A Graduate Student Guide to the NASP Convention

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I. Should I Go?

Just about every school psychology student who attends a NASP convention is glad they did. It is a unique opportunity to see our profession in action, to hear nationally renowned keynote speakers, to attend sessions by leading experts in the field, to network with graduate students from other programs, to meet people who may someday offer professional opportunities, and to have fun with colleagues. It may also be a great opportunity to explore a new city.

*Some other reasons to consider going*-

If you someday hope to be involved in your professional organizations, the NASP convention is an excellent way to get your foot in the door. If you one day hope to join committees or interest groups that provide opportunities for you to advocate for students you serve, then attending the convention is one way to start working toward your goals. For one, it allows you a firsthand perspective of how school psychologists come together at the national level. It is also a very inspiring atmosphere – attending even one session at NASP can spark a passion you didn’t know you had!

If you are considering applying for jobs in other states, then attending NASP could help you make connections. Many states organize receptions that allow school psychologists to network. This could be an opportunity for you to meet some of your prospective employers and find out about future job availability.

Of course, each student has to weigh the ability to travel and the associated costs. Taking time off from classes and an assistantship is usually not a problem, as school psychology classes at Winthrop are typically not scheduled during the convention week because most if not all faculty will attend the event. If students plan ahead and keep up with their work, taking time off from traineeship or internship is usually possible with field supervisor/district permission. In fact, attending the convention is one way to fulfill the continuing professional development requirement of the traineeship or internship.

Given these factors, every graduate student should try to attend the NASP convention at least once, if not more often during their matriculation. You’ll likely be glad that you did.

II. Registering for the Convention

Registration information is distributed by NASP in the Fall prior to each convention. If you are a student member of NASP, you should receive a preliminary conference program in the mail. Typically, the preliminary program lists workshops and special sessions, provides hotel and travel information, and includes registration forms. But the preliminary program includes just a fraction of the sessions that will be available. So if you can’t afford the extra cost of a workshop, don’t worry. There will be plenty of sessions to choose from. If anything, it will be hard to narrow down what to attend.

*Some tips*-

Register Early
Be sure you register early (see the date posted on the NASP website) as you will pay a lower fee. Additionally, if you are a member of NASP, you get a discount. Often, there is a drawing for a prize if you register before a certain time. Late registration and on-site registration are also allowed, but at a higher cost. The cost of early registration, without additional workshops or events is around $100.

**Consider Additional Events (at a cost)**

When registering, you will have the option of paying to attend special sessions. One that’s highly recommended is the *Getting and Keeping Your First Job as a School Psychologist* session. It usually has a $15 registration fee and is said to be well worth it. Don’t wait to register on site; it will be full. You can also preregister for the Children’s Fund Auction, the 5K race and other sessions. Ask for advice from previous attendees to determine which sessions might be worth your while (and money). The *Getting and Keeping* session is perhaps most useful in your third year, as it can help build your confidence going into interviews. If you attend other sessions, doing so as a group might be the most fun.

**III. Making Hotel and Travel Arrangements**

Once you know where the convention will be held, the first step to making travel arrangements is to decide when to arrive and depart. Most NASP convention activities occur from Tuesday through Friday. But going to a convention isn’t all about the sessions. NASP conventions are held in cities that are great to explore, and tours of surrounding areas are often available. Try to take advantage of that opportunity by arriving a day early or staying a day late if you can afford it. Saturdays tend to be good days for planning something special after the convention without being away an extra day of work or internship.

NASP negotiates the best price it can for convention hotels, but hotel rooms in large cities during a convention tend to be expensive. Staying at the convention hotel (or one of the hotels, as NASP conventions often include multiple hotels in close proximity) has its advantages, the most obvious of which is convenience to sessions. Sharing rooms with one, two, or even three other students is a way to make such convenience more affordable.

You may be able to get cheaper rates at nearby hotels. Use Google Maps to determine which hotels might be nearby. If you select an alternative hotel, try to pick one within walking distance to the convention, and close to public transportation (you can call the hotel’s desk or concierge to verify this).

The next step is to determine how to get to the convention city. For most conventions, travel by air will be necessary. If you are considering driving, take the cost of parking (which can be as high as $25-30 a day in large cities) into account.

Travel search engines such as kayak.com, and sites such as cheaptickets.com, expedia.com, and hotwire.com are all worth checking for airfare, and some will issue an alert if fares for a particular route fall. TIP: The travel site studentuniverse.com is designed specifically for college students and sometimes has exceptional deals on hotels, airfares, rail tickets, and even travel activities.

**IV. Events Worth Attending**

*First Things First*

You can find out ahead of time what will be offered, but when you sign in at the NASP registration area you will get a sizeable book that lists every session being offered, by time and day. (TIP: all sessions can be searched online ahead of time but that list will not have location information. But it’s a good way to preplan your week.) You also get a name badge and, perhaps paper, pens and other goodies. The program book is easy
to use, but can be overwhelming at first glance. Try to sign in as soon after you get in as possible, then take your book back to the hotel and highlight sessions you want to attend. Make a list in order of day and time. TIP: sessions are held all over the convention site, so try to schedule back-to-back sessions that are close in proximity to each other (e.g., in the same wing at least). Consider attending the Welcome Orientation session which is usually Tuesday at 5 pm. You will receive helpful advice on getting the most out of the convention and likely will be invited to join the Student Development Workgroup for a social event afterwards.

