

MAXIMIZING THE FORD CONFERENCE

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MEETINGS WITH POTENTIAL MENTORS

You should think of the entire conference as an opportunity to expand your network of mentors. Within this larger framework, there are two additional formalized opportunities. There will be senior Fellows who are willing to offer advice and support on a topic of importance to you. In some cases, these are regional liaisons; in other cases, they are simply senior scholars who have decided to make themselves available for one-on-one advising.

With whom should you meet? What should you ask? Remember that the conference is for your benefit!

Feel free to make appointments one-on-one advisers. Some may be in your broadly defined field; some may not be but they can nevertheless provide good advice. Whether you are concerned with an incident that bothered you in class or want general advice about forming exam or dissertation committees, here is an opportunity to get a different perspective. Don't underestimate the power of external support with a difficult situation. It may also be comforting to hear an adviser put your problem in a perspective that makes it seem less serious than you may have thought. Many times, advisers may suggest that you seek out someone at your institution, but this is helpful too. Ask about strategies for identifying those people. The conversation may help you to see your home institution in a different light; you may feel more empowered with this new outlook.

Also, as Federico Subervi-Velez (1988 Postdoc) suggests, Fellows should see the conference as an opportunity to receive feedback on documents. A one-on-one advising session could be used to discuss how best to format your C.V. or how to write a letter of application for a job. Simply be ready to share your document on screen or email in advance so that mentors can see them and offer feedback.

This is your time; get what you came for!

FEATURES OF THE CONFERENCE

Keynotes

Keynote addresses provide an opportunity to hear from senior scholars with outstanding records of accomplishment and a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. The conference planning committee works diligently to represent the sciences, the social sciences, and humanities in keynote presentations, but each talk is accessible to everyone. Furthermore, these presentations always help us to see that our work has a much larger impact than we sometimes assume. These are often inspiring talks because they help reveal the many paths that have been carved for us—even though we may not have been aware of them.

Presentations by Fellows

Each summer, the planning committee receives proposals for this plenary session. Three Fellows are chosen from a large pool of submissions, so these often exemplify the cutting-edge work done in the fields represented by Ford Fellows.

Special Interest Sessions

Because the Ford Foundation hopes to encourage scholars committed to diversity to go into academic careers, the conference provides strategies for navigating life in the academy. This means addressing professional concerns as well as ways to maintain strong community and family ties. Many of us define success in ways that mirror the academy's insistence on rigorous research and impressive publication, but we also unapologetically prioritize emotional and spiritual health, which often includes quality relationships. Many of the Special Interest Sessions allow us to think creatively about how we can operate according to our truest values—even while we claim the academic success that our predecessors struggled to make possible and that we have worked so hard to achieve.

Workshops

The workshops focus mostly on the different stages in one's career. Read the descriptions carefully and make choices accordingly. To offer a note on an issue that has come up before: generally, a postdoctoral Fellow who is already in (or has already landed) a tenure-track job will likely opt for the Junior Faculty Success Workshop over the Dissertation/Postdoctoral Workshop. Those in visiting positions or non-tenure track appointments should let the descriptions in the program be their guide. All should feel free to ask for the advice of a senior Fellow in their general discipline about which session is most useful, because postdoctoral experiences differ greatly depending upon whether one is in the humanities or the sciences. (*Liaisons are identified at https://sites.nationalacademies.org/PGA/FordFellowships/PGA_082282 and via conference social media efforts.*)

Academic Exchange Sessions

These sessions provide an opportunity for presenting work in a supportive environment. Of course, this also means that one can witness such a presentation, knowing that the audience is made up of Fellows in the field and others who are interested in the material. Please take advantage of these sessions and expand your networks. (And

remember: these are also opportunities for observing different approaches to delivering scholarly presentations, the kinds of questions that can be asked, and how presenters handle questions and comments from the audience.)

PUBLISHERS AVAILABLE

The Ford Conference provides an invaluable opportunity to meet with publishers *years before* one might expect to see a book in print. Scientists among us may be more interested in the sessions on article publication, but all Fellows should know that, when you attend the conference, you will have the opportunity to meet with an acquisitions editor from a respected press.

You do not need to have a finished book manuscript to talk with editors, but I suggest that you prepare a short book proposal if you take a time slot. So, Fellows who are writing dissertations should not be shy about signing up. Your project is likely to change in the transition from dissertation to book, but it is not too early to meet with an editor. These conversations may provide you with insight regarding the argument and scholarly contribution of your project—from the perspective of someone who is not on your committee and who knows the academic publishing industry. Please remember that these editors are professionals who have taken time to attend the Ford Conference and to make themselves available to us. Be courteous, be on time, and be professional with them. But you should also know that they are here because they have had good experiences with the caliber of scholar that congregates at the Ford Conference, so you should feel some confidence meeting them. *You are part of a select group.* They generally come to our gathering because they understand that.

LOGISTICS

Some Fellows may be tempted to ask the Ford staff or planning committee members which presses will be in attendance. It is an understandable question, of course, but that is not generally revealed in advance. There are so many things that can happen with the editors that there's no need for the Ford office to reveal their plans and create expectations that may not be met for reasons outside of the office's control.

Even with little advance notice, many will be able to do a bit of thinking and online research before sitting down with an editor. In those cases, advice from Denise Cruz (2009 Postdoc, 2006 Diss, 2003 Predoc) will prove helpful. She suggests that Fellows think about the press with these questions in mind: What books have they published? How might my book fit in with the press's interests? Is there a book series that seems like an organic fit? If not, how does my work extend, complicate, or build on the work of other authors published by the press?

Cruz continues, "Fellows should also practice, in addition to the proposal, talking about the book—making it come alive and sound intriguing to an editor. Often, I've found that the best way to do this is to go back to what originally intrigued me about my material. Sometimes, we get lost in the writing/argument and forget what we initially found interesting."

THE IMPORTANCE OF LINGERING

For many people, the conference is rejuvenating. It is a time to be reminded that while our numbers are small at our home institutions, we are not alone. We are part of a larger group of people who are the best at what they do—whatever they do. Though the American academy does not acknowledge this, scholars committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion are doing some of the most rigorous, cutting-edge research out there. The conference is a time to remember that and to soak up that positive energy so that you can endure (if need be) when you are back in your normal environment. If your home institution truly feeds your soul, then the conference is an opportunity to get an extra strong dose of that energy!!

More than anything, I hope that you attend the conference open to all of the many conversations and experiences that you can have when Ford Fellows congregate – even virtually! Be determined to get out of it all that the conference has to offer, knowing that it is for YOU!!