From Student to Expert: Leveraging SAS Conferences as Professional Development Opportunities

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ABSTRACT

It all started as an extra credit opportunity for undergraduates. She submitted her honors thesis to a SAS® conference to get a little cushion for an upcoming exam. It was accepted for presentation and she was accepted as a student scholar. That was in 2011. Since then, she has moved from first-generation college student and student scholar / junior professional award winner from a small town in the MidWest to invited speaker, conference committee member, and statistical programming expert/data manager for the federal government. This presentation details the lessons learned and experiences gained through the presenter's participation and growth as a SAS conference presenter and network member. In this presentation, you will learn the benefits of accepting challenges as they arise, writing and presenting SAS conference papers, networking, and just making the most out of your conference experience. Regardless of when and how you came into the SAS conference world, through proper utilization of its opportunities, you too can leverage your conference experiences to maximize its benefits to your growth as a professional!

INTRODUCTION

I started out as a Psychology major. During my third year as an undergraduate, I was hired on as a research assistant for my advisor in her cognitive psychology lab. Through this and progressively more complicated psychological research opportunities, I quickly grew to love statistics. By the end of that year, I decided to declare it as a second major. My first introduction to SAS® was as a fourth-year undergraduate psychology student - still new to my statistics degree curriculum and working on a large-scale meta-analysis project spanning years of data. I had never programmed before seeing my first SAS procedure. I broke down in tears, terrified at what I had gotten myself into. I toughed it out (with help from my statistics professor), finished my psychology honors thesis with top grades and went on later to use SAS in my statistics thesis for good measure.

About a year later, that same statistics professor encouraged us to submit our work for presentation at the MidWest SAS Users Group Conference, sweetening the deal with a promise of extra credit if we did. I hopped on that opportunity and submitted both my psychology thesis as well as my statistics thesis that night. A couple of months later, I received an email…they accepted both of my papers and awarded me a FULL student scholarship to attend!

I was torn between whether to present my papers or to back out of the invitation. I had never presented anything to a group of professionals before (I was still only an undergraduate college student!) much less a conference. Ultimately, I decided it was an opportunity worth pursuing so I turned in my final drafts, booked my hotel and flight, and headed off to my first SAS conference.

When I look back on this experience, I can not help but smile. My first conference was amazing. I learned so much and met so many people, many of whom I am now honored to call my mentors and friends. When I returned home, my understanding of SAS and its applications had widened and I had renewed ambition to apply this knowledge to my research and studies. I also brought back a strong motivation to continue my participation and attendance at MidWest SAS Users Group as well as others. I learned so much from my peers in the MidWest, what did the other conferences have to offer?

NETWORKING THE VARIETY PACK: A SAS CONFERENCE FOR EVERYONE

You may have noticed, that our conference acronym stands for the Western Users of SAS Software. In short, this is a gathering of SAS Users from the West! However, if you manage to read through my paper

to the end, you may notice that I work for a company and site located in Maryland….an Eastern state. Strange, yes? Not really! There are currently four main regional conferences (WUSS, MWSUG, SESUG, and SCSUG) and one larger-scale specialty regional conference (PharmaSUG) that have been holding consistent face-to-face events in the United States for a few years. Add on top of this, the two main-event SAS conferences during the year (SAS Global Forum and The Analytics Experience) and we have quite a selection of conferences to choose from, all with their own dedicated field concentrations, presenters, and attendees. Because of this, several presenters and SAS professionals attend more than one conference in a given year to take advantage of the wide variety of networking and learning opportunities that each conference offers.

I strongly encourage this. Even if you are only able to check out a given conference once. The people you are able to meet and the knowledge they have to give, is well worth the trip. I would also like to note that every conference has its own student and junior professional opportunities for those of us who do not have the consistent support of our accounting department, so there is no excuse not to try!

I am happy to say that I have attended all of the conferences mentioned above at least once. Upon completion of this achievement, I was asked by a couple of my mentors what I had thought of each of the conferences and if I had a favorite. In response I acknowledged that each conference was unique in its structure, organization, and content. On top of that, you could see the personalities, culture, knowledge, and ambitions of each region reflected in the conference itself. Therefore, I could not choose any one conference as a favorite over the others. Each conference added something to the SAS community as a whole. Each conference was valuable and necessary. My overarching experiences at each conference were positive and left me longing to come back. My choice then, was to favor SAS conferences as a whole over every other conference! To have such a wide variety of favorites couldn't possibly be bad. After all, every conference, every presentation, is a notch on your professional development belt.

VOLUNTEERING: WHAT'S IN IT FOR ME?

One of the stipulations as a Student Scholar during my first conference was that I had to volunteer. I had experience volunteering in the human services realm, but never at a conference, so I had mixed feelings as to how much benefit I would gain from this experience. I was happy to do this, however, as I was grateful for the opportunity and assistance that was guaranteed to me as a Student Scholar. I made note of the slots I was assigned and made sure to show up on time. My first assignment was as a Session Coordinator. I was tasked with taking attendance, making sure the door didn't slam, and timing the presentation. I prepared myself for a long four hours.

