

Undergraduate Research at Professional Psychology Conventions

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One of the most important aspects of undergraduate research is the opportunity to present or publish the research. For an undergraduate in psychology, there are a number of forums available to present or publish research findings. In this volume, Stuber-McEwen and Thielen-Belveal (2008) described undergraduate research conferences which specifically focus on student research while Ware and Burns (2008) and Froman (2008) discussed publication opportunities for undergraduate research. In this paper, the focus will be on the presentation of undergraduate research at professional conventions with particular attention given to the regional psychological associations.

Professional Associations

As a profession, psychology has a strong history of supporting the undergraduate research experience. That support is most evident in the regional professional associations. A recent report from the American Psychological Association (Mathie & Wesp, 2006) highlighted the activities of regional associations in both secondary and post-secondary education including undergraduate research. There are seven regional psychological associations all of which have some provisions for the presentation of undergraduate research. The seven regional associations and their websites are as follows: Eastern Psychological Association (EPA, www.easternpsychological.org); Midwestern Psychological Association (MPA, www.midwesternpsych.org); New England Psychological Association (NEPA, <http://www.nepa-info.org>); Rocky Mountain Psychological Association (RMPA, www.rockymountainpsych.org); Southeastern Psychological Association (SEPA, www.sepaonline.com); Southwestern Psychological Association (SWPA, www.swpsych.org); and Western Psychological Association (WPA, www.westernpsych.org). Except for MPA, all of these associations allow undergraduates to become student members and present papers at their convention. MPA does not have provisions for undergraduate membership but will allow

undergraduates to present at their convention if they are sponsored by a member. Requirements for student membership vary but generally student members require sponsorship from a full member, are non-voting, and have a reduced dues rate. The two national psychological associations, the American Psychological Association (APA, www.apa.org) and the Association for Psychological Science (APS, www.psychologicalscience.org), both have an undergraduate student membership category and programs at their conventions in support of undergraduate research. In addition to the national and regional associations, psychology has numerous discipline-specific professional organizations many of which also have provisions for undergraduates but most often require some level of professional sponsorship from the student's advisor.

For the undergraduate, there are a number of fundamental differences between presenting at an undergraduate conference and a professional convention. Stuber-McEwen and Thielen-Belveal (2008) outlined many of the important benefits of an undergraduate conference, but a professional convention provides a rather different experience with different benefits. First, an important distinction needs to be made. There are two ways in which a student can present at a regional professional convention. The first is through the *Psi Chi* program which is part of each regional convention. This is "the conference within the conference" and closely parallels the undergraduate conference model. Sessions are exclusively student sessions and often these papers are judged and awards are made. The primary audience for these sessions is fellow students and faculty advisors. More recently, however, we are seeing more undergraduate papers appearing among the regular paper sessions within some of the regional conventions that may be co-authored by faculty but presented by students. The primary audience for these sessions is other professionals and while they are not judged, they are scrutinized and held to a higher standard. While the *Psi Chi* programs are excellent opportunities and derive many of the

benefits of the regional convention, it is the latter situation that is of primary concern in this paper.

Undergraduate psychology conferences tend to have very low to non-existent rejection rates and work that has not been fully completed prior to submission is often accepted. Submissions to professional conventions, on the other hand, are reviewed more rigorously and have significant rejection rates. Often the primary focus of the undergraduate conference is to encourage learning about the process of doing research to help mold future researchers whereas at the professional convention the focus is on the content and the quality of the research. Dissemination of cutting-edge research is paramount at professional conventions and researchers use conventions to bridge the publication lags (Tryon, 1985).

