

The Value of Networking in the Research World

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Getting a science degree is a steep uphill battle. We work so hard to earn numbers that supposedly represent, not only our academic abilities, but also our potential as researchers. The countless hours spent engaging our minds, developing our passions, and building our dreams are transformed into a neat series of digits on our applications. In the process, we easily forget that these hard-earned numbers are nothing but a convenient tool for employers and graduate school admissions officers to quickly sort applicants.

This “tool” makes sense, from a practical point of view; with no other opportunity to meet you, employers and admissions can only judge based on the numbers on your data sheet. Even in personal interviews, the impression you make is diluted by the dozens of peers making a similar pitch in the interviews before and after your time slot. But what if you had a chance to have a direct meeting with someone in the field, not as an applicant, but as a fellow scientist?

In a meeting with Dean Marcin Majda, I was reminded that research teams aren't trying to find the applicant with the best numbers; in fact, if they can avoid the hassle of sorting through hundreds of faceless applications, they would gladly do so. Recommendations and personal meetings are, without a doubt, the **most** powerful way to move up in the research world. Whether you're applying to graduate school, exchange program, or even an undergraduate lab, making valuable human connections will help you more than any combination of digits on paper.

Now, you might be thinking, that all sounds nice and reasonable, but to what extent could that really help me? And how easy is it to actually make such “valuable” connections? To answer that, I'll present a case study: my own experience!

I'm no stranger to the struggles and disappointment that come about from the world-class chemistry program at Berkeley. Maintaining a passion for the subject feels impossible when all your hard work just yields you a letter that signifies “mediocrity”. But after my freshman year, I took a leap of faith and threw that letter aside... and got a position in the Arnold research group. Although I hadn't taken the relevant classes yet, all they wanted was my hard work and dedication. Rather than applying through URAP or a different “official” sorting process, which would have *undoubtedly* weeded me out, I presented myself directly to the group during their lab meetings. And ultimately, after a few months of persistence, I won my spot in the lab.

A little over a year later, I learned about exchange opportunities with a group at Osaka University that we had collaborated with. I knew it was typically reserved for graduate students, but I still asked my professor about it anyway. He knew my work ethic, and so he was confident that I could pull my weight as a researcher in Osaka as well. Normally my GPA would've *instantly disqualified* me for even applying to formal study abroad opportunities; instead, I was personally recommended for a 3 month research position abroad.

This isn't a blog post about studying abroad, so I'll simply echo the sentiment of such posts by saying that my experience in Japan was nothing short of amazing and life-changing. More importantly, however, it gave me a rare opportunity to focus solely on research, without dividing my time between classes and clubs. After working myself ragged in the lab in Japan, I earned a spot on an upcoming publication and a potential future recommendation from the professor. Furthermore, during my stay, the group hosted many other visiting professors, including one from Caltech with whom I had the opportunity to meet and to go out to dinner with.

By now, hopefully you see a common theme emerging. Regardless of the letters you earn, or the academics "numbers" that are taped to your forehead, make yourself known! Professors and employers want to see YOU, not your data sheet. They'll trust your honesty and passion more than the stumbles you've had in a *top-tier, competitive research institution*.

I don't have a list of useful links for you, nor any easy applications for you to hammer away at in the comfort of your desk chair. I challenge you to get out there and get networking! Here's a short list of ideas, but remember that there really are opportunities everywhere!

- Attend lab group meetings consistently, and ask questions about the research afterwards!
- Go to weekly research seminars (info posted in the Latimer and Tan elevators); look for opportunities to ask the presenter a question 1-on-1 afterwards, or become familiar with some graduate students in the audience who regularly attend
- Graduate student office hours; ask about the applications of what you're learning, what they do as their own research, current major topics in the field, etc.
- Undergraduate poster presentations; often a great way to see what your peers are doing and meet with some of their graduate coworkers
- Joining clubs (AXE, AIChE, etc.) and getting personal contacts for research groups and internships; I personally helped someone from AXE get a position in my lab!
- And many more...