

Attending Professional Health Education Meetings: What's In It for the Student and New Professional

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Abstract

The profession of health education and health promotion involves a journey of discovery, where along the way, the student and new professional uncovers many layers and nuances. One of the mysteries surrounding the profession is the participation in a professional meeting. Student and new professionals often perceive this to be challenging, overwhelming and fraught with roadblocks and barriers. While understanding perceptions of mystery from those entering the field about professional meetings, the best way to fully engage in the profession and to get the full effect and benefit of a professional health education meeting is through direct immersion and personal experience.

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Professional meetings and conferences are filled with opportunities, with some hidden, but most within easy access and reach to the student. Where else can you find hundreds even thousands of education professionals from all over the world coming together to share cutting edge knowledge through presentations, sessions, workshops, socials, and other events, than professional meetings and conferences. Wouldn't you like to be connected to this type of energy and talent?

Like everything in health education, planning is key to getting the most from attending professional meetings and conferences. Thoughtful and careful attention to the conference registration deadlines, conference program, schedule of events, opportunities to participate in job resource centers, exhibits and earn continuing education credits will make your time at the conference more enjoyable, more enlightening, and more affordable.

Once you've decided that you are attending a professional conference and meeting, one of the first considerations by students and new professionals is your budget. The next priority consideration should be getting organized and

prepared. Careful planning is necessary for an enjoyable conference experience and the following information presented in two categories, before you leave home and now that you've arrived, will get you on the right footing for your meeting or conference journey.

Before You Leave Home

- Get colleagues to cover classes you will miss; notify professors
- Pack casual, but bring professional clothes for last minute job/internship interviews onsite
- Pack good walking shoes and workout clothes
- Check your hotel's availability of hair dryers, irons, etc. to minimize excess baggage
- Take an extra suitcase for all those exhibitor freebies or "must haves"
- Revisit airline tickets for your scheduled departure and arrival date and times
- Verify times for conference registration; arrive early to avoid long lines.

It Pays to be a Student

Students with valid proof of status, often uncover unexpected benefits by being a student. Most professional conference and meetings provide discounted registration fees for students. In some cases scholarships may be available on

to students. For example, SOPHE has in the past and will continue to collaborate with Eta Sigma Gamma (ESG), a national professional health education honorary on college campuses! All ESG student members are welcome to register at the SOPHE student member rate.

Meetings on a Budget: Top 10 Tips

10. Inquire about the availability of conference scholarships or volunteer to get reduced or complimentary conference registration fees.
9. Meet the early-bird registration deadline.
8. Look for the best air/train/bus fares by shopping around and checking the web.
7. Be flexible with your arrival/departure dates and times (use off peak times)
6. Use public transportation.
5. Check nearby hotels for a lower room rate or stay with friends or family in the Host City.
4. Maximize roommates.
3. Bring snack bars, dried fruit, snacks, and juice from home.
2. Attend all of the socials and events with FREE FOOD!
1. Have someone else pick up the tab (your job, family, school...anyone you can find!)

Now That You Have Arrived: Plan, Prioritize and Participate

Once you are at your destination and onsite, you are ready to continue your professional conference and meeting discovery. One of the early action steps is to carefully look over the schedule and select presentations or events of interest. This roadmap will highlight events that may be of particular interest to you as a student or new professional. **PREREQUISITE:** Read preliminary programs when they become available. Professional conferences and meetings tend to posts a preliminary program and conference information on it website in advance to the actual meeting. With the program schedule in tow, you should look for event start times, room locations and any changes in times. You might find it useful to explore the conference facility, paying attention to the features of the hotel, pool area, workout area, restaurants, and nearby stores. The conference program will also contain the selection of educational and skill-building sessions uniquely fashioned to address topics of interest in health

education and health promotion issues, thus allowing maximum return on your conference investment! Remember that planning your schedule is essential! You'll want to be in several places at a time!

In general, professional conferences and meetings for health education include many components. While not all meetings are the same, the following activities seem to be consistent across the profession:

Orientation Meeting

Participation in the conference orientation meeting is a great way to meet other students and new professionals early on in the conference! This session will familiarize you with the conference and introduce you to some of the organization's leadership.

Opening Reception & Social

Attending the conference opening reception and social reminds us that are as much about fun as it is learning. Enjoy another opportunity to get to know your fellow health education colleagues, plus the food is free. This is an opportunity not to be missed!