However, I quickly realized that this assignment was more of an opportunity than an obligation. I found myself completely caught up in the presentations, even though the abstracts had not been directly of interest to me. I found that I was able to use and apply the knowledge I was gaining from my volunteer experience to my own work in a meaningful way. In addition to this, I was able to interact with and get to know the presenters before and after their presentation. So networking during the evening events was comfortable and easy because I had already begun the development of a professional relationship with the individuals whose presentations I found so fascinating!

Lastly, it was volunteer experience! I was a member of conference team and realized that I could pad my resume with this unique experience. I guess I was able to gain a lot more in the end, wasn't I?

TO PRESENT OR NOT TO PRESENT

As I stated earlier in this paper, I had two papers accepted at my first conference - one oral presentation, and two posters (yes, I know that mathematical theory tells us that those numbers add up to three and not two….one paper was accepted as an oral presentation and a poster - just run with it). I was nervous for all three presentations, but much less so for my posters in light of my oral presentation.

I remember standing nervously between my posters and hoping no one would come over to ask me questions. I chatted lightly with the presenter next to me until he received his first audience member. I then stood silently and stared at my posters, trying to prepare for any questions that someone might ask

me. I did this until I realized that my neighbor had finished his presentation and his audience member was now in front of my posters and patiently waiting for me to present. I nervously started and soon realized that I knew my material well enough to give a fairly coherent presentation. I mean, I created these things myself, right? This is my research! A couple of other attendees approached my poster while I spoke and listened in to my presentation. I answered questions as they arose and offered additional readings and information to the interested individuals who asked for them. I also offered to send the full papers, given that they were not needed for poster presentations at that time, my audience members seemed pleasantly surprised. My presentation slot ended shortly after that and I left the poster area humming with excitement. What was I so nervous about?!

My oral presentation was the next day. I was definitely nervous about this one. I didn't sleep much, woke up early to prepare, and paced a lot in my room. It is recommended that you attend the presentation before your own so that your section chairs know that you are there and ready to present. I was able to handle about 5 minutes before my nerves got the best of me. The presenter before me was so skilled! He was relaxed, animated, and flowed through his presentation with ease. How could I measure up to that? I chose to walk around outside to wear out my anxiety. I came back to my section's room about 10 minutes before my presentation was supposed to start. My section chair helped me make sure everything was set up and running smoothly, and I was given the go ahead when it was time for me to start. Again, I started out slowly and nervously, but found that I quickly fell into a rhythm. I had already presented this paper as a poster, and new the content well. Before I knew it, I had completed my presentation and was answering questions. There were a lot of questions! This worried me at first, until I realized that my audience was more interested in the implications of my work rather than its critiques. I had several individuals come up to me once I had finished to ask for my slides and code so that they could explore the applications I had covered. Again, what had I been so nervous about? These are SAS User conferences! We are here to learn from and with each other. We are not here to criticize or to belittle, but to grow together!

Every conference since then, I have asked myself the same question, "Should I submit a paper?" Only once did I choose not to submit. It was my first PharmaSUG conference and I knew I would be fresh off of Global Forum (there was a two week break between the two). Since I had won the SAS Global Student Ambassador scholarship, I was unsure I could rededicate the cognitive energy needed to another presentation only two weeks later. I chose to apply for the PharmaSUG student scholarship anyways and hope for the best. To my pleasant surprise, I received that scholarship as well and attended as a scholar and sans presenter status. Though I can say that I thoroughly enjoyed my first PharmaSUG, I regretted not presenting. It felt like I was missing out on an important opportunity and I didn't want to feel that way again. I still get nervous before my presentations, but it is hard to imagine a conference without that anticipation. It just doesn't seem like it would be complete.

Therefore, if you have never presented before, I encourage you to try! It is definitely a worthwhile experience for both you and your fellow attendees. After all, without presenters, there isn't much of a conference, right? Plus, you get to add presentation experience to your resume!

WHO PUTS ON THESE THINGS ANYWAYS….AND HOW DO I GET INVOLVED?

After that first presentation, I found myself chatting with my section chair about the conference and my experience. I stated that I was having a lot of fun and hoped that I could continue to be involved in future conferences. He then took the time to describe the conference structure and responsibilities of a handful of conference committee positions. He encouraged me to look into becoming more involved in the conferences if I wished to continue being an active attendee. I took his words to heart and spoke to several more conference committee members and SAS professionals over the coming years about these opportunities.