Benefits

There are obvious benefits for undergraduates to attend and present at professional conventions over student conferences. First, regional professional conventions tend to be more prestigious than student conferences. Just as there is a hierarchy of journals, there is a hierarchy of conventions and conferences. If a student is trying to build his or her resume for graduate school, a regional convention is generally viewed more positively. Second, students attending a professional convention have an opportunity to observe and model professionals at work. While students have interacted with faculty members in the classroom and in the lab, the professional convention presents a whole new situation and an opportunity to see professionals interacting with other professionals. In addition, the opportunity for a student to interact with their mentor “away from the office” can broaden their perspective about what it means to be a psychologist. Third, at most student conferences there is a single keynote address from a professional. At regional conventions there are many invited addresses, keynote speakers, and special lecturers from various sub-disciplines within psychology. Whenever I’ve taken undergraduates to a convention, the most memorable experiences are not what they themselves presented but instead what they heard from one of the keynote speakers. The opportunity for students to hear and meet psychologists that they have read about in their textbooks can be invigorating. Some of the regional conventions provide conversation hours or receptions that allow students access to these professionals. Fourth, regional conventions often present cutting-edge research by experts in the field. There is probably no better place to get timely information than at a convention. And finally, fifth, there are greater

opportunities to network with professionals at regional conventions for both graduate school and research purposes. Contacts at conventions have propelled many students into graduate programs. Being able to put a face to an application or hearing a presentation by the applicant is invaluable when graduate programs are making decisions.

Costs/Risks

There are also potential costs/risks involved in attending and presenting at professional conventions over student conferences. First, most student conferences strive to keep cost down and travel distance at a minimum. Professional conventions, on the other hand, can be quite expensive. Registration and membership fees are generally lower for students but still somewhat expensive. Hundred dollar a night hotel rooms are common place and most professional conventions last several days while student conferences are usually one or two days at the most. Travel as well as meal costs are also expensive. At one of the student conferences I’ve been involved with we charge students about \$17 which includes a luncheon and evening banquet. At some convention hotels \$17 won’t cover breakfast. There are ways that students might have the opportunity to attend professional conventions at reduced costs. Most professional conventions utilize student volunteers to help out with registration or other tasks in exchange for the opportunity to attend some of the sessions.

A second concern or risk associated with a professional convention has to do with the level of support. One of the hallmarks of most undergraduate conferences is that they provide a very supportive environment of both peers and faculty that provide constructive feedback. That is not always the case at professional conventions. Not all the attendees at professional conventions are student-focused; sad to say, some are not even people-focused, and there is the occasional pompous professional we’ve all run into at conventions. A supportive environment is important for students who are just beginning their career in psychology. I still recall being brushed off by a researcher I greatly admired at a professional convention. But I equally recall convention experiences with some giants in the field who were as open and friendly as can be.

Responsibilities

There are certain expectations of behavior at professional conventions that may not be apparent to the undergraduate student. Since failure to live up to those expectations reflects poorly not only to the

student but also on the faculty member and the institution they represent, it is the responsibility of the mentor/advisor/sponsor to communicate these expectations. The undergraduate needs to dress and act professionally. Jeans and a t-shirt or hopping from the hotel swimming pool into a paper session in your swim suit is never appropriate (I've seen both done at conventions). Entering sessions late or leaving sessions early is frowned upon. Some of the regional associations, such as WPA, post a guide for students attending conventions on their website. Others, like RMPA, include a section on convention etiquette in their program. A faculty mentor needs to discuss these issues before leaving for the convention because it is not always clear to the students what those expectations are. Often faculty assume that students know what it means to act professionally; that may be a faulty assumption.

While preparation is important at both the student and professional convention, the professional forum provides a more intense experience with greater risks. For the undergraduate, the audience is not one's peers, but rather possible future professors, colleagues whose impression could impact on the student's career. Most of us can recall the first paper we presented at a professional convention and the time we agonized over it. Most of us were probably graduate students, not undergrads, at the time. It is very important for the mentor to guide the undergraduate in this process especially since the mentor's name is typically on the paper. A well rehearsed presentation with note cards is far superior to the student who thought they could "wing it" and suddenly drew a blank.

Closing Thoughts

As one who has been involved with both undergraduate conferences and professional conventions for a number of years, I would like to close with some suggestions. In a perfect world, every student in psychology would have the opportunity to present at both a student conference and a professional convention during their undergraduate career. While there are many undergraduate conferences around, they're still not everywhere. I believe that the student conference presents an ideal environment for presenting that first paper. It is supportive, typically provides constructive feedback, and is relatively non-threatening (when

compared to the professional convention). Undergraduates who successfully present papers at the student conference level and who want to pursue further studies in psychology should be encouraged to take the next step and attend a professional convention even if they do not present a paper.

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