

## EPAF Conference Tips, Tidbits and Attire Guide

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We were developing this guide to help our first timers when we realized it would be helpful for everyone to prepare for the upcoming EPAF conference. We look forward to seeing you later this month!

### Benefits of Attending

- **Network** and meet others in Extension across the state. These individuals will share your vision, provide guidance and/or mentor you with their expertise.
- **Trading notes** on processes and tactics with people who are doing similar jobs as you.
- **Open new opportunities** by connecting with speakers, organizers, and colleagues. Then set up initial meetings for collaborations and partnerships after the conference.
- **Learn** about the latest technology tools used by others in Extension.
- **Generate** new ideas for social media and educational content.
- **Improve** your communication skills and increase professional networks.
- **Travel** to see new places and learn about new things.
- **Reenergize** by having a growth mindset and being around positivity!

### Pre-Conference Prep

- Don't schedule any programming the day (or two) before and after the conference. You will want some time to prepare for the conference and to catch up when you come home.
- Set up your out-of-office message on your email. Indicate that you will respond to most messages when you return to the office. Don't stress over email during the conference. It's OK to skim through at the end of the day and delete emails to decrease the volume in your inbox but try to not check your phone during the conference.
  - Have your message reply say something like:
    - "I'm sorry I missed you. I am currently out of office attending a professional development conference (**Start Date**) and will get back to you upon my return."
    - "During this time, I will have no/limited access to my email (**if you are not going to check it put no, if you are, then use limited.**) If you require immediate assistance or for urgent matters, please contact (**name and contact details of the next relevant person**). I apologize for the delay and look forward to connecting with you upon my return!"
- Register for the conference, reserve hotel room, and get roommate for the conference.
- Turn in your TA and any county travel forms prior to leaving.
- Make transportation arrangements. Carpool if possible.
- Plan your route ahead of time.

- If there is someone you want to connect with at the conference, contact them ahead of time and set-up a meeting time. Monday evening will be dinner on your own and could be a good time for this.

## Pre-Conference Schedule Tips

- **Review schedule** in advance to select sessions to attend. You may want to print and review the breakout sessions and highlight the ones that interest you most. If unsure about a topic, ask other Agents. If you are new, connect with your mentor prior to coming for any insights they may have. Look over the map of conference facilities and familiarize where key events will be taking place. Be sure to attend the first timer orientation Monday.
- **Association Information:** Receive in advance information on all Florida Associations within the Extension realm and how they benefit through involvement: FACAA, FANREP, NEAFCS, FAE4HA, ESP.
- **Sessions:** You won't be able to attend every session that looks interesting. It is helpful to take a preliminary look at the schedule and map out things that interest you. Then talk with colleagues from the district to divide sessions among each other getting many resources for your area.

## Professional Socialization

**Social events:** Meals and other gatherings are an important part of the conference experience. They give you a chance to talk with the others in a more informal setting. Make an effort to attend at least some of the social events as well as talks and workshops. You are required to attend Wednesday and Thursday meals to receive the Dean's \$500.

**Talk to people:** Although we have expertise, not one person in Extension is a complete expert in all aspects of Extension programming. One way to grow as individuals (both professionally and personally) is by learning from one another. Meals are a great time to meet new colleagues and network with others. Striking up a conversation with new Extension contacts may turn out to be very helpful down the road (i.e. cross-county programming, forming action teams, grant collaboration, promotion packet, ROA, etc.). If you leave EPAF knowing more agents in multiple disciplines across the state by name and face, it makes it easier to reach out and get statewide collaborations. Having a colleague to hang out with is great, but make sure it doesn't stop you from meeting new people. You never know...you might make an incredible friend!

- Challenge yourself by sitting at a table where you don't know anyone for at least one of the meals each day. Walk up to a table with people you have not met and ask, "Do you mind if I join you?" It's tempting to hang around with people we know but spread your wings!
- Make it a goal to meet five new people from outside your district at the conference.

**Community Areas:** Try to stay off your phone; the email can wait because you put an out-of-office reply on before you left home. Now is the time to socialize and meet people. If your head is down looking at the phone, you may seem unapproachable or disinterested.

**Soak in the experience:** EPAF is often the culmination of a very long year. The experience of traveling, presenting, and traveling back may be long and tiring, but take a moment to realize by who and what you are surrounded.

**You are not alone:** Not knowing anyone at a major conference can be intimidating. During those moments remember that other people feel the same way. If you can't find anyone, look for an EPAF committee member. Engage with others and you will have more fun!

## Professional Socialization Cues for Meals and Common Areas

**Elevator Speech:** You will be introducing yourself a lot at a conference. To get comfortable with this, you can practice a quick two-minute description.

- Your name, where you're from, how long on the job and what job you are doing.
- What you have found exciting so far.
- What you have to offer or your interests.
- You may even have a question you want answered.
  - I'm being challenged by ...
  - Who here could help me with...?
  - Who else works on this interest?

**Opening Conversations:** You may want to have a few questions in mind to open conversations:

- What did you think of that last speaker?
- Hi, I'm [your name]! I don't think we've met yet.
- What area of Extension do you work in?
- What part of the state do you live in?
- To what sessions are you thinking of going? I thought (blank) looked interesting.
- Why did you sign up for this session?
- Have you learned anything interesting so far? What have you liked most so far?

**Getting out of a conversation:** Don't be afraid to excuse yourself politely by saying:

- It's been great talking with you. I'm going to get some air before our next session starts.
- It was nice to meet you. I'm off to check out (blank).
- I'll follow-up with you on email.
- Before I go, I didn't catch your name. What was it? I'm (blank).

