The Hidden Curriculum of Conferences:

Motivational Messaging Lab
(Written by Alison Koenka)

First, a couple of caveats:

- This is written especially with AERA and our field (educational psychology/motivation) in mind. Some of these suggestions likely apply to other professional organizations, but others likely do not!

- These recommendations and tips are based on my personal experiences and perspectives. While I have a lot of experiences in a bunch of different roles at AERA (grad student, postdoc, faculty, chair, discussant, symposium organizer, poster, roundtable, and paper presenter, and program chair), other experienced colleagues may not agree with some of the perspectives/tips I share here, which is of course absolutely fine!

- This isn't meant to be an exhaustive list of tips – just a few (or maybe a little more than a few ;)) things that come to mind that I think are especially unclear/confusing about AERA specifically and/or academic conferences more generally

Second, be sure to see these excellent existing resources that the Motivation SIG Graduate Student Committee put together:

- How to put together a poster
- How to prepare a roundtable presentation
- How to prepare a paper presentation
- Creating engaging powerpoint slides
- Building an AERA schedule
- Being a good participant in an AERA session

Third, when preparing an AERA proposal, here's a recording of tips I put together last year in my role as Motivation SIG program chair.

How do I prepare for a poster presentation?

- AERA has changed its format of poster presentations in recent years, and now I believe that they've switched entirely to virtual posters…if at all possible, ask someone who has presented a poster before (preferably at AERA) for a template - doing so will save you a TON of time!

- Prepare a ~ one-minute "elevator pitch"; some people will walk by your poster and ask you to briefly describe your research. I've found that it can be really helpful/essential to prepare and practice a one minute synopsis (with a focus on the overarching goals, findings, and implications)

- This is less important now that AERA has gone digital, but to be extra prepared, I suggest showing up with ~20 8x10 hard copies of the poster that people who are especially interested can take with them. I also suggest bringing business cards with you (and I should really take my own advice, because ever since the pandemic, I've completely forgotten to order cards for myself ;)). In many ways, I think that poster presentations are an especially valuable networking opportunity; showing up with hard copies of the poster and/or your contact information can help you make the most of it!

How do I prepare for a roundtable presentation?

- A roundtable presentation quite literally takes place at a round table. Your presentation will be included in a session with 2-4 other papers that all converge on a similar theme.

- In general, I recommend that presenters prepare a brief, accessible handout to distribute to attendees. I suggest showing up with ~20 copies of this handout.

- If you don't hear otherwise from the chair of the session, I would plan an informal 10-15 minute presentation.

- The roundtable format can be excellent for facilitating a really interesting dialogue with scholars with overlapping research interests. Unfortunately, be prepared for it to be very noisy and hard to hear.

- In my experience and opinion, you can prepare a longer paper and upload it to the AERA portal, but you don't have to (and many people don't). Typically, there isn't a discussant assigned to roundtable sessions, which is the primary reason for preparing a longer, manuscript-style paper (again, this is my opinion - others may disagree with me here!)

How do I prepare for a paper presentation?

- In general, I find paper sessions to be very rewarding and an excellent opportunity to really cast a spotlight on your work (because they are often well-attended), and/but I also find them to require the greatest amount of prep work

- Typically, a paper presentation will be included in a session with 3-4 other presentations that all converge on a similar theme or topic

- In addition to the presenters, there is usually a chair, who organizes the session, and a discussant, who provides a critique and synthesis of the presentations and papers.

- Therefore, as a presenter, your first task begins long before AERA (ideally around Feb): (a) to learn whether the discussant would like a complete manuscript-style paper (rather than "just" your AERA proposal and/or annotated slides) to review before the session to prepare their discussant remarks (in our field, many would like/expect a full paper) and if so (b) when they would like it (most discussants will ask for your paper at least two weeks prior to the session so they can prepare accordingly). If you're not in a position to generate a full paper for the discussant, I think it's acceptable to ask if they'd be willing to receive slides with detailed annotations from you instead (but the discussant may understandably push back on this).

- Assuming that you're preparing a full paper, it typically takes the same structure/format as an APA-style manuscript would. In my opinion, it can be a little shorter, but if a discussant wants a full paper, I'd aim for at least 15 pages of double-spaced, polished writing.

- The session chair should ideally be in touch with specific details and expectations surrounding the session. If you don't hear from them when AERA is a couple of weeks away, I suggest reaching out to inquire about details such as presentation length.

