

Alec Ellis

Alone, but not Lonely

Attending an Academic Conference Solo

Somehow, it feels like conference season is always around the corner. With ALA, LibLearnX, ACRL, regional conferences, trade associations, and more, it can feel like you are either planning for or recovering from a conference! As great as these experiences can be to get out of the routines of our daily life, learn what is going on in “Library Land,” and visit the exhibitor hall, there can be a certain amount of trepidation going to conferences alone. It is often a stereotype that librarians tend to be more introverted.¹ When you work at a library with a small staff or are a solo librarian, it may be the norm that you attend conferences alone. However, especially for library staff like this, getting out of your small bubble can be a great experience as you get to learn what other places are doing.

For the last three years, I have attended the Colorado Association of Libraries’ (CAL) conference alone. As an introvert, but also somebody who enjoys conferencing and meeting new people, I’ve developed some tips and tricks that I hope can help any solo conference attendee not feel so lonely.

Before the Conference

After I attended my first CALCON and felt a little out of my depth, knowing nobody in either Colorado or CAL, I decided to join the CALCON planning committee. So my first tip, if you are able, is to join the planning committee for the conference you want to attend. This offers an important service to the academic guild and allows you to meet people before the actual conference. It can also help you feel more comfortable when you arrive to understand how the conference will work.

My second tip is to review the conference schedule and events to decide which ones you want to attend. This allows you to focus on the actual sessions and getting to where you need to be rather than spending time with your head in your phone planning on the fly. Conference centers can be confusing enough without also trying to decide which session to attend! To this tip I will also add, make sure you know where your hotel is (if it is not at the conference site) and have a plan on how to get back and forth.

During the Conference

When the conference finally comes, I have found it helpful to arrive on time (or early) and explore the location. Figure out where the sessions will be, where the food options are, and where the exhibit hall is located. It can be frustrating and exhausting to always be lost, rushing around trying to find each location, and then arriving at a session late.

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Next, I find it helpful to try to connect with new people early or even find acquaintances from previous events so that you can have conference buddies. This can make meals and events a little less awkward. By doing this the first day, I have made good connections and then was able to find a friendly face later when it came to days two or three. When I attend CALCON now, I already know members from the planning committee, but I also seek out fellow academic librarians.

My next suggestion is to attend meals, after-hours events, and networking sessions as you feel able. These can be great informal settings to meet fellow librarians and staff. You may end up “talking shop” or airing complaints and finding a sympathetic ear. But you also may find a kindred spirit and talk about the latest TV show or bond over board games and Manga. Especially for regional conferences, these meals and gatherings are a great way to meet library staff who are dealing with similar situations and may help you find solutions to your own problems. Furthermore, these conversations may also lead to collaborations or mentorship opportunities. For me, as an academic, my connections with public librarians allow me to have friends and connections when I visit the local public library branch.

Lastly, don't burn yourself out by always going and meeting new people. Make sure you take care of yourself and skip a session if you need time to recharge. But remember conferences are often short, two to three days, so try to find the balance between putting yourself out there, even if it's tiring, and spending all your free time alone in your hotel room.

After the Conference

After the conference is over and you are going through your conference swag, take time to follow up with people through email if you discussed a project or problem on which you could collaborate. Also, follow people or organizations on social media and continue any conversations you had. Lastly, begin to plan your next conference! Hopefully, now that you have met or “followed” all your new acquaintances, your next conference can be full of old friends rather than strangers.

To that end, I want to thank Anna, Erin, Alejandro, and others who have become my friends over the last three years. And a special shout out to my trivia night team this year—we didn't win, but we shared great food and had a fun time. You all ensured that even though I was alone, I never felt lonely. ❧

Note

1. Mary Jane Scherdin, “Vive la Différence: Exploring Librarian Personality Types Using the MBTI,” in *Discovering Librarians: Profiles of a Profession* (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 1994), 132.