

## **First Time Attendee? New to SIGUCCS?**

**This paper was written to provide you with information and resourceful tips to inspire magical outcomes and make the most out of your SIGUCCS conference adventure.**

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# Networking: SIGUCCS and your professional and personal development (expanding your boundaries)

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## ABSTRACT

The SIGUCCS conferences are opportunities for attendees to gather, discuss, share and learn about supporting and delivering services to their campus communities. But did you know it's also an occasion to network and expand your boundaries both professionally and personally? After attending her first SIGUCCS conference in 1997, Wendy, experienced "enlightenment" and realized she was not alone. By the end of the conference she was revived, refreshed and renewed both professionally and personally. She discovered that other people spoke her language and understood her work life culture. These people shared her focus, challenges, concerns and cares. On a personal level, she was able to connect with real people that had similar stories. These people became more than just an email address or a name on the attendees list. They were people she could turn to and trust for advice, guidance and support. They were her SIG-friends. Over the years, Wendy has brought many colleagues, including Beth, to the conference to share this experience. They found that SIGUCCS can be just a conference where ideas are exchanged, or through conscious effort, can be a place to develop relationships that enhance your professional and personal life. The hope and goal of this paper is to give you hints and techniques so that you too can follow your own adventure and create a world wide network of lifelong friends and colleagues. We will discuss personal goal setting, networking techniques and ways to maintain the connections over time.

## Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.7.m [Computing Milieux]: Computing Profession – *codes of good practice.*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Whether your boss or co-worker told you about a conference on computing and user services, or you stumble across it when Googling a problem you are banging your head against the wall about, either way, you find yourself on a plane flying to a conference that has more consonants than there should be in any one word.

That's when you find yourself opening that folder you created at work, the "catch all folder" with all your travel plans, destination and conference information from the website as well as the list of registered attendees. Also included in the folder are the pre-conference emails you received with mentor, newcomer, opening reception and 5K run information. It's all the material that you fully intended to read before you left the office but didn't have time to do it. So instead, you have stuck the folder in your carry-on bag before leaving.

Where exactly in North America were you flying to? What is SIGUCCS it all about? What were you going to learn? Who are the presenters? Who would you meet at the conference? Would you bring back any gems of ideas that could be used in your workplace? How would you get the most out of this conference? Would there be any vegetarian food or would you have to sustain yourself on salad for the three days of the conference.

You ask the flight attendant for a coffee (double cream), you push the seat back the six inches it will recline and you open up the folder.

## 2. THE TRAVEL

You are flying across the country alone the day the conference begins. You'll arrive around 2:00 pm and the newcomers reception isn't until 4 o'clock. You'll have plenty of time to settle into the conference hotel and find the registration area

before you need to be anywhere. The young boy on one side of you is listening to their iPod loud enough for you to hear the hip-hop beat. The business woman on the other side is reading a Fortune magazine. You seem to have little in common with either of those travelers so for the next five hours you don't hear yourself speak, except for the occasional "thank you" to the flight attendants.

## **2.1 Traveling With Others**

At the conference, you learn that many other conference participants travel together sometimes meeting up at airport hubs for the connecting flights.

### *2.1.1 Booking Flights Together*

The key to traveling together is to do the booking of flights around the same time. This can be done in many ways, but it needs to be coordinated.

#### *2.1.1.1 The Book and Send Approach*

One person can make the travel plans for themselves and then send the itinerary to the other person. Once the other person receives the travel plans, they should immediately contact their travel agent or book the flight online. Personal experiences revealed that even waiting overnight can make flights no longer available.

#### *2.1.1.2 The Book Together and Sit Together Approach*

Another approach to booking flights is to use the same travel agent to make all the arrangements including the seat assignments. Booking online at the same time will have the same result. Using the "request seat" option when booking online can also make sure seats are together or near each others. If you aren't in communication with each other when booking online, it's possible that you won't get the same flights. A good approach is to phone each other at the time you will be booking online and talk to each other through the entire process.

If you find that you've booked the same flights but your seats don't end up together, you can always arrive at the airport early and request a change or when on the plane ask the person seated next to either of you if they would mind switching. Airlines usually don't mind this.

### *2.1.2 The Arrival and Departure*

The pilot's voice comes over the loud speaