

Notes on the fall conference season

This fall I had the opportunity to attend three conferences, each of which added to this year of my PhD in a unique way. I started this PhD in 2020, in the height of the pandemic. One of the many consequences of this was that all conferences were cancelled or modified to be virtual- as a result, I had never attended an in-person conference during my PhD, so I jumped at the opportunity to go to a few.

I started this season out at O'Bayes (I believe the O stands for Objective). This conference was subject-wise extremely out of my comfort zone, yet I found it to be an excellent learning experience. Located this year on the UC Santa Cruz campus, I met several statistics and math students and even got to reunite with two collaborators who happened to live on the east coast (this was the highlight of the trip). I went to this conference to present a poster on work I did earlier in the year, some of which is more related to probabilistic modeling. This was my first time presenting this work in-person, and this experience taught me that poster presentations are a way to showcase your current knowledge about your research. They are building blocks, rather than final presentations. Despite being introverted, I found it easy to keep up conversations with new people, and I appreciated when my collaborators introduced me to their friends. O'Bayes seems like a small community that stays pretty consistent across the years. I'd love to attend again, I think repeatedly seeing the same people at conferences is an integral part of building community.

A few weeks down the line, I decided to skip the first week of the quarter at Stanford and attend the Illumina Genomics Forum located in San Diego. This was largely an event attended by business executives, though there were several scientists and clinicians who spoke on panels and in small workshop settings. To be honest, I struggled with managing the stress of starting at a new university, missing classes, and putting on a more extroverted personality here. I think there was a time in my life when it was easy to make small talk but I found it challenging especially because I knew only a few people prior to attending. The highlight of this conference was getting to run in San Diego, and listening to Barack Obama, a keynote presenter, speak. It's not every day that the 44th president of the USA attends the same conference that you do.

I wrapped up this season with attending NeurIPS 2022 in New Orleans. I had never been to New Orleans before, so I went in with the expectation that I would at the very least explore a new city. However, a few things complicated my experience- I could only stay for four days because I was running a marathon at the end of the week, and I was also heavily masked up and avoided drinking alcohol which I felt limited my networking opportunities. That being said, this was my first ML conference and I was presenting a poster at WiML, so I wanted to put on my best game face. My first night, I attended the WiML Reception, reunited with some friends, and even met a few new faces. Like O'Bayes, WiML seems like a tight knit community containing individuals at all stages of their career trajectories. I hope to continue to attend WiML meetups in the future. After some light hors d'oeuvres, I left to explore Bourbon street with some new friends and ended the night setting an early alarm to get up and volunteer. The next morning I volunteered at WiML registration, which allowed me to put faces to many of the names I had previously seen on papers. I ended up spending most of the afternoon talking with a collaborator- looking back, these are the highlights of in person conferences. The unplanned conversations that last hours and allow you to unpack everything that happened since you last spoke. I eventually ended up presenting my poster, though the experience was less useful in advancing my understanding of my project than I anticipated. It's always great to present work and learn to explain it, but the people that come up to your poster often make suggestions that, without further conversation, are difficult to implement or may be irrelevant. Regardless, I followed up with individuals that expresses interest in my work, and the resulting conversations ended up being quite useful. The rest of the conference was filled with talks, walking around

New Orleans, and combing through hundreds of posters in an attempt to refine my ability to ask questions. At the end of the day, NeurIPS was rather overwhelming, and it was easy to feel that I didn't belong. I found that seeing it as a learning experience and an opportunity to meet researchers in related (or unrelated) fields helped me feel more grounded.

After experiencing three flavors of conferences, I can say with some certainty that being in person is better than being virtual. Here are a few takeaways for the next one:

1. Be conscious of the dress code and optimize for wearing comfortable shoes and clothes. Conferences can involve a lot of walking and being comfortable allows you to stay at the venue and go to subsequent activities more easily.
2. Make a checklist of things I hope to get out of the conference so when I inevitably feel lost and overwhelmed, I can refer back and ensure that I'm getting out what I set to do.
3. Assess where I am in my career so that when someone asks me what I work on, I can provide a succinct answer.
4. Email people in advance of the conference so that I can set up meetings over coffee.
5. Take more breaks. As an introvert, socializing for long periods of time can be difficult, and taking breaks is completely warranted if it recharges me.
6. Attend the parties, and make sure to get invites on the first day of the conference. These events can be better socializing opportunities than the main conference.