Student/New Professional Meeting

Don't miss attending the student and new professional meeting, if offered. This important meeting provides an opportunity to meet other students and new professionals in a more intimate environment. Not only will you get involved in networking, but you'll also get tips on job searches, becoming more engaged in the organization, and ways to make the most of your conference experience.

Poster Sessions

Be sure to visit the poster presentations! Be on the lookout for posters by fellow students and new professionals; they will appreciate your support.

Pre- & Post-Conference Workshops

Don't miss these interesting intensive skill-building learning opportunities! While additional fees will apply, try to take advantage of the opportunity to invest in skill enhancement or to gain new skills and information.

Exhibits

Be sure to allot plenty of time to enjoy the exhibit area. The majority of professional organizations offer attendees access to publishers, providers of health education materials and tools, plus programs and services.

Is This Your First Meeting? Connect with a Meeting Mentor!

A meeting mentor is like having a buddy to show you the ropes. Well recognized for meeting mentor programs are SOPHE and APHA. SOPHE first-time attendees, new professionals, and students have the opportunity to be matched with seasoned members. Those interested in participating should check the box for mentor or mentee on the conference registration form or visit the SOPHE website at: <http://www.sophe.org>.

Meeting mentors and mentees are contacted prior to the meeting to announce your match so that you can connect via email or phone to make plans. APHA's Public Health Student Caucus offers a National Mentoring Program in Public

Health. This program pairs public health students with public health professionals across a variety of disciplines. For information on APHA's mentoring program visit their web site at: <http://www.phsc.org/mentoring.htm>.

Job Resources

Whether you are looking for your first job or are considering other alternatives, conference and meeting job banks and job resource centers serve as an excellent way for you to gauge what's out there. As an example, both SOPHE and APHA's meetings include job banks to help you with your search for employment.

Additionally, on-line resources may aid you in your search. Many employment websites require you to register before being able to post your resume or search their job bank. Consider creating an e-mail address specifically for this purpose. This will prevent you from being inundated with mail and will keep your job search organized! Here are a few websites that list positions related to public health/ health education:

Table 1
Employment Websites

Employment Web Site	Web Address
Public Health Connection, Emory University	http://cfusion.sph.emory.edu/PHEC/phec.cfm
Idealist	http://www.idealists.org
Rutgers University	http://health.rutgers.edu/healthed/jobs/

Be sure to tap into services offered by your school's career center. This may be particularly helpful by posting your resume for local employers to view and connecting you with jobs that meet your needs.

Networking

Did you know that unpublished job leads hold the bulk of employment opportunities? The best way to find them is to talk informally with a lot of people and gather your personalized job market information. Networking is the key to tapping into this market, and what better place to

network than at a professional conference and meeting.

Getting started can be overwhelming, but here is a list of helpful hints to keep in mind before, during, and after your networking experience:

- Define your own job market. Know your interests (i.e., health issue, community); skills (i.e., planning, implementation, evaluation, advocacy, policy analysis, research); geographic preference (i.e., rural, international, national, regional, local); and

type of work-setting (i.e., corporate, non-profit, academic, government).

- Develop a personal profile. Summarize what you are looking for in a job: your general background, work experience, and several accomplishments.
- Prepare for the networking meeting. Know what you want to get across. Know what you want to ask. Be aware of presentation (i.e., dress, grooming, and eye contact). Be focused and clear about your expectations. Ask questions, get information, but be respectful of the other person's time. Ask your contact to identify other people with whom you might meet or talk to gather more information.
- Be prepared to transition from networking opportunity into a "real" interview. Assess yourself and have very specific examples that demonstrate your strengths, knowledge of health education, health promotion, and communication.
- End conversations courteously and positively. Thank the contact for the meeting and indicate you will stay in touch. Get a business card to follow-up.
- Follow-up. Immediately after the conference, send your contact a brief thank you note. You may want to consider including your resume if not available during your initial contact.
- Track your contacts. Maintain a logbook of telephone contacts, letters sent, and personal visits. Keep track of who referred you to whom. Note outcomes of meetings or actions. Inform your original referrals how their suggested contacts helped you.
- Keep networking fun and share your gifts! View networking as an opportunity to make new friends, learn new things, exchange ideas, and form collaborations. Most importantly, remember to show your appreciation to those who have helped you as well as be generous in opening the doors for others.