Finally, in 2015, I was offered my first seat on a Conference Committee as an MWSUG Section Chair. I was equally nervous and excited for this opportunity. Luckily, my co-chair was patient and amazing and I learned so much from her. Since then, I have had the pleasure of being directly involved with the committees of WUSS, MWSUG, SESUG, PharmaSUG, and SAS Global Forum. Each conference bringing with it new knowledge, opportunities, and friends. I would not give up these experiences and people for anything. They have helped guide me on my path to being a professional. The opportunity to

lead, organize, and directly impact the success of a conference has not only proven to be a great outlet for professional development, but also helped refine my resume in ways I thought were impossible as a student and young professional.

SUCCESS FROM FAILURE: YOU WILL NOT WIN THEM ALL, AND THAT'S OK

By now, I am willing to bet that I have made things sound pretty easy, right? As long as you try, you will always get what you want? There is little to no competition? Since I am not a fan of false advertising, I want to make it clear that this is not the case. Student and junior professional scholarships, paper acceptance, and committee positions are quite competitive. I have "failed" several times in my journey. My papers have been rejected, I have been passed over for scholarships and committee positions, and I've only won a small handful of Best Paper awards. Each time I experience one of these "failures" I feel a twinge of sorrow and regret…but it is short lived. The experience and feedback that I receive from these interactions are well worth it.

For example, the first time I submitted a paper to SAS Global Forum, it was rejected. Along with this rejection, I was disqualified for the SAS Student Ambassador scholarship. I was heartbroken. I really wanted to attend Global Forum and this rejection made me feel that my work was not good enough for acceptance. I let myself feel sad for a while before turning this into the motivation to make sure that my next submission was accepted. I worked hard over the next year to develop and write a worthy paper. I submitted this new idea when the Call for Papers went out. It was accepted! Following this acceptance, I received my first of three subsequent SAS Global Forum Student Ambassador scholarships. I was on top of the world! My hard work and dedication paid off. The negative experience I felt the year before was transformed into a wonderful, memorable experience that I was able to repeat two more times. After my third Student Ambassador scholarship, I pursued a position as Presenter Coordinator and then Content Advisory Team Member. Each experience building on the previous. All with the origin in that first rejection.

I am now grateful for that rejection. It helped me grow personally and professionally. I can say the same thing for every time I have been heckled during a presentation, presented material that was underdeveloped, tripped up during a presentation, was passed over for an opportunity, or felt undervalued for any number of reasons. Each of these experiences offered me the opportunity to grow and better myself. Each time I fall, I get back up and keep moving. That is how we grow. That is how we learn.

CONCLUSION

This paper only scratches the surface of the impact SAS conferences has had on my professional and career development, but I made sure to hit the main points of those aspects of a conference that can be easily leveraged as professional development opportunities. I have said several times that I would not have the job or skills that I have now, were it not for my continued and dedicated involvement in SAS conferences early on in my career.

We all experience a conference in our own, unique, way. Therefore, we all have our own, unique, development paths. The bottom line is that these conferences are more than just a learning and networking opportunity. If approached in the right way, these conferences can help grow you as a person and as a professional. Take advantage of them!

REFERENCES

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SAS. (2015). SAS Student Ambassadors [Interview]. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H5mqbsuqRgQ

RECOMMENDED READING

Shipp, C. E. (2015). Top Ten SAS Sites for Programmers: A Review. Paper presented at SouthCentral SAS Users Group Conference, Baton Rouge, LA.

Shipp, C. E. (2015). Google Search Tips and Techniques for SAS Users. Paper presented at SouthCentral SAS Users Group Conference, Baton Rouge, LA.

Shipp, C. E & Lafler, K. P. (2015). Using the Free SAS University Edition Software. Paper presented at SouthCentral SAS Users Group Conference, Baton Rouge, LA.

SAS CONFERENCE WEBSITES TO CHECK OUT

SAS Events Listing: https://www.sas.com/en_us/events.html

SAS Users Group Listing: https://www.sas.com/en_us/connect/user-groups/find-a-group.html

Western Users of SAS Software: www.wuss.org

MidWest SAS Users Group: www.mwsug.org

SouthEast SAS Users Group: www.sesug.org

SouthCentral SAS Users Group: www.scsug.org

Pharmaceutical SAS Users Group: www.pharmasug.org

SAS Global Forum: www.sasglobalform.org

Analytics Experience: https://www.sas.com/en_us/events/analytics-conference.html

MORE GREAT SITES TO CHECK OUT

SAS Proceedings (1976 – Present): www.lexjansen.com

SAS Blogs: www.blogs.sas.com

SAS Communities: http://www.sascommunity.org

SAS.com: www.sas.com

SAS Support & Documentation: https://support.sas.com/documentation/

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Nate Derby for encouraging me to submit this paper to the Western Users of SAS Software Conference, and Amber Randall for being an awesome Section Chair! Coincidentally, Nate was also the presenter before my very first SAS conference oral presentation, as mentioned earlier in this paper! Thank you for your patience with a first time presenter, Nate! I would also like to thank Misty Johnson for being my first Section Co-Chair and teaching me so much on my journey as a SAS Conference Committee Member! I sincerely hope that I am at least half the Co-Chair you were!

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