**How to Decide Which Sessions to Attend**

Review the program book and see what interests you most, or what can best add to your existing knowledge. Highlight sessions of interest for each day. If the times for some of these sessions overlap, pick your favorite. Be sure to include the keynote addresses and general sessions in your schedule, as these usually include nationally renowned speakers. Once you’re done selecting sessions of interest, write the schedule (including times and places) down. It will be easier to follow than reviewing the program book each day.

TIP: Don’t over schedule or you will wear yourself out! Plan an hour to two for lunch (an hour if you find a place nearby – which everyone will be doing, so prepare for a rush). Get to sessions early if you want a copy of PowerPoint slides and a good seat (popular sessions often end up as standing room only). Note: slides are available online after the sessions for free or you can email the presenters (their names and email addresses are in the back of the program book). Remember that you paid to attend sessions, so balance sessions and sightseeing accordingly.

**Graduate Student Stuff**

As mentioned previously, the convention offers sessions for graduate students, most at no extra cost, to help with taking the Praxis, writing resumes and cover letters, and in interviewing for a position as a school psychologist. Check the Student and Early Career section of your program handbook for details. The *Getting and Keeping* session is three hours long and includes handouts (including sample resumes, cover letters, and interview questions). Note: these slides are posted on the NASP website after the convention at no cost. At the end of the presentation, you have the opportunity to meet with representatives from different states who are hiring school psychologists. This probably isn’t helpful during your first year, so skip it and do something different. Your second year, this is very helpful in building your resume for your portfolio and getting a jump on applying for jobs. During your third year, the session is very helpful again – especially in interviewing for positions (you can go twice, but it is the same exact presentation each year and still costs $15). TIP: Dress well – business casual at least, especially if you are going to meet potential employers or colleagues.

There is also *Convention Career Services* for students looking for work. This “job fair” is usually held on Friday. You register beforehand and sign up for a time slot. You will actually meet recruiters from all over the country who are hiring school psychologists. If you are looking for work outside of the state this is especially helpful. If you want practice in interviewing for a job, this may be helpful. TIP: Dress well – this is an interview.

Winthrop hosts an Alumni Reception each year. There will likely be free appetizers (drinks are at your own cost) and an opportunity to interact with your colleagues, professors, and alumni on a social level. Don’t miss this—even if you’re not an alum yet! TIP: Dress how you want and have fun – but remember that faculty are still your professors!

Some other events to consider-
The Welcome Party Tuesday night is usually a fun way to connect with colleagues, meet new people and get the convention off to a good start. Wednesday night there is usually a student outing to a nightspot nearby. Check the program or with the volunteers staffing the Student Booth in the registration area for details.

The Children’s Fund Auction is worth attending. The free appetizers, chance to wander around and bid on silent auction items, and opportunity to bid on larger items, including vacation trips--or watch others bidding against each other--is worth the small admissions donation that goes to a good cause.

The Poster Session is a way to get a lot of good information about a variety of topics without having to invest a lot of time on any one topic. There are also Participant Information Exchange (PIE) sessions which are small group discussions with a presenter. They are in a separate room with large round tables.

Don’t miss the chance to browse the Exhibit Hall for free give-aways and a chance to see new books, tests, and other products and services. It is usually open after the General Session on Wednesday and again on Thursday and Friday. (TIP: you must have your name badge to get in.)

V. Other Tips for Getting the Most Out of the Convention

• Seek a balance between going to convention sessions and networking/socializing.
• Pick up a Convention Daily newsletter each morning. It will include an program changes. This could save you a trip to a cancelled session!
• Consider taking a tour of the city or surrounding area, going to a play, or exploring. Make good use of your time by seeing things that are located close together (it saves time and money by cutting down on travel time). And don’t forget to bring a camera!
• Be smart with food selection-- the prices can add up. Stop at a convenience store and get items to keep in the hotel (e.g., granola bars for breakfast, snacks, bottled water, etc.). You’ll get hungry during the convention and hotel food prices are terrible. Also, do a Trip Advisor or Yelp search to see which restaurants near the convention hotel are both good and cheap.
• Offer to share/exchange handouts with colleagues. Everyone wins when you share stuff!
• Use the NASP website to access some convention handouts, or use the presenter index at the back of the program to contact presenters after the convention. Many presenters are happy to email a copy of their handouts if you make the request politely.
• Have a good time, but remember that you are representing the Winthrop School Psychology Program.
• Try to avoid getting sick! Dress warm enough. Hydrate. Wash your hands often. Don’t eat in “sketchy” places. Bring some extra cash for medicines, tissue, etc.

VI. What to Wear

Some people dress up for the convention, and some don’t. The best advice for attending conference sessions is to dress business casual (e.g., khaki pants or a skirt, a nice top, and semi-casual shoes). Jeans, a t-shirt, and tennis shoes are great for sightseeing or working out (most convention hotels have gym facilities), but not for displaying your professionalism at the conference. For the special events where you are meeting potential employers – step it up a notch to dress slacks/skirt, a blouse or dress shirt (and tie), and nice shoes. It helps to bring an easy change of clothes and a second pair of shoes if you are not staying at the convention site.