Help others—and help your career

As a Ph.D. student, I try to volunteer at every conference I attend. Initially, the motivation was purely monetary: Students who volunteer usually get discounted registration fees. However, during my first conference, I came to appreciate how important volunteering can be for networking. While welcoming people at the admission desk or offering speakers assistance, volunteers get to know a lot of scientists. During my second large conference, the 2013 International Congress for Conservation Biology (ICCB) in Baltimore, Maryland, I leveraged my volunteer position to create an even more rewarding networking opportunity.

I was volunteering at the front desk when I heard an announcement about a fundraising auction. The auction, which aimed to raise money to support the Society for Conservation Biology’s chapters, was planned for the closing party. Participants were invited to provide auction items, such as signed books, paintings, and wine. This sparked an idea: You probably know the concept of having a bachelor auction, but, as we were at a scientific conference, why not have a scientist auction?

Conferences are a great venue for students to meet leading scientists in their field, but, in practice, such opportunities are rare. Typically, prominent scientists seem surrounded by people at all times, and students can be shy. So, my idea was to add 2-hour personal meetings with leading scientists to the list of items for auction.

The auction, however, was in 3 days, and I was just a student volunteer. Luckily, members of the conference planning committee had purple ribbons on their name tags, and so I started pitching my idea to anyone with a purple ribbon. Eventually, I reached the president of the society, who not only gave me his permission but also promised to participate as an auctioned scientist. Next, I had to convince other top researchers to take part. I started with my own supervisor, who agreed and referred me to other people he knew, and so on. Altogether, I convinced six scientists. In the process, I talked to 30 of the leading scientists in my field, who probably still remember my name, where I’m from, and what I do.

During the auction, I encouraged supervisors to bid on meetings that could help their students advance their careers or secure new collaborations for the lab. I prompted students interested in doing a postdoc with one of the leading scientists to bid on an opportunity to talk with them before sending a formal application. I promoted bids on scientist-authors by saying, “Why buy the book, when you can buy the author?” I finished the night exhausted but with all six scientists bid upon. The effort raised an extra $300 for the chapters, which will serve to fund student awards. And most of the attendees left the event knowing me.

This year, I organized a similar event at the ICCB in Montpellier, France. While coveted 2-hour personal meetings were still offered, we decided to make the event more affordable to students and people from developing countries by replacing the scientist auction with a scientist raffle. We also ran the event earlier in the conference so that the auctioned meetings could take place onsite.

Raising funds for students and providing them with opportunities to talk to leading scientists have proved hugely rewarding. I know of at least one new collaboration that has emerged from such meetings. And from the personal connections I made during the first auction event, I have formed collaborations with senior scientists and received invitations to travel overseas. Next time you go to a conference, offer yourself up as a volunteer and create your own good reason for all the scientists you approach to remember you.

Tal Polak is a fourth-year Ph.D. student in conservation biology at the University of Queensland, St. Lucia, in Australia and the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for Environmental Decisions. For more on life and careers, visit sciencecareers.org. Send your story to SciCareerEditor@aaas.org.
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