

Networking: a catalyst for your academic and career success

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Networking can happen anywhere; both formally (at an official networking event) and informally (meeting a friend of a friend who works at a company that interests you), as well as online, and in person. However, the very thought of actively meeting new people and conversing can make students shudder (especially us awkward folk), but the process of creating and managing your network connections doesn't have to be so daunting. While it is work, it can also be incredibly rewarding!

Why is networking important? Why do I have to start thinking about it now?

Even if you are not yet in grad school, networking can be a catalyst for your academic and career success. It can help you gain contacts and knowledge that give you a competitive advantage when choosing and applying to graduate programs, funding opportunities, and getting a job.

Though finding a job may seem like a concern for Future You, thinking about it now is smart. Consider this: if you had to choose between two people to interview for a job and your choices both had equally impressive qualifications, but one of them was recommended by someone you knew (and trusted), who would you choose? If you would choose the recommended candidate, you are like most employers. A huge portion of jobs are not advertised on job boards and employers often use referrals to find new hires. You want to take advantage of this! To build an effective network that can lead to referrals, starting early is best.

How do I network before I'm in grad school?

One of the less intimidating ways of networking is online, using [LinkedIn](#), so it's a great place to start. You can use the alumni search tool to find people who graduated from your prospective program (go to the institution's page and click the "See alumni" button). Where are graduates working now? What careers do they have? What experiences led them there? What skills do they highlight? Take note of these things.

Now for the intimidating part: reaching out to potential connections. While creeping is great for learning about career options, connecting with relevant alumni means they can offer you advice about your potential grad program, study tips, or grad school experiences that can make you stand out from other students when job searching.

Reaching out isn't as scary as it seems. When you request a connection, avoid simply pressing the "connect" button. Instead, opt for a more personalized message that they will be more likely to accept. For example, "I am interested in applying to the graduate program that you completed. I was wondering if I could ask you some questions..." Voilà! You now have a new network connection in your field that has other valuable connections that may lead to opportunities in the future. Success!

Professors are also helpful connections. Reach out to them, even before grad school. Not only will you get to know the people who will be teaching and mentoring you, but you also may be able to become involved in some of their research or projects. If they think you will be a valuable addition to their work, they may lend support for your grad school application. Search on your prospective department's website for a list of faculty members and learn about their research that aligns with your interests. If you are still completing your undergrad, reach out to your current professors too. Share additional resources related to course material and ask them meaningful questions. If they get to know you, they can give you grad school advice and may be able to act as a reference for your grad school application.

Networking tips

- Attend conferences, presentations, and events where you can network with other researchers and students. Even if you're super busy, these opportunities are worth your time.
- Look for leadership activities on campus (student groups, hiring and planning committees, etc.), but also consider off campus initiatives, such as community groups or boards. This will help to diversify your network and expand it outside of academia.
- Think about your skills and achievements and what makes you unique and valuable. Practice communicating this in a 30 second elevator pitch so you can pique the interest of potential connections.
- Follow up with connections by requesting informational interviews. This is where you connect with someone working in a job, company, or sector that interests you to ask questions and gain career information (not ask for a job). It can be incredibly beneficial.

Finally, don't forget to be memorable

Rest assured, this isn't as hard as it sounds. Your network will be more invested in your success if they remember you and see you as a valuable connection. On LinkedIn, share information about your sector (tips, news articles, stats, research, etc.). Twitter is another excellent platform to share resources and participate in relevant conversations, especially if you follow people with similar interests. Once you begin doing research, ResearchGate allows you to share with other academics. These practices will help to establish you as not only a grad student, but also as a professional in your field.