**Adapted from "Networking at Sessions at the Annual Meeting," by J. George Grabowski (Tulane University), APHA Public Health Student Caucus News & Views, 2(3), pp. 3 and 7 (Fall 1997).*

Join a Student Caucus

Many professional health education organizations have an organized student group. These groups provide wonderful opportunities

for new professionals and students to become further engaged in the organization. For example, SOPHE's Student and New Professional Caucus provides health education students and recent graduates the opportunity to network with each other, exchange ideas, provide support in job and continuing education searches, and facilitate involvement with SOPHE leadership and program planning. Similarly, APHA's Public Health Student Caucus represents and serves students of public health and other health-related disciplines -- including students of health education, health promotion, and health communication -- by connecting individuals who are interested in working together on public health student-related issues, and advocating for student involvement in APHA.

Typically health education professional organizations are dedicated to the development of the next generation of public health professionals by fostering student/new professional participation in improving the public's health; encouraging the exchange of ideas, experiences, and opportunities among students, professionals, and organizations of public health; and advocating for student involvement in these organizations.

To find out more about [SOPHE](#) and [APHA's](#) caucuses, visit the organizations' websites. Also review the nine organizations that comprise the Coalition of National Health Education Organizations (CNHEO).

Meeting the Needs of Certified Health Education Specialist (CHES)

Are you a certified health education specialist (CHES)? Are you wondering how to earn Continuing Education Contact Hours (CECHs) at professional conferences and meetings? Navigating through the process requires careful attention to detail. Also if you aren't yet a CHES, or if you have questions about your CHES, or past credits, you should contact the National Commission for Health Education Credentialing's ([NCHEC](#)) through their web site or call toll-free (888) 624-3248.

How Are CECHs Provided at Conferences and Meetings?

Continuing education contact hours are earned through participation in experiences that assist in the development or enhancement of the knowledge and skills directly related to the Areas of Responsibility and the individual's professional occupation. Two categories of Continuing education exist, Category I or Category II. Category I continuing education contact hours refers to continuing education activities that relate to one or more of the Areas of Responsibility and have pre-approved by a sponsoring organization if they are a designed provider of continuing education contact hours (CECH) by the National Commission for Health Education Credentialing (NCHEC). Category II continuing education contact hours refers to continuing education activities that relate to at least one of the Areas of Responsibility but are offered by non-designated providers. Many educational and skill-building sessions, with the exception of poster presentations, and social/networking opportunities typically are approved for category I continuing education contact hours. For example, SOPHE is NCHEC's largest multiple-event provider of continuing education contact hours (CECHs). Often time, fees for continuing education contact hours will apply. In many cases, professional organizations will include the continuing education fee as part of the conference registration so that there are no additional onsite fees, however some organizations will apply

additional continuing education fees, which are payable in addition to the conference registration fees.

In order to receive CECHs for an CHES-approved session, you must attend the session in its entirety and complete an evaluation form for each session. You cannot receive credit for more than one session per date and time slot.

How Will I Receive CECHs?

The National Commission for Health Education Credentialing requires the completion of an evaluation form for each session that you wish to earn continuing education and physically attend in its entirety. Many CHES have indicated that it is more feasible to complete the evaluations as you sit through each session rather than waiting until the last day of the conference.

Conference evaluation packets are typically included with the conference materials packet that you pick up at the registration area of the conference. The next step is to review the instructions for receiving continuing education credits. Most conferences and meetings will instruct you to proceed to the CE Desk and sign in; and at the end of the meeting, you must drop off your evaluations at the CE Desk and pick up your signed CECH certificate of attendance. (See Appendix A) If your certificate is not signed, you should follow-up with the conference CE contact.

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Appendix A
SOPHE Certificate of Attendance

Certificate of Attendance

"Title of the Conference"

Name of Sponsoring Organization

Conference Dates

Conference Site

City & State

EVENT # 00-000

NCHEC PROVIDER NUMBER DC0007

Name of Participant: _____

CHES Number: _____

Category I Contact Hours Completed: _____

SOPHE is designated as a provider of continuing education contact hours in health education by The National Commission for Health Education Credentialing, Inc. This program is a designated event for CHES to receive up to **XX.0** Category I CE contact hours in health education.



SOPHE CHES Representative