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Professional Conferences During A Pandemic

Hello everyone. Your Blogger (YB's) Daughter (YBD) here.

I had the privilege of attending the American Public Health Association Conference (APHA) this past week in Denver, Colorado.

This was my first in-person conference since the January 2020 American Economic Association meetings in San Diego. It is inevitable, in attending a conference during a pandemic, to compare the experience with what it was like before the pandemic, including the networking opportunities and overall conference culture.

The Good

APHA mandated proof of COVID-19 vaccination in order to attend. In-person attendees were asked to submit proof online and then verify it in person using the CLEAR app or vaccination card. Attendees would get a blue bear sticker on their badge indicating compliance.

APHA also instituted a lanyard policy. Green meant all socialization (hugs and high fives were permitted), yellow meant limited social interaction (elbow bumps only) and red meant they wanted people to stand 6 feet away with no interaction.

There was also a mask mandate. All attendees were required to wear a mask unless they were presenting. This was modeled by the APHA Executive director, and other speakers during the conference.



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I presented two papers from my dissertation research looking at hepatitis C in Orange County viral load testing, and predictors of undetectable viral load.

I was also able to meet up with some past graduates of my PhD program, and some old friends.

I also got to hear some great speakers such as current Surgeon General, Vivek Murthy, former Surgeon General David Satcher, and Heather McGee.

All good.

The Not So Good

Interpersonal contact remains difficult. I chose a yellow lanyard. Even though I was vaccinated, I did not want people to touch me. This was not always understood by some of the conference staff. People are creatures of habit. Some of the non-Confex tech support shook my hand even though I was wearing a yellow lanyard.

Masking during social sessions was challenging and it was hard to hear others in some of the rooms during the limited social sessions that were planned. In addition, not everyone wore masks correctly and consistently at all times in the conference center and outside of the conference in Downtown Denver (indoors and outdoors) and in the hotel. I chose to wear a mask at all times inside, and outside, unless I was eating.

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The meetings' hybrid format of these proved to be confusing. For two of my sessions, one in person, and one on zoom, the moderators did not show up, and I ended up moderating my own sessions. Fortunately, all the presenters stuck to the time limits and were accommodating. Teaching on Zoom for several quarters certainly helps with moderating online. I also brought my own time cards and presentation timing app.

The Public Health Expo paled in comparison to previous meetings. The last APHA meeting I attended in person was in 2018 in San Diego. Compared with the San Diego meeting, the Denver meeting seemed incomplete. Many of the larger and more prestigious schools of public health including Johns Hopkins (where YBD got her MPH degree) and Harvard did not have booths. YBD's own PhD Program, the University of California, Irvine opted for a virtual, rather than in-person booth.

The in-person career mart, which is generally a large and important part of the meetings, did not occur. This was a disappointment. I hope to finish my dissertation by the end of this academic year, and career placement was one of the main reasons for attending in person. It will be interesting to see whether APHA will create a virtual job mart between now and the spring for those who are on the market.

The online meeting platform had many technical issues, and it crashed the second morning of the conference. Many of the Confex techs were spread thin between different online sessions, and not having moderators for both online and in-person sessions made holding a hybrid conference more difficult.

Was It Worth It?

In closing, I am grateful to have presented my research. The conference re-energized me, and made me more excited than ever about public health. I think that APHA did the best they could to put on a hybrid meeting. However, some of the challenges still need to be worked out to make sure that the meeting platform has an adequate infrastructure to support a hybrid meeting.

Would I go to another hybrid conference like this? The classic epidemiologist answer: It depends. Personally, if the conference were less than a 3-hour flight from my residence, if I were presenting a paper in person, and if there were enough in-person job-market events that could seriously boost my chances of employment, I would go. Otherwise, I do not think it would be worth it to spend the extra transportation and hotel costs to attend. A hybrid conference is certainly better than online-only, but compared to past pre-pandemic in-person sessions, it is just not the same.

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