



THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
mentor memo
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This Mentor Memo, part of a series, responds to graduate students' requests for advice about navigating graduate studies successfully.

The series also addresses topics in career preparation and professional development. For more information and to suggest topics, contact Graduate School Dean Jerry Baldasty at baldasty@u.washington.edu.

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At some point in your graduate career you will have to mingle with others informally at conferences, departmental colloquia, social hours, and other events—it's inevitable. If you find these situations uncomfortable, you're not alone! Read on to learn how to "work a room" with confidence, poise, and style. The result could be identifying contacts and information that can help you reach your goals.

Getting ready

Attend as many receptions and networking events as possible so you can practice working a room before it really counts. Make or order some business cards to distribute at the event. Prior to an event, collect information about it and the venue. Brush up on your current events so you sound intelligent and well-rounded; web surfing can be an easy way to do this. Prepare a short personal script so you can confidently introduce yourself—without sounding "scripted." Consider writing a 10-second and a 60-second summary of your research so that you can speak about it confidently and consistently.

Looking good

Dress appropriately for the occasion. If you're not sure what to wear, ask a colleague, check the event website for attire instructions and photos from previous events—or err on the side of safety by dressing up more rather than less. Try to limit how much stuff you bring. For example, you don't want your backpack to fall off your shoulder and spill wine all over somebody. Write and display your nametag clearly.

Managing the munchies

Remember, your main goal is to make contacts, not to eat. Don't camp out at the refreshment or beverage table. Think small—stick with small foods that are easy to eat, limit your plate to a small amount of food, take small bites, and drink alcohol in moderation. Try to leave your right hand free and dry so you can shake hands; you might even consider keeping a napkin in your pocket so you can periodically clean and dry your hands.

Jumping in

If you don't want to look like a loner, make eye contact with somebody in a group that includes a familiar face or a group with a physical gap. Approach the group and then,

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as appropriate, shake hands firmly, introduce yourself in one to two sentences at most, and start short conversations about non-controversial topics. If it becomes clear a group doesn't want to include you, don't take it personally. Find another group, start your own by finding other individuals who are wandering aimlessly, or make conversation with somebody at the refreshment table. Remember that a positive, confident attitude goes a long way in social situations!

Keeping it going

After introductions and “small talk,” what next? Discuss commonalities you share with other group members. Perhaps you belong to the same organization, went to the same school, etc. Ask others to talk about their research, job, career path, or workplace; most people enjoy talking about themselves. Once a connection has been developed, you can ask for academic advice, career tips, or referrals to other contacts. It's best not to ask directly for jobs because doing so tends to make others uncomfortable. Focus on the conversation, but don't monopolize it, one-up people, or invade others' personal space. Be sure to welcome and introduce others who approach your group.

Breaking out

When you're ready to exit a group, ask for business cards and distribute yours, as appropriate. Express appreciation for the conversation and excuse yourself. Visit the refreshment table, approach another group, or call it a night.

Bringing it home

The event is not over when it's over! After the event while the experience is still fresh in your mind, jot down informal notes about the people you met so you'll remember their names, titles, and stories. Follow through with any promises you made to those with whom you interacted. If appropriate, send a thank-you note to the event host.

Last-minute tips

Be sure to silence your cell phone. Take some breath mints. If you make a mistake, don't get rattled but laugh about it, learn from the situation, and move on. Most importantly—be friendly, sincere, genuine, confident, and interested in others.

References

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