

Attending the LSA Meetings for Fun and Profit: A Slightly Irreverent Guide

by

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The Law and Society Association's annual meeting stands less than three months away, and while many LSA members look forward to the meeting with eager anticipation, some experience less eagerness than anxiety, and others see no reason to bother with the meeting at all. A few years ago, in a perhaps foolhardy attempt to nudge graduate students in my own department from the latter two groups into the former, I assembled the following tip sheet on annual meeting attendance.

People differ widely in their taste and tolerance for academic conferences, of course. But the LSA meetings have much to offer, and even the most reluctant conference-goer can almost certainly find something to like -- provided that one knows why, where, and how to look. Here, I submit my own (admittedly idiosyncratic) suggestions on each front.

Why to Go to the LSAs

In my opinion, LSA members -- especially new members, and especially especially aspiring young scholars -- should attend LSA annual meetings early and often. Many graduate students seem to assume that the LSA meetings are rites of passage, which you should defer until you stand on the brink of graduation. But in fact, the LSAs are less rites of passage than renewal festivals, and they reward attendance even (or some would say particularly) when you're *not* actively on the job market. To succeed in a new field, you must establish a professional presence and gain ease and comfort with your professional persona. This comes from repetition, not from a single make-or-break appearance.

If you're still having trouble convincing yourself to attend, though, here are some additional reasons:

Intellectual reasons: The most conventional rationale for conventioning, of course, is to learn what's happening in the field. The LSAs can be an invaluable device for staying current with the cutting edge of your specialty area, whatever that area may be: The time lag between when research appears at the LSAs and when it appears in print generally runs 18 months or more, so by attending LSA sessions, you can preview the likely course of your specialty over the next 2-5 years.

Just as importantly, the LSAs can also be an invaluable device for keeping tabs on work *outside* your specialty -- and/or outside your home department: Even the largest law and society program contains numerous gaps and blind-spots, and the gaps tend to get larger as the program gets smaller. Plus, even in the most broad-minded and eclectic program, most people's daily focus remains much narrower than the program as a whole. The LSAs provide an opportunity to look up and see the sweep of the horizon. By dropping in on sessions beyond your own specialty, you can sample a wonderful smorgasbord of fare from around the law and society world. Thus, not only do the LSAs keep you up-to-date in your own field, but they also preserve your flexibility to think, talk and read broadly, to put your work in perspective, and to communicate with colleagues whose outlooks may diverge quite widely from your own.

Professional reasons: A second major reason to attend professional meetings is for the professionalization that they provide. To some extent, this is just the earlier injunction “to learn what's happening in the field” couched in somewhat less cerebral terms: Besides keeping you apprised of the field's most pressing intellectual challenges, the LSA meetings are a great location for tracking the field's personal, professional, and institutional challenges, as well. Special program sessions often explore topics like publishing in journals or teaching in liberal arts colleges (and the newly-formed Connections Committee is working hard to increase both the number and the variety of such offerings). And the hallways always buzz with gossip about who is moving where, which departments are rising and which are falling, or who is fighting with whom, and why. The LSAs will never answer all your questions, but they're certainly a good way to begin learning the ropes.

The professional value of the LSA meetings goes beyond passive learning, however, to include more active networking, too. To put the matter bluntly, the LSAs are *the* place to meet other sociolegal scholars beyond your home campus. At the LSAs, you can see (and often chat with) the leading figures in the field. But even more importantly, at the LSAs you can also meet (and often drink with) the next generation of graduate students and junior faculty, who are going to be your colleagues throughout your professional life.

And, of course, along with the opportunities to “see” come many opportunities to “be seen.” If you're trying to raise your profile in the field, the LSAs are *the* place to gain visibility beyond your home campus. Presenting at sessions, of course, puts you on center stage, often in fairly illustrious company. But even when you aren't presenting, simply attending sessions and receptions -- or just striding purposefully through the hallways -- helps to make you a familiar face.

Motivational reasons: In addition to providing intellectual and professional exposure, the LSA meetings can often serve as idea incubators and confidence builders. The LSAs spark new ideas because some LSA papers are *very* good. Often at the LSAs you'll hear about new theories or techniques that you'll want to try in your own research as soon as you get home. Indeed, even merely daydreaming about your research seems to be more productive when you do it during LSA sessions. It must be something in that conference-hotel water...

At the same time, the LSAs build confidence because some LSA papers really aren't all that good. Papers evolve gradually, and even the most perfectly cut diamond probably once looked

like a chunk of road salt. But it's hard to remember this, if all you ever see is the finished product. So when you hear leading scholars presenting research that isn't yet fully polished, it can reassure you about your own ability to make a significant contribution to the field. It can also remind you that academic inquiry is a collective endeavor, and that nothing improves a work in progress as much as collegial scrutiny. Plus, since the LSAs define the "state of the art," if your research is as good as at least half of what you see at the meetings, you can feel fairly safe that you aren't too far behind the times. If nothing else, you may be inspired to expose your own works in progress to a little collegial scrutiny the next time around.

