

## Pharmacy Conferences: Lessons for Student Success

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**S**chools and colleges of pharmacy are required to provide career development, leadership skills, and professionalism training based on accreditation standards.<sup>1,2</sup> Students are also required to complete co-curricular activities to accompany classroom and experiential learning. Attending a local, state, or national pharmacy conference is one way that student pharmacists can accomplish these requirements. Additionally, it provides an opportunity for students to enhance their career development through networking and building connections, sharing innovative ideas, and practicing appropriate conference etiquette.

As a student pharmacist, attending a pharmacy conference can be intimidating without knowing expectations for educational sessions, professional social outings, and how to maximize your conference experience. The purpose of this article is to provide tips for a successful experience at pharmacy conferences focusing on elevator speeches, networking, and attending poster and educational sessions.

### Deliver Your Elevator Speech

An elevator speech provides structure when presenting yourself to a new individual and makes a memorable impression during a brief interaction. The name is based on presenting the entirety of the speech in the duration of an elevator ride, typically no more than 30 to 60 seconds.<sup>3,4</sup> Key elements of an elevator speech include focusing on your educational and employment background, professional interests, future goals, and your purpose for interacting. Another important element of the elevator speech is that it is adapted based on who you are talking to and the purpose of that conversation. Your speech can be very different if you are introducing yourself to a peer student pharmacist from another pharmacy school

compared to an Introductory Pharmacy Practice Experience (IPPE) or Advanced Pharmacy Practice Experience (APPE) preceptor or future employer. It is essential to have your elevator speech prepared when you introduce yourself to someone new at a conference. Before you debut your elevator speech at your first conference, it can be helpful to practice with a friend or mentor first so that you are polished and ready to deliver it. When it is time to deliver your elevator speech to someone new, begin the conversation with a firm handshake, a welcoming smile, and ensure your name badge is visible on your upper-right chest.

### Build Your Professional Network

It is never too early to start networking and engaging with other students and pharmacists. As pharmacy is a smaller, tight-knit profession, building your professional network now as a student will provide benefits many years into the future. Conferences create numerous opportunities to connect with others in a variety of settings. Even though networking can be intimidating and outside of your comfort zone, separating yourself from those who are known to you and introducing yourself to others is valuable in building connections. One place to start is asking a friend to introduce you to someone they know. If you have certain individuals in mind that you would like to meet, take the time to learn about their previous and current roles within the pharmacy profession before introducing yourself. When you meet someone new, have an engaging conversation by asking thoughtful questions and listening attentively. Questions asked to individuals should be specific to their organization or practice such as asking about a certain staffing model the pharmacy uses or a recent expansion of their services offered. These questions demonstrate that you have

done your research before entering the conversation and show a higher level of genuine interest.

As your interaction ends, ask the individual for a business card in order to reconnect with them at a later time. After they are gone, write down a few notes on the back of the card to remind you about your conversation. Once returning home after the conference, send a follow-up email with a reminder of how you met, what your conversation was about, and the purpose for your follow-up. If following up on potential IPPE/APPE rotations, employment, or post-graduate residency opportunities, it shows initiative and interest by reaching out again after the conference.

If food or drink is offered, have your right hand free to shake hands when greeting new people or have a place to set down your refreshments. When in more casual settings such as eating establishments, it is important to be aware of alcohol use and to maintain professionalism. While the lure of food and beverages may be enticing, don't forget the true purpose of your attendance at the event as the best interactions can often be unplanned and maintaining a professional state is the expectation.

### Attend Poster and Educational Sessions

Pharmacy conferences often have poster sessions where attendees present their research. This provides conference attendees an opportunity to learn about research, practice advancements, and innovation while networking with others. As a poster session attendee, prepare in advance by looking at the list of poster titles and selecting which ones are of interest to you. When viewing a poster, it is helpful to have a general bank of questions to ask if you cannot think of a specific question related to the project or research, such as future



directions and implications of the project or lessons learned from the presenter.

As a poster presenter at a conference, be prepared and have business cards or paper printouts of your poster available to hand out so that interested attendees can contact you or reference your research if needed. Have an elevator speech ready about your research to provide a one-minute overview of your project and lessons learned. If food and drink is available, avoid them while you are actively presenting your poster as it can be distracting for all involved.

As with poster sessions, pharmacy conferences have a wide-ranging selection of educational sessions to attend. Determine ahead of time a potential list of sessions to attend based on your clinical and professional interests. Depending on the scope of the organization, topics can range from a specialty or primary care focus, academia, leadership, or personal development. Presentation slides are typically available for download from the organization's conference website or phone app so you can take notes and share the information with other colleagues. Most importantly, be engaged and give your undivided attention to the speaker without

being distracted by your electronics or social media.

Attending a pharmacy conference as a student pharmacist may seem overwhelming as you are having many new experiences in a short period of time. Prepare for the conference ahead of time and challenge yourself to go outside your comfort zone. While meeting someone new can be intimidating, it is helpful to remember that regardless of our current positions in our academic or professional communities, we are all just people. Attending a conference is an essential mechanism for career and professional development that starts for students and continues on in your career as a pharmacist.

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*Disclosures: The authors declare no real or potential conflicts or financial interest in any product or service mentioned in the manuscript, including grants, equipment, medications, employment, gifts, and honoraria.*

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