



## Career Development

# Benefits of Professional Organization Membership and Participation in National Conferences: Considerations for Students and New Professionals

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*The focus of this manuscript is on the next generation of health education professionals and is written by those who are part of that next generation. This manuscript serves as a good reminder to all health educators regarding the importance of professional association membership and attending professional conferences. The co-editors hope that established health education professionals—whether serving as faculty members teaching in professional preparation programs or those practitioners mentoring the next generation—will share this article with students and/or colleagues regarding the benefits of attending professional conferences and joining professional organizations. Joining professional organizations like the Society for Public Health Education (SOPHE) and attending professional conferences can provide tremendous career development, skill-building, and professional networking opportunities.*

**Keywords:** *professional associations; national conferences; health promotion students; new professionals; professional preparation*

Belonging to professional associations and attending professional meetings has been promoted as an important aspect of career development (Cottrell, Girvan, & McKenzie, 2009). Most health educators during the course of their professional development have heard from faculty, employers, or colleagues that they should join and obtain the benefits of professional association membership. The purpose of this article is to reinforce this message through the experiences of three students who met while delivering a presentation at the 2009 SOPHE Mid-Year Scientific Conference in New Orleans. We, the authors, believe it is our perspective as students and emerging professionals that make this a unique contribution to the literature.

We initially met as copresenters of a session at the 2009 SOPHE Mid-Year Scientific Conference (Note: the terms *professional meetings* and *conferences* are used interchangeably throughout). None of us had met or corresponded prior to this session. We quickly discovered that our current areas of interest and research were vastly different. They included sexual decision making

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among sexually active adolescent girls (Latham), the social and psychological factors that may influence risk and protective factors of HIV infection among Caribbean immigrants in New York (Ransome), and cultural influences on health behaviors and substance use in the U.S.–Mexico border region and innovative research frameworks to address health disparities (Mata).

Despite our diverse interests, we also discovered numerous points of professional commonality. We shared common experience as doctoral students with interests in discovering and implementing community-based strategies to reduce risky health behaviors (specifically, harmful substance use and unsafe sexual behavior). It was apparent that our work was connected, and we quickly became more than a panel of researchers presenting at a professional meeting; instead we identified readily as colleagues working together to address common issues. We all marveled at the ways in which we could learn from each other's work and experiences, and saw value to keeping in touch after the conference ended and supporting each other as we navigated our respective graduate programs.

We all felt encouraged by the opportunity we had been given to learn, share, and grow individually and collectively through attending and presenting at the SOPHE midyear conference. We also agreed that many of our fellow students and colleagues would benefit from the process of attending and presenting at professional meetings, and we made a commitment to pass on the value of our experience. In this article, we discuss many aspects of our experiences attending and meeting at the SOPHE mid-year conference. In addition, we discuss the benefits of professional meeting attendance in general. These include faculty involvement and support, experiencing the diversity of the profession, inter- and intradisciplinary collaboration, preparing and giving presentations, attending

sessions and caucuses, committee participation, networking, mentoring, and social events.

Like many SOPHE members we have met, we were each originally encouraged to join SOPHE by our faculty mentors and colleagues. Most students have little knowledge of professional organizations and their importance to career development. It is extremely important for faculty to encourage and promote professional membership. Faculty have a unique opportunity to educate students about professional organizations and facilitate membership by providing applications, organizing conference travel, and generally serving as role models for involvement in professional associations. Moreover, all health educators regardless of the setting in which they work have a responsibility to mentor others and should encourage professional organization membership as a method of professional development.

Joining SOPHE and attending SOPHE conferences has benefited us in many ways. For example, attending SOPHE meetings has allowed us access to a much broader network of health educators and other health professionals. We were able to meet other graduate students, clinicians, educators, practitioners, and researchers—all of whom brought their own unique perspectives, training, and experiences to the interaction. Meeting and interacting with a broader array of health education professionals beyond academia has helped us become more aware of the breadth and depth of our profession and the different professional opportunities that are available as public health educators. Being able to interact with such a broad group of professionals in our field in such a concentrated time period such as a SOPHE meeting is inspiring and invigorating for emerging as well as established health education professionals.