- It depends on the specific session and how many presentations are included, but presentations are typically 10-15 minutes in length.

- **Be sure to practice – a LOT!** Especially earlier in my career (but also more recently/to this day), there are often a lot of extra nerves that come along with paper presentations. In addition, an important piece of hidden curriculum is that it's *really* important to not go over time during a conference presentation. Thoroughly practicing is the best way to combat nerves and not go over your allotted time.

What are the Session Chair's Responsibilities and How Do I Prepare to Serve as Chair?

- Typically, I've seen chairs assigned to both roundtable and paper sessions. The chair's broadest responsibility is to ensure that the session runs smoothly. The chair plays an especially important role in paper sessions, so that's where I'll focus my advice.

- Serving as chair and the responsibilities that come along with it often aren't made explicit in my experience – a classic case of hidden curriculum! So here's my detailed take on how to be an effective chair below.

- Here are my specific recommendations:

    - Prior to the session:
        - I suggest reaching out shortly after the program is made available to all presenting authors and the discussant to put the session time and location on their radar (note: it's okay if you didn't do this! People don't

necessarily expect it, but it's a helpful thing to do to make sure everyone stays organized and has the session on their radar).

- Ideally, I also think it's helpful for the chair to reach out to the discussant separately, ask whether they'd like a full paper from each presenter, and if so, when. If they're comfortable receiving annotated slides and/or "just" the AERA proposal instead of a full paper, ask when they'd like to receive it. Then, reach out to all presenting authors with the discussant cc'd sharing this information unless the discussant has already gone ahead and done it.
- I recommend touching base with the discussant shortly after the date they've asked to receive the papers to confirm that all authors have submitted. If not, sending a friendly reminder is helpful.
- At least a couple of weeks before the session, I suggest figuring out the timing of the session. Take a look at the total amount of time allotted for the session and the number of presentations plus whether there's a discussant (there usually is for paper sessions). E.g., for a session with 5 presentations plus a discussant, the presentations typically need to be pretty short (12ish mins) to allow transition time, time for questions, and very importantly: time for discussant remarks (typically another 10 minutes). After figuring out the timing, email all presenting authors plus the discussant this information.
- I also suggest asking presenters whether they're comfortable emailing their slides to you the morning of the session so that all presentations can be presented on your computer to minimize transition time between presentations. That being said, some people understandably prefer to present from their own computer, and you as chair may not want to volunteer your computer – totally fine!

- During the session:
  - The chair should also provide some *brief* but insightful introductory/opening remarks during the session, so you'll likely want to prepare a few slides.
  - One of the most important responsibilities of a chair during the session is to ensure that it's running on time. To do this, you'll want to time each presentation and give a 2 minute and 1 minute warning before they've reached the time limit. To do so, bring signs with a big "2" and "1" written on them.
  - Briefly conclude the session after any Q&A just by thanking the presenters and audience members. You may also be expected to facilitate the Q&A session.

What Are Some Tips for Making My Schedule?

- First and maybe foremost: make your schedule far in advance of the conference! In order to take advantage of learning and networking opportunities to the greatest extent possible, it's important to have a tentative idea of what events/sessions you want to prioritize attending

- There's a way to make your schedule via the AERA portal (or app - I can't remember which one), but I personally find it to be really clunky and error-prone, so I make my schedule by creating a google doc and pasting the session information into the document

- AERA is *huge,* and the number of opportunities are literally countless. So, how do you go about making a schedule?!! I'll share my flawed but somewhat efficient strategy: I typically search the AERA program by including my two professional communities as a filter: the Motivation SIG and Division C. I find this to be a pretty efficient strategy, but the downside is that I miss out on really excellent sessions that I'd be interested in in others SIGs and Divisions. So, that's my efficient but flawed strategy!

- Last, but definitely not least: a huge piece of hidden curriculum is that conferences are just as much if not more about networking than they are about learning the research (although the latter is important, too!). So, with that in mind, I strongly suggest learning about and prioritizing business meetings and socials. In our professional communities, here are a few to especially look out for:
    - Motivation SIG and Division C Business Meetings
    - Motivation SIG social
    - Motivation SIG grad student social (typically in collaboration with other SIGs)
    - Motivation SIG Karabenick Conversations
        - This last one is *extremely* important to consider signing up for (if it's too late this year, then definitely in future years). Essentially, you have an opportunity to meet with a small group of grad students and a motivation scholar over coffee. This is an amazing networking opportunity that I continue to benefit from a whole decade later!