## Professional Socialization Follow-up

- Follow up:** Keep a list of who you want to follow up with after the conference. You can start to build these like-minded individuals into your professional network.
- Business Cards:** Write on the back of people's business cards to remind yourself of conversations, or digitally capture the cards with notes.
- Touch back:** For people you want to stay in touch with, but don't have any current linkages, send a short email saying it was great to meet you.
- Project of interest:** For those who are working on a project that you are interested in and want more content about, you may want to email them and try to set up a conference call or video conference to explore opportunities.

- Reminders:** Place reminders in your calendar or on your task list to follow up with those leads the following week.

## Conference Schedule Tips

- Hotel:** Check-in at hotel.
- Room:** Check your room for evidence of bedbugs before you bring in luggage, etc. Even nice conference hotels can have them!
- Conference Registration:** Check-in at conference registration desk.
- Changing Session Rooms:** It is acceptable and expected that people will switch rooms during sessions. You are not stuck in one room just because you got a seat. If you realize it's something you already know, or perhaps it's just not clicking for you, you can leave. But go quietly. If possible, wait until the presenter finishes making a point.
- Headshots:** IFAS Information and Communication Services (ICS) is usually there and will take award photos and formal headshots. Take advantage of that for your directory photo. Headshots are usually taken before the banquet. Check the schedule to see if other headshot times are offered.
- Logo Wear:** IFAS ICS usually has logo shirts and products available for purchase. Consider getting a logo shirt for media events and other engagements where you are representing IFAS Extension.
- Silent Auction:** Be sure to attend and walk through the silent auction. Consider bidding on a few things to support the associations and their members. Even if you decide not to bid, it's always interesting to see what's been donated, and it's a great way to meet and interact with people. Try to enjoy yourself, mingle, socialize, and give yourself breaks as needed.
- Alcohol Consumption:** If you drink alcohol, drink modestly. You do not want to be remembered for your alcohol consumption or actions. Be cautious about alcohol consumption prior to the auction; it has led to regretted actions!

## Post-Conference Schedule Tips

- Set reminders** in your calendar or on your task list to follow-up with leads the following week.
- Write a blog post** about your favorite sessions, what you learned, and/or actions you plan to take.
- Program Team Follow-up:** Set-up a time immediately following the conference to share the information with your county and district program teams. This way everyone can benefit from the knowledge gained at the conference. When you share the information via a presentation or blog, you will consolidate, process, and absorb the information and be in a better position to act on what you learned while attending the conference.
- Expense Report:** Complete expense reports from travel.

## Packing Guide and Recommendations from Others

- Primarily pack professional casual attire

- Dressy business outfit for the Banquet and DSA Luncheon
- Nice, causal outfits for relaxed evening events
- Outdoor outfit and gear in case you want to take a tour or walk
- Swimsuit for the pool or hot tub
- Comfortable shoes (no flip flops for Extension events)
- Jacket, sweater, or layers to add or remove - hotels often have hot and cold zones
- Medications: bring them and take them
- Glasses for distance or reading close
- Bring your own pillow and a bottle of lavender essential oil. Just put a few drops on the edge of your pillow for the best sleep ever!
- If you have a roommate, bring earplugs and eye mask
- Water bottle or your own water
- Snacks just in case
- Tote bag or backpack to carry stuff around
- Bring business cards or address labels to swap
- Small notebook
- Pen, highlighter, mechanical pencils
- Selfie stick/tripod
- Chargers for any technology
- Multi-plug power strip or extension cord

## Attire

When packing for the conference remember, you are representing the University of Florida. You should choose attire that is a step up from your typical well-worn and loved weekend gear. Make sure gear does not have inappropriate advertisements that are in poor taste. **NO FLIP FLOPS for the week unless at the beach or out on your own.**

### Attire Guide:

- **Dressy Business:** suit, sports coat, blazer, slacks, tie, skirt, dress, jacket, blouse, collared shirt, sweater.
- **Professional Casual:** collared shirt, no ties, IFAS wear, sweater, blouse, slacks, khakis, skirts.
- **Casual:** jeans, shorts, t-shirt, tennis shoes, sandals. \*No flip flops for Extension events.

### Monday:

Association Meetings: *Professional Casual*  
First-Timer Orientation on the Gulf: *Casual*  
Dinner on your own: *Your Choice*

### Tuesday:

Daytime: *Professional Casual*  
Banquet: *Dressy Business*

**Wednesday:**

Daytime: *Professional Casual*  
DSA Lunch: *Dressy Business*  
Deans Dinner and Auction: *Casual*

**Thursday:**

*Professional Casual*

## Emotional & Physical Health Tips

Travel messes up your normal routines. But sleep, exercise, hydration, and diet can all have a major effect on your mood and energy while at the conference. Hydration is important; water is a natural lubricant for muscles and joints and helps maintain blood volume. One of the first signs of dehydration is headaches. If you get one drink water!

**Do not compare yourself:** This rule pertains 100% to your mental health. It is very easy to look at all the incredible things everyone else is doing and feel as if you're not doing "enough". Do not be so hard on yourself...growth will happen when you find your passion.

**Remember that you are representing everything good your county has to offer:** This is a true honor...be proud of it.

**Explore and enjoy the atmosphere:** Although most of the days are planned out with little down time, take whatever time you can to enjoy the amenities, town, and the beach.

- Give yourself some breathing room. Don't sit all day!
- Do not feel like you must attend all sessions.
- Sometimes you just need to take a little "me" time or time to meet and network with new colleagues.
  - Take a walk around the area
  - Get some fresh air
  - Go to the gym
  - Sit by the water or pool
  - Chill in the hallway and chat with others
- It's all good. No one is tracking you. You need to take care of yourself and your needs. **Exception - you must attend Wednesday and Thursday meals** to receive the Dean's \$500.