

# IDENTIFYING THE VALUE OF ACADEMIC CONFERENCES

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## ABSTRACT

Although all conference organizers would like to plan for growth, in recent years, many academic conferences have been experiencing no growth or even decreasing levels of conference attendance. Reasons include both increasing competition and declining financial support from universities for faculty to attend conferences. It is important that both the attendees and the universities see the value from attendance. Organizations hosting academic conferences need to understand better the motivations and deterrents to conference attendance. They also need to better articulate the value of attendance for both the attendees and the universities that often sponsor the attendance. This paper will assess the motivators, benefits, values, and inhibitors of attending academic conferences.

## INTRODUCTION

Academics develop themselves professionally through both formal and informal approaches. Some examples of formal approaches [1] include research, publications, workshops, formal training and conference attendance. Informal approaches include receiving feedback from colleagues and students, mentorships, and networking. This paper focuses on conference attendance, considered a more formal approach although networking, which may also occur at a conference, is considered an informal approach.

Benefits in both attending and presenting at conferences included [1] keeping current in the field and getting new ideas, networking, broadening one's professional perspective, being stretched by new ideas, and being 'taken out of my own frame of reference'. Another study [2] identified many of the same motivators, but they also revealed some other motivators that enter in to the decision to attend or not attend a nonacademic conference. The six underlying dimensions of conference attendee's decision-making process included personal/professional development, networking opportunities, cost, location, time and convenience, health and wellbeing. Furthermore, this study found that networking opportunities and cost were significant predictors of intention to attend the conference. Another study [3] examined inhibitors of attending an international academic conference with the top three inhibitors being money, time and distance since many faculty members have teaching obligations and responsibilities that make it difficult for them to attend conferences during the academic year.

Much of the research conducted has focused on nonacademic conferences. It is important to understand these issues better with respect to attending academic conferences. This study will address the following research questions: What are the motivators and inhibitors for academic conference attendance? What are

the perceived benefits derived from attending academic conferences? How does conference attendance affect professional development? After conference attendance, what is the value the conference brings to the attendees and ultimately the universities sponsoring the attendance?

This project builds upon previous exploratory work in which qualitative data were collected via semi-structured interviews with a small convenience sample of marketing educators. Results were content coded and assessed to reveal the most prevalent motivators, inhibitors, perceived benefits, and value gained from multiple stakeholder perspectives (e.g., the attendee, their institution, students, other audiences).

The current study utilizes a mixed methods approach in which the previously obtained qualitative insights guide follow up quantitative data collection and analysis to validate and assess the relative importance of behavioral drivers and outcomes within a larger representative sample. Survey content will be grounded in previous theoretical findings, with items operationally adopted or adapted from an extensive review of the existing literature. Factor analysis of items will be used to group items according to their underlying constructs, followed by stepwise linear regression to partition the likelihood of academic conference attendance variance by its primary sources of influence.

The extrinsic validity of the conference attendance model depends upon recruitment of a representative sample of higher education faculty. The sample should ideally include those that do/do not attend academic conferences, hail from larger/smaller institutions with/without AACSB or other forms of accreditation, receive varying levels of travel budget support, fulfill varying levels of scholarship requirements, and differ on gender, age, years of experience, rank, and discipline. Cluster analysis will be employed to better understand the distinct characteristics, drivers and benefits of potential conference attendee target segments.

## REFERENCES

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