



**MASTER OF ARTS
HIGHER EDUCATION
ADMINISTRATION**

Advance your career in student affairs or academic administration with a professional graduate degree.
Online • On-Campus • No GRE Required



ADVICE



How to Make the Most of a Virtual Conference

Seven tips from a seasoned practitioner on how to select and get value out of your next online academic conference

By Thomas J. Tobin | JULY 14, 2020



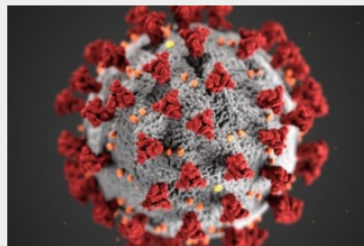
Getty Images

Most of us in higher education go to conferences to do our networking and professional development. Add that to the list of things Covid-19 has ruined this year, at least for those of us who enjoy going to a good meeting.

The pandemic has led academic associations to [cancel events](#) and [shift](#) them to the [virtual realm](#), a trend likely to continue for all or part of the 2020-21 academic year. But if you've never "attended" a virtual conference before (and sometimes, even if you have), it can be confusing to figure out which set of sessions will be a meaningful and useful fit for you. It doesn't help that most of the advice on this front is aimed at a [corporate audience](#), not an academic one.

However, there is a group of academics who are old pros at both organizing and attending online conferences. In the mid-1990s, those of us in the distance-education field started conferencing via [Web 2.0 tools](#), MOOC-based [online meetings](#), time-shifted [remote recordings](#), and [synchronous-chat](#) conversations. We have honed our craft in the ensuing 25 years.

As a seasoned practitioner within this tech-nerdy tribe, and as an organizer of the long-running [Distance Teaching &](#)



Coronavirus Hits Campus

As colleges and universities have struggled to devise policies to respond to the quickly evolving situation, here are links to *The Chronicle's* key coverage of how this worldwide health crisis is affecting campuses.

- [Live Coronavirus Updates: Here's the](#)

**MASTER OF ARTS
HIGHER EDUCATION
ADMINISTRATION**

Advance your career in student affairs or academic administration with a professional graduate degree.

Online • On-Campus
No GRE Required

Working from Home?

Your Institution May Provide Remote Access to *The Chronicle*.

[Learn More](#)

Chronicle Jobs

Browse by Position Type

[All Types](#) | [Faculty/Research](#) | [Administrative](#) | [Executive](#) | [Jobs Outside Academic](#)

Search by Keyword

[All Types](#) Keywords

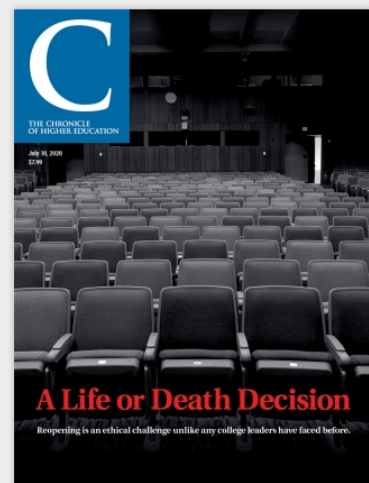
[Search](#)

Top Jobs

[Tenure-track Faculty Positions in Material...](#)
Southern University of Science and Technol...

[Post a Job](#)

In print and online today



This Week's Issue

Get must-read news and trusted insight.

[Learning \(DT&L\) conference](#) that happens every August (and has shifted to 100 percent online this year, too), I offer the following seven ideas to help you select, engage with, and get value out of your next virtual academic conference.

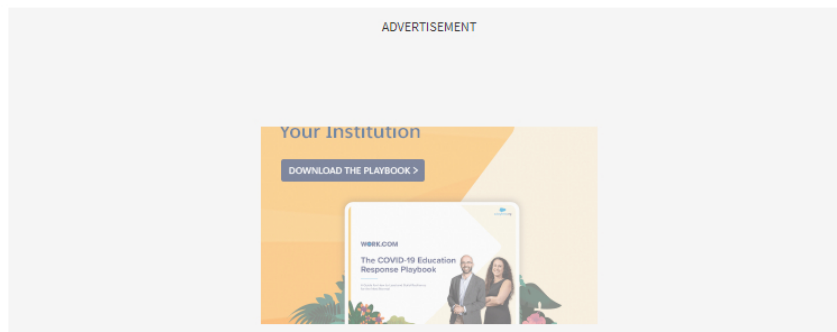
Latest

- [Here's a List of Colleges' Plans for Reopening in the Fall](#)
- [Colleges Face a No-Win Dilemma: To Cut or Not to Cut Tuition?](#) **PREMIUM**

Read This Issue

Get narrow. The fall semester will require new or strengthened skills — in remote teaching, online course design, and flexible administration — from all of us, whether classes on our campuses are in person, hybrid, HyFlex, or fully online. The good news: With so many conferences going virtual, they are now [less exclusive](#) and more affordable than in-person meetings, which means more of us now have a wider selection of options from which to choose. So how do you decide which conference to attend, and which sessions will expand your skills?