One of the strengths of the health promotion and education profession is the value placed on inter- and intradisciplinary collaboration. As graduate students, opportunities for collaboration exist not only with students and faculty members in other academic departments and universities but also with practitioners, community agencies, and community members. Attending SOPHE meetings has helped us better understand how practice informs our research and how our research can inform practice. Although we have, of course, discussed this in our classes, it is hearing about real programs at the SOPHE meeting sessions that made this interaction come alive. Conference attendance has enabled us to share resources and develop relationships with both lay and professional health educators. Specifically in our own careers, these opportunities have resulted in the

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implementation of new HIV prevention interventions and the inclusion of social marketing strategies in our programs. Attending SOPHE conferences has helped ground our research in the body of ongoing related research and practice that happens across communities, states, and regions. Conference attendance has helped us learn as much about program implementation challenges and successes as we have learned about specific research outcomes. Although the examples presented at the conferences are specific, the applications of the lessons learned are generalizable. This type of learning and exposure to the practical application of health education theory and practice make attending conferences worthwhile for researchers and practitioners alike.

The opportunity conferences provide to share our research through poster and oral presentations has also had a tremendous impact on our skill and confidence levels. Rising to the challenges of preparing our presentations and translating statistics into meaningful and audience-friendly interpretations enabled each of us in our own way to better understand the multidimensional skills and abilities we will need as educators, researchers, and public health practitioners.

Attending the many and varied sessions at a national conference is an eye-opening experience. From the plenary speakers to the individual sessions, there was always something new to learn. Topics included child and adolescent health, social marketing, health disparities, teen sexuality, and many others. Some sessions reinforced topics with which we were familiar, whereas other sessions exposed us to completely new areas for consideration. The conference can serve as a good opportunity to interact with presenters, many of whom are nationally recognized experts. Attending a SOPHE conference is an excellent way for students and new professionals to obtain CHES continuing education credits for a full year at just one meeting.

We found the caucuses to also be of interest. There are a number of caucuses where people with like interests meet to discuss issues. For example, there is a caucus on social marketing, one on community health, and one specifically for university faculty. One caucus in which we all participated was the student/new professional caucus. Some of the friendships we formed through this caucus have become an ongoing source of support, camaraderie, and inspiration in our respective work.

Participating in the numerous committees and administrative structures of SOPHE is another way for students to get involved and actually help shape the direction of the professional association. Students are encouraged to

volunteer for planning committees, membership and award committees, editorial boards, and special-interest groups. One student is elected to and actually sits on the SOPHE Board of Trustees. All of these opportunities serve to enhance one's career and overall understanding of the profession.

By attending professional meetings, we have met and networked with colleagues and mentors who have played a critical role in our professional development. Where else can you meet the authors of your health promotion textbooks, the developers of the latest technological innovations in our field, and an entire room full of people sharing your research or practice area, all hoping to learn from each other? We also have been able to share some of our own inspirations and ideas to assist other emerging public health professionals. At a professional meeting, one of the authors of this article actually connected with doctoral students from the institution to which he was planning to apply for doctoral studies. These doctoral students were able to provide him with insight and advice in the development of his application. Graduate students attending conferences like those offered by SOPHE provide students with access to encouragement, assistance with doctoral applications, linkages with established researchers, and networking opportunities.

The pressures and stressors of the daily routine sometimes make it difficult for students to have quality time with their mentors while on campus. Through our conference attendance, each of us has had memorable opportunities to share working and social time with our mentors, away from the office or school setting. We have cherished the chance to reflect on our own work, share thoughts about innovative strategies highlighted in sessions, and brainstorm future programs and projects with our mentors while at the conferences. Of equal importance, we have also returned from conferences able to mentor others in our field. One of the joys of working in health education/promotion is what we think of as the reciprocal relationship of mutual mentorship. Faculty, practitioners, researchers, and students at all levels seem willing to share expertise, experience, and innovation with each other.

