writing learning outcomes for yourself for the Annual Meeting and then selecting your educational sessions and other experiences based around them: [Here](#).

“Planning without action is futile, action without planning is fatal.”

–Unknown

Plan. It is easy to get derailed at the Annual Meeting when you only see some of your colleagues once a year, but planning your schedule in advance will help you stay on track. Download the Guidebook app, and create your schedule before you go. You can select the educational sessions you want to attend, a backup session in case the first one you selected fills up, add the receptions you plan to attend, and set reminders to ensure you arrive on time. If you do not plan out your AM experience you will inevitably be the one standing in the hallway frantically scrolling through the Guidebook, sprinting to the session you really want to be in only to find you are in the wrong part of the hotel, or end up in a session you have heard before that has no relevance to your experience.

“If we knew what it was we were doing, it would not be called research, would it?”

–Einstein

Learn. Our organizations are social, and there is no denying as members of our Association we are social. We also cannot deny the amount of learning that occurs at the Annual Meeting. Attend as many educational sessions as possible, take notes, request copies of the PowerPoint presentations, introduce yourself to the presenters, and complete the evaluations afterwards. Learn from your colleagues outside of

educational sessions as well. Seek out other professionals who can help you reach the goals you set for yourself for this AM. Meet with headquarters staffs that have programs or new initiatives that are interesting to you. Meet with institutions that are similar to your own to share ideas and policies.

*“Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself.”
-Leo Tolstoy*

Reflect. Remember how you critique students for winging it and not taking time to think through what they learned from a session? Pot, meet kettle. The Annual Meeting can be a whirlwind. Before you know it the meeting has ended, and you are back on campus finishing the semester. Set time aside on your calendar before you leave to reflect on your time at the AM when you return. Did you achieve the goals you set for yourself for the AM? Who did you connect or reconnect with? Take the time to write an email or brief card on your flight home to ensure you will keep that connection beyond the AM. Email the presenters you want to send an extra thank you to or from whom you want to request a copy of a presentation. While it is fresh in your mind, reflect on something you want to start, stop, or continue doing for the next year. Hold yourself accountable; send a meeting request to your supervisor before you leave to share what you learned the first day back in the office.

The Annual Meeting is a valuable experience. Taking these extra steps can help you in creating a more intentional experience from start to finish. Here is a step-by-step preparation guide to help you get ready for a successful AM: [Here](#).

Once the Annual Meeting is over it might be tempting to put the handouts you received in educational sessions away in your desk and forget them, but this is the best time to continue to maximize your experience while everything is fresh in your mind. Here is a step-by-step guide on how to follow through after the AM: [Here](#).