My advice is to specialize: Spend your conference dollars first on virtual meetings that will strengthen your teaching-with-technology bona fides — whether that means attending a teaching-and-learning conference or selecting tracks and sessions on technology at your field-based conference. As you scroll through the program, look for narrowly conceived sessions that will help you learn or improve a specific skill; find and attend more of those than large plenary sessions on broad themes.



Get small. Choose events that attract a small number of people — say, under 150 — or find small communities within large online events. At face-to-face conferences with thousands of participants, it's easy to attend sessions but still feel “alone in the crowd.” For online conferences, that risk is greater. Before you attend, find out how to connect with other participants and send messages to a few people via social media or email so that, during the conference itself, you see at least a few familiar names on the online roster.

Every time I lead webinars or online conference sessions, I ask everyone to scan the list of participants and say hello to people they know. I ask those who don't know anybody yet to choose someone at random to greet and share a sentence about their conference goals. Just having one or two “conference friends” makes the social aspect of virtual events less impersonal and more engaging.

Get ready. The most common reason people don't get value out of a virtual event is that [they don't make time](#) for it and give it their full attention. During a face-to-face conference, no one expects you to keep working with colleagues back home (at least, not as much). Establish the same expectations when you “attend” an online conference.

Block off the conference time on your work calendar. Look through the program ahead of time, and send presenters a quick email or social-media message to say you'll be at their sessions. Most important, download the conference app or bookmark the conference website that contains the links or instructions for getting access to programming and social functions.

Get familiar. Once you have downloaded the conference app, live-session software, and/or interaction software (things like polling or shared-document apps), practice with them ahead of time. Find out what tools the presenters of your preferred sessions will use beyond the shared-session software (you might need to reach out if this isn't listed in the session description). Make sure your web camera, headphones, and microphone work with the

software, too. (And, for goodness' sake, please [use headphones](#).)

You can tell that online-conference organizers are well prepared if they provide opportunities ahead of the event for self-guided and/or facilitated practice with the common tools that will be used throughout the meeting. They will also offer you the chance to practice with the tools they plan to use for social interactions, such as chat apps or connection tools in the conference mobile app. Make a point to attend those practice sessions (and request them if they are not listed).

Get in tune. Once the virtual conference is underway, tune in to the sessions and social aspects of the event, and [tune out](#) from the rest of your work. Set your out-of-office email notice. Then turn off notifications or log out of email entirely. Find a private place to participate. If you're still working mostly from home, enlist the aid of your family or housemates to provide you with as much uninterrupted time as possible.

Focusing on the conference includes making notes, asking questions, and taking an active part — not just in conference sessions but also in the side-channel conversations and social opportunities that the organizers provide.

Get together. Passively watching online-conference sessions produces a result similar to binge-watching television shows: You might be able to recount the basic plot points, but you'd be hard-pressed to recall details, questions, and conversations later on. (Don't @ me if you're one of those fans who memorized all of *The Mandalorian* after one long watch.)

Two things make ideas stick when you're in a conference session: taking notes and [talking with other people](#) during and right afterward. Before the meeting, find out the special conference- and session-specific hashtags (for example, our conference hashtag is [#UWdtl](#)). Then follow and use them. Tweet, post, and chat in the primary and side channels for the conference. The conference app almost always has a "connect" feature to help you extend the live-chat conversation beyond the session.

ADVERTISEMENT

If you meet someone (virtually) whose ideas are engaging, know how you'd prefer to create a side conversation. My own preference is to set up 20-minute phone calls or live-video conversations after the conference has ended, but you do you.

Get realistic. Recognize that, for conference organizers, the shift to fully online events most likely [has been abrupt](#). That means glitches will happen (just as they do at in-person events), so be understanding.

The ideal online-conference experience may require money and flexibility that you don't have. Don't be too hard on yourself if you can't adopt some of the advice I've offered here. Just work within the parameters of your own circumstances.

