

Virtual Scientific Conferences: Benefits and How to Support Underrepresented Students

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Background

- ❖ Gaps in accessibility force students from historically marginalized backgrounds to navigate academic spaces, such as conferences, with minimal support
- ❖ The large shift to virtual platforms has opened up a path toward inclusivity by offering more flexible involvement options and new opportunities for students to engage with research professionals

Framework

- ❖ Evaluate virtual spaces, and the benefits associated with them, and recommend actions that result in high-value experiences for underrepresented students

Virtual Conference Benefits

Accessible

By eliminating or reducing travel expenses, virtual conferences remove this financial barrier for students and early-career professionals and increase the number of potential attendees who can afford to attend both from the United States and internationally.



Inclusive

The Animal Behavior Society has stated that because of the transition into virtual templates, they can accept more talks. This means more research and community members are visible.



Engaging

Virtual conferences allow for those who feel intimidated by a room of scientists to ask questions. This stimulates discussions and brings additional questions to the presentation. Additionally, attendees can consume the material at their own pace, and engage with presentations via live Q&A sessions and panels.



Innovative

As a presenter, you now have the ability to articulate yourself in ways you haven't before. The virtual medium pushes scientists to restructure their presentations on what is truly important and allows them to answer questions that are left on posters or talks more thoughtfully.



Establishing Microcommunities

Microcommunities should aim to satisfy these processes for fully integrating an individual into a community



#1

Rule Orientation: students are provided with the necessary skills to succeed in science

#2

Role Orientation: students form and maintain relationships, thus seeing themselves as scientists

#3

Value Orientation: students establish a desire to improve science and those that experience it

Potential of Microcommunities

Navigating academia can be daunting, particularly for marginalized students. The desire to share research and connect with colleagues can be overshadowed by “impostor syndrome,” a condition characterized by anxiety and fear of appearing “unintelligent” to peers². These fears that undergraduates and first-time attendees face in these spaces can be alleviated with microcommunities.

Charles H. Turner Award

The Animal Behavior Society's microcommunity, the Charles H. Turner award, offers undergraduates and recent graduates the chance to “become a Turner”. A Turner Fellow receives support to attend the conference, a mentor, and partakes in professional and identity-centered workshops. This program, and the resulting cohort, further supports students, fostering “belongingness” and encouraging individuals to see themselves as scientists.

Recommendations

#1

Create Microcommunities

Creating microcommunities for undergraduate students/early-career researchers with rule, role, and value orientation

#2

Develop JEDI Initiatives

Diverting money saved on conference costs to hire JEDI (justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion) professionals for panels and workshops

#3

Further Inclusivity

Including closed captions on all presentations and hiring American Sign Language translators for all major keynote speakers

#4

Boost Accessibility

Strongly encouraging all speakers to upload their talks to an accessible platform (e.g., YouTube)

#5

Conduct Surveys

Conducting a pre- and post-conference surveys to receive anonymous feedback in order to improve the attendee experience

Literature Cited

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