Personal reasons: Finally, any conventioneer worthy of the title will confess that half of what makes conferences fun happens outside the conference hall. The LSA meetings are almost always located in world-class vacation sites. So they provide a good excuse to get away from your home turf and kick up your heels.

Over time, though, you may find yourself going to the LSA meetings less for the opportunity to see new places than for the opportunity to see old faces: The LSAs are the one setting where law and society scholars gather from year to year, and the meetings always have a bit of homecoming about them, no matter how far from home they may be. As you get further along in your career, more and more of your friends from graduate school will have moved to other institutions; but you can always reunite at the LSAs -- provided that you got into the habit early.

Where to Go at the LSAs

The LSA meetings are more than just a collection of law and society scholars giving mini-lectures about their research. Here's a brief synopsis of the types of events that you can expect during a typical year's conference:

Pre-conference Workshops: Each year, the LSA runs several workshops in the days leading up to the annual meeting. The largest of these is the Graduate Student Workshop, a 2-day event designed to welcome newcomers into the field by providing research and professional guidance, and by introducing participants to one another and to the Association's more established scholars. At a smaller scale, the LSA also usually offers one or more Didactic Workshops on the day before the conference, geared toward hands-on instruction in new research topics and methodologies.

Panel sessions: These thematically-organized 90-minute sessions make up the bulk of the annual meeting program, covering the full gamut of law and society research topics. Most commonly, three to five presenters talk for 15 to 20 minutes apiece, followed by a discussant's comments and then open Q&A. These sessions are the best venues to hear about research projects that are nearing completion; usually, people present their work at panels as a prelude to publishing. Some panels, however, are more free-form, intended as dialogue-starters or teach-ins, rather than as research symposia. You can usually spot such sessions by the lack of paper titles in the program. This year the Connections Committee is sponsoring several panels directed particularly at newer scholars in the

field: “New Career Challenges for Law and Society Scholars,” “Publishing Law and Society Scholarship,” and “Funding Law and Society Scholarship.”

Roundtables: Less formal (and smaller) than panels, these sessions often focus on works-in-progress, and they frequently have a fairly high concentration of graduate-student presenters. Some roundtables present papers in sequence, as in a panel session, while others work toward a more "conversational" exchange between the presenters and the audience members.

The Presidential Luncheon: On Saturday at noon, the LSA holds its annual Presidential Luncheon, where attendees gather in a conference ballroom for a lunch featuring lackluster institutional food followed by award presentations and the Presidential Address. This is a “love it or hate it” event, in part because the price-tag, although heavily subsidized by the Association, stands at the high end of many cash-strapped graduate students' meal budgets. But the Presidential luncheon is nevertheless invariably well-attended. Often, it constitutes the meeting's only plenary gathering, and the awards ceremony provides an opportunity to applaud the achievements of one's colleagues and, by extension, of the law and society movement as a whole. The Presidential Address, itself, is sometimes rousing, sometimes puzzling, and sometimes merely anticlimactic; but no matter what, people are always curious to see how the speaker will mesh (or refuse to mesh) his or her own research, the state of the Association, the state of the field, and the state of the world, into a coherent 30-minute talk. It's a bit like watching one of those juggling acts with ping-pong balls, bowling pins, flaming torches, and chainsaws...except without the ping-pong balls, bowling pins, flaming torches, and chainsaws, of course.

Receptions: Numerous receptions punctuate the LSA meetings, although the precise number and timing varies from year to year. Many are open-admission, widely-publicized events, while a few are smaller and by invitation only. The largest of the receptions are usually the “LSA reception” on Thursday, and the “local host reception” on Saturday. The local host reception is sponsored by one or more universities from the host city, and it often takes place off-site, in a setting of historical or cultural interest. In addition, this year the Connections Committee will inaugurate a new reception on Friday, specifically designed to welcome new members and people attending their first LSA meeting. Regardless of the location or sponsor, though, receptions are excellent places to pick up gossip and connect with established scholars and fellow grad students alike. Plus, they almost always offer free munchies, and they provide numerous opportunities to recruit (or be recruited) for a dinner excursion or a night on the town.

Fun Run: Each year, the LSA organizes a 5k “Fun Run.” The runners usually set out from the conference hotel at some unholy morning hour beloved only of runners. Those who return (usually at least 50% of the number who set out) report that the event is great fun - a good way to meet people, burn off conference calories, and avoid deep-vein thrombosis, all rolled up in one. If you ended your previous day with a dinner excursion or a night on the town, you'll probably be happy to take their word for it. But if you're an inveterate morning person, why not show up and see for yourself?

Breakfasts: For several years, LSA has sponsored a “CHANGE” breakfast for participants interested in increasing the intellectual and social diversity of the Association, and this year brings the addition of an International Breakfast for scholars interested in international issues. The food is again institutional, and the price tag (although again heavily subsidized) is again a bit high for students on a budget. But both breakfasts provide good opportunities to meet people with similar interests and to increase your scholarly and social contacts in an informal setting. And if you need to hold down your expenses, you can simply drop in to converse but not eat. If anyone asks (which they won't), just say that you're in training for the Fun Run.

Book Exhibits: Every year, the LSA sets aside a gymnasium-size room for publishers to exhibit books, software, etc. You can browse new and old titles, test drive computer packages, chat with editors, and usually purchase various wares at substantial discounts.

Hallway conversation: The hallways at the LSAs always hum with activity, even during scheduled sessions. Eavesdrop, people-watch or start up a conversation of your own. Prime locations tend to be the lobby, restaurant, and bar of the main conference hotel, the book exhibits, and the area by the “message kiosks” where conference participants leave hasty notes for one another.

How to Make a Go of the LSAs

For all their appeals, the LSAs can nonetheless be expensive, anonymous, and exhausting, especially for first-time attendees. Here are some survival tips for making the most of it all, while preserving your sanity:

Saving money: For graduate students, the biggest challenge of the meetings is often financial. Although attendance may be a wise investment for the long-run, it often feels like a budget-busting cash-sink in the short-run. Nothing can make a four-day conference in a distant city cheap, but there are ways to reduce the pain:

Share: Daunted by \$160/night hotel bills? Try putting 4 people in a room. Your bill drops to \$40/night, and you get a bonding experience that you'll cherish forever. If none of your friends are going to the meetings, the LSA's “Sleep Cheap” program will even match you with a roommate who is in a similar situation. Or get a city-guide, and look for less expensive hotels nearby. (Beware of staying too far away, though. The conference will be much more pleasant if you can sneak back to your room for a nap or a change of clothes during the day.)

Stock up: Why pay \$25.00 for breakfast and lunch, when you can bring cereal, sandwich fixings, drinks and snacks with you? Most good hotels will give you a mini- refrigerator if you ask, and if not, you can always pack a cooler with ice from the ice machine.

Party: Remember those receptions? Remember the phrase “free munchies”? You're a grad student. Need I say more?

Collect: Building a library? If so, you can defray some of your meeting costs by taking advantage of discounts at the book exhibits. Almost everything is 30%-50% off, and if you check toward the end of the conference, you can often get leftovers for even less, because the publishers have to ship and store whatever they don't sell.

Standing out: If you attend enough LSA meeting events for enough years, you will almost certainly become a familiar presence, whether you seek to or not. But if you would like to accelerate the process, the following strategies can help:

Approach panelists: If a presentation sparks your interest, consider approaching the presenter afterward. People are often happy to chat (briefly) about their research -- and/or yours. And even if you don't get a chance to have a real conversation, simply asking for a copy of the paper can put your name on the panelist's "radar screen."

Ask questions: Feeling like just another face in the crowd? Ask questions -- professional questions, scholarly questions, practical questions, whatever. For example, try this little exercise (suggested by the sociologist Wendy Griswold): Every time you attend a session, try to come up with at least one good question to ask. You don't actually need to *ask* the question; simply formulating one will help to keep you focused. Of course, if you do feel like speaking up either during the session or afterward, this exercise ensures that you'll conveniently have something to say.

Get introduced: People you know are the best gateways to people you don't. If you'd like to be introduced to someone, and you see a colleague or mentor who's an LSA long-timer, let him or her know. Connections Committee members may be useful for this purpose as well. Although making introductions isn't always convenient or appropriate, if it is, people are usually happy to do it.

Mix: In addition to getting to know senior scholars and LSA impresarios, don't forget that the meetings are also full of your future colleagues -- many of whom are craftily disguised as graduate students and junior faculty. Good places to meet these folks are roundtables, workshops, receptions, and hallways. Play your cards right, and you might even be invited to join a group from another department for a night out -- the pinnacle of LSA-meeting success!

Having fun: In the end, the secret to enjoying the LSA meetings lies in knowing when you've pushed yourself too hard and need to lighten up. When that time comes, here are a few good pressure valves:

Session surf: It's common (and acceptable) to move from session to session, in order to catch presentations that sound as though they'll be of particular interest to you -- or in order to escape presentations that turn out not to be. Obviously, you should

be as quiet and unobtrusive about this as possible; but you needn't feel as though every time you enter a session, you're committed for the duration.

Daydream (in moderation): If your mind wanders -- or, better yet, if a particularly interesting presentation sends you into a flight of creative fantasy that occupies the rest of the session -- don't feel bad. There will not be a quiz at the end.

Cut class: Don't wear yourself down by feeling as though you have to attend every interesting or important session. No session is more important than a good round of hallway hob-nobbing. In addition, leave some time for resting, chatting, getting out of the hotel, or hitting the exercise room. You'll be a sharper, happier, more successful conventioneer afterwards. If you experience too much guilt when you skip a session, try repeating this mantra (silently, of course!): "Everything worthwhile eventually appears in print; everything worthwhile eventually appears in print." It isn't strictly true of course, but it is pretty close, and it usually does the trick.

Hang out: You don't need to have a well-developed purpose for every moment of the meetings. Drop in on some sessions without knowing what they're about. People-watch in the corridors. Browse the book exhibits. Strike up a conversation about the weather with a stranger. Go to an art museum. The meetings will still be there when you return.

Remember: The fact that the LSA meetings are an important intellectual and professional undertaking shouldn't prevent them from being fun and energizing, as well. It's all a matter of technique...