A final reality check: At some point during the conference you will tell yourself, "I'll watch all of the session recordings later." There will never be a "later." Rather, get what you can out of the conference while it's underway, and enlist your institution, colleagues, and loved ones to give you time to take an active role in as many of the live conference events as you can. You will get so much more out of the experience, and you will be in a good position to bring ideas back to your colleagues and become an advocate and trainer for those who could not attend the online conference.

Those seven strategies provide a framework to make decisions that will support your

continued learning, collaboration, and professional growth. If you have the inclination, support, and time, the best way to learn how to attend virtual conferences is to help plan and run one. Check the websites of the advocacy and membership groups in your field to connect with the organizers of virtual events. Consider volunteering to review proposals, be a session moderator, or otherwise get involved in setting up and running the conference.

Whether you are an expert online-conference participant or just getting started, let's keep this conversation going and growing. Take a moment to post a comment on social media about your experiences as an academic attending online conferences. Share the best practices that you have found work well for your own situation. And who knows? Perhaps I'll see you on the road, either virtually or in person, one of these days soon.

Thomas J. Tobin is the program area director for distance teaching and learning on the Learning Design, Development, & Innovation (LDDI) team at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, as well as an internationally recognized speaker and author on quality in technology-enhanced education.

As the coronavirus crisis deepens, The Chronicle is providing free access to our breaking-news updates on its impact on higher education. It's your support that makes our work possible. [Please consider subscribing today.](#)

RELATED CONTENT

- [What to Know When You Approach Book Editors at a Conference](#)
- [Academic Conference Panels Are Boring](#)
- [Why I Love Academic Conferences](#)

ADVERTISEMENT



This article is part of:
[Coronavirus Hits Campus](#)

Questions or concerns about this article? [Email us](#) or [submit a letter to the editor.](#)

MORE FROM THE CHRONICLE



Colleges Face a No-Win Dilemma: To Cut or Not to Cut Tuition?

PREMIUM

They can offer discounts for online classes and take a hit to the bottom line, or they can stick with full tuition and still probably take a hit to the bottom line.



How Higher Ed Can Stop Affirmative Action for Rich White People

PREMIUM

Fixing academe's race and class inequality must be at the top of the list.



This Will Be One of the Worst Months in the History of Higher Education

PREMIUM

Layoffs, declarations of financial exigency, and closures are imminent. Here's who's most at risk.



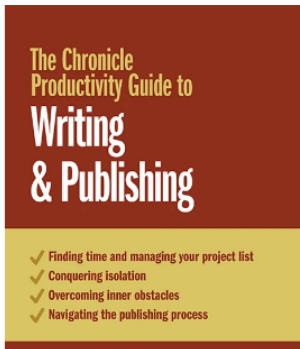
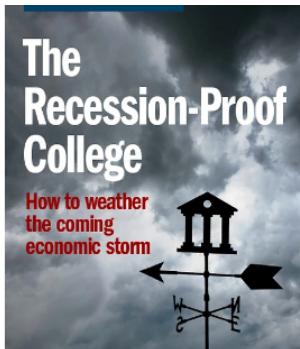
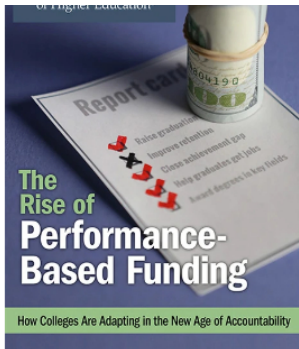
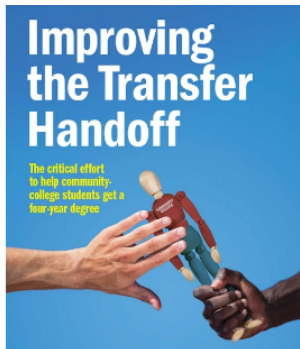
PAID FOR AND CREATED BY SEC

Celebrating Academic Success and Innovation

Highlighting the first-class work of SEC Faculty, the SEC Achievement Awards recognizes academic innovation, research as well as the breadth of fields of study.

IN THE CHRONICLE STORE





THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

[Subscribe Today](#)

[Twitter](#)
 [Facebook](#)

[Log In](#)
[Get Newsletters](#)
[Events](#)

[About The Chronicle](#)
[Advertise](#)
[Hiring Solutions](#)
[Contact Us](#)

[Help](#)
[Site Map](#)
[Do Not Sell My Information](#)
[Privacy Policy](#)
[User Agreement](#)

© 2020 The Chronicle of Higher Education

1255 23rd Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20037