Some of the less formal opportunities that present themselves at conferences can be very important to professional development. Recent SOPHE conferences (Chicago, New Orleans, and most recently Philadelphia) have included gala social events that coincide with the opening of poster sessions. Wonderful music, food, wine, and great conversations await those who participate. In addition, there are always wellness challenges

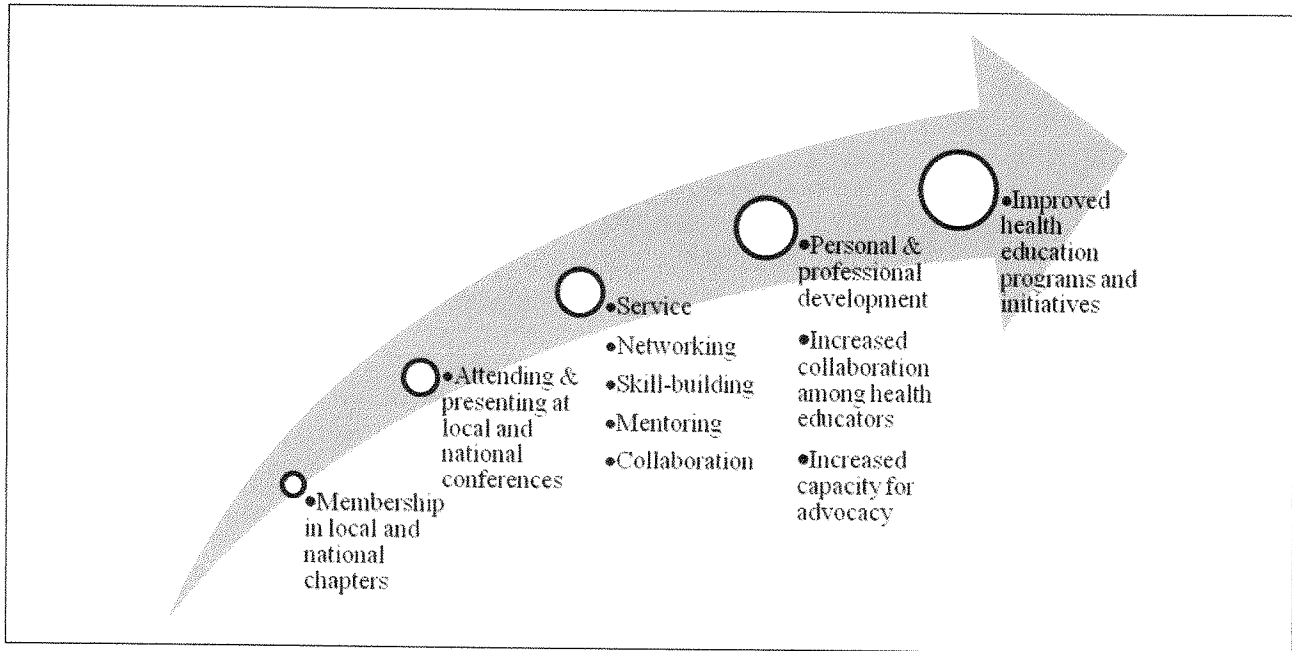


FIGURE 1 Evolution of professional development

and fitness activities, tours of local landmarks and interests, and other social events throughout the conference. We've found these socials to be a wonderful time for making new friends, connecting with long-distance colleagues, and forming new professional relationships and partnerships.

In thinking about joining professional associations and conference attendance, we see it as an evolutionary process (see Figure 1). First, one joins and then begins attending and presenting at conferences. This participation can facilitate networking, skill building, collaboration, and mentoring. Consequently, conferences may contribute to increased professional development, collaboration, and advocacy, which translate into more effective public health education programs and initiatives.

In summary, our SOPHE membership and conference presentation facilitated our professional development as health educators, researchers, and future academicians. Through networking, service opportunities, and mentoring, we have been able to fine-tune our research and advocacy skills. As a profession, public health education is diverse, multifaceted, and inclusive; so too are the SOPHE conferences. Reflecting on our shared experiences at recent SOPHE conferences, we realized

that we have experienced much more than the benefits of presenting our own work and being exposed to what others are sharing.

Although we are at different stages of our careers and our educational programs, a common thread is the facilitation of our professional development through professional organization membership and meeting attendance. We have grown through our individual and collective social, educational, personal, and cultural experiences. Meetings have served as a fertile training ground for us in that they have fostered open communication, professional development, and networking opportunities among a diverse group of interested students, researchers, and practitioners. In addition, they are fun, rewarding, and inspirational. Numerous opportunities for service, sharing of research, scholarship programs, and special conference deals and events for students and new professionals can be found at every SOPHE annual and midyear meeting.

#### REFERENCE

- Cottrell, R. R., Girvan, J. T., & McKenzie, J. F. (2009). *Principles and foundations of health promotion and education* (4th ed.). San Francisco, CA: Pearson Benjamin Cummings.