

How to Make the Most of Your NCDA Conference Experience

Though attending a conference is a wonderful professional development opportunity, it can also feel like a whirlwind of information, people, emotions, and ideas. To help participants at this year's NCDA Global Career Development Conference better prepare for and maximize their time in Boston, we have crafted a list of suggestions. While certainly useful for new professionals, students, and/or first-time attendees, these tips are designed to facilitate the best possible conference experience for participants at all levels.

Things to bring with you:

Business cards

Boston 2013 is poised to be the biggest conference in NCDA history, with thousands of attendees! You are going to meet a lot of people, so a great way to remember names and help others connect with you post-conference is to exchange business cards. Be sure to bring a stack with you.

Something to write on and with

You may receive an NCDA notebook upon checking-in, but having extra writing space and your favorite writing utensil (or two) would be wise. Taking notes during sessions, and jotting down your own ideas based on what you hear, will help you organize your thoughts when reflecting upon your experience.

Appropriate attire

At this conference, you may see individuals in suits as well as in casual dress. If trying to decide what to wear throughout the day, business casual attire will likely be most appropriate. It is never a bad idea to keep an extra sweater, blazer, or thin jacket with you when spending the day in a large hotel where A/C settings could make it feel much cooler than July! Lastly, if you plan to attend the Gala on Tuesday night, packing cocktail or semi-formal attire would be ideal.

Snacks to stay energized

As awesome as it is, this conference (like any multi-day professional development event for thousands of participants) is a marathon! You will attend many sessions back to back, and staying alert and focused throughout the day will help you to get the most out of your time in each session, and be your best self as you meet new and interesting professionals. Though refreshments may be available, it would be smart to pack a few snacks of your own to keep you going.

Spending your time wisely at the conference:

Participate in the First-Timers Session or State Leadership Training.

Based on feedback from last year's conference participants, highlights of attending the First-Timers Session included meeting NCDA officers, connecting with other first-timers/new members/young professionals, and getting more excited about the conference experience and all that is offered. For returning participants, even if you aren't a state CDA president, you may want to check out the State Leadership Training session. Being there will give you a chance to learn about leadership at the state level, meet current, future, and past presidents of state CDAs, and see how you can get more involved in NCDA through state affiliation or vice versa.

Introduce yourself to one new person at each event or session.

Meeting new people and expanding one's professional network is one of the top-rated benefits mentioned by conference attendees of all ages and experience levels. People you meet at NCDA will often become valuable colleagues and contacts, as well as future conference buddies to reconnect with in years to come. Remember to exchange business cards and follow up post-conference.

Select at least one program aimed at your own professional development or personal interests.

There are a number of sessions offered that focus on practitioner wellness, career advancement, entrepreneurship, and other topics that keep us growing and thriving in this field. While you may find yourself mostly attending sessions that address your clients' needs, be sure to check out at least one program that will benefit you personally or professionally. Consider checking out a session on a concept that is totally unfamiliar to you – something research-related, in a practice setting you are unfamiliar with, or focused on a topic that simply sounds interesting. There are so many smart, passionate presenters at this conference – take advantage and learn something new just for you!

Sit in on a Committee Meeting.

Open committee meetings will be held Tuesday during lunch. These gatherings are for committee members and leaders, potential members, and those simply interested in common topics impacting NCDA. If you are seeking out your niche in this organization, attending a committee meeting is a great way to meet people and get inspired to contribute further.

Attend networking and social events [without any fear of awkwardness].

Though we already mentioned that networking is perhaps the greatest benefit of attending the conference, many people feel a bit uneasy walking into a big social event. Here are a few tips to put you at ease and energize you around the idea of connecting in this setting:

- a Pretend you are hosting. Start conversations with the aim of making someone else feel welcome and less alone in a big room. Engage with someone who does not yet have someone to talk to, or invite someone you met at an earlier session to join a conversation with you and a colleague. Your kindness could make someone else's conference experience exponentially better, and will most likely do the same for you.
- b Seize the opportunity to talk to an NCDA leader, "celebrity" in the field, or more seasoned professional in person. How often will you be in the same room with someone whose name you have seen on a textbook or in an article you referenced in grad school? Strike up a conversation and reap the benefits of having these individuals and their wisdom at your fingertips.
- c If you are a graduate or undergraduate student attendee, please join us at Student Networking Social on Monday, July 8th at Jerry Remy's Seaport (7:30-9pm). This event, designed by Leadership Academy participant Samara Reynolds, will be a great chance to relax, connect, and reflect upon your eventful first full day at NCDA 2013.

Try Roundtables for maximum exposure and a small-group feel, and Presentations for an in-depth perspective and more time with a presenter of interest.

New conference participants often ask about the difference in program formats, and the advantages of each. Presentations last for 70 minutes and typically involve one presenter or group discussing a topic with attendees in a separate break-out room. The benefit of Presentations is that you get deeper insight into a topic, can network with people in the room before or after the program, and don't have to worry about jumping around to a second session or trying to hear over the buzz of conversation. Roundtable sessions allow you to attend two shorter, smaller discussions during the same time block (30 minutes each). Often the Roundtables are all set up in the same room, which can be both convenient and chaotic. The benefits of Roundtables are that you get to sit with a more intimate group of colleagues, potentially meet more people in a small window of time, and gain exposure to two topics for the price of one. Test out both formats and see which suits you best! And be sure to preview the conference sessions online and make initial selections prior to the event. Seats will fill up quickly so you may want to arrive early at the sessions you most want to see.

Invite a new contact to share a meal with you.

The best way to get to know someone new may very well be to break bread together. Going out to breakfast, lunch, dinner, or coffee with a fellow participant is a perfect way to connect on a more personal level in a large, hectic conference environment. We encourage you to sit next to someone new at the awards or strolling lunch, ask a contact to join you for a meal after a session, or include one or two new people in an established group of colleagues going to grab a bite. You can also check out who is coming to Boston 2013 ahead of time on NCDA's website and use the list to pre-arrange meetings during meals or coffee breaks.

Following up on your experience:

Connect via social media at and after the conference.

There are many ways to use technology and social media to enhance your conference experience, keep track of contacts, and deepen your involvement with NCDA post-conference. We encourage you to check out the Cyber Café, connect to people you meet via one or more of your social media networks, and join the [NCDA LinkedIn group](#). You may want to track your experience via Twitter and share useful information with those that can't be at the conference. You can also follow [@NCDA](#) on Twitter and [Pinterest](#) now and well after the event. Remember to post regular tweets about the conference (#NCDABoston) and/or start a discussion on the NCDA LinkedIn group to be entered into our Social Media Contest! The more you post, the greater your chances of winning! Lastly, be sure to read your NCDA listserv emails, stay informed via Career Convergence online magazine, and check out the many nooks and crannies of the NCDA website that are packed with helpful tools and info.

Reach out to any presenters of sessions you wanted to check out but missed.

There are a ton of programs to choose from you and will undoubtedly have to make the tough choice to attend one session over another you were equally as interested in. Don't be afraid to follow up – via email, social media, or simply in person if you have the chance – with the presenter of a session you wanted to get to. They may be willing to share their handouts/presentation with you and engage in further conversation on the topic.

We hope you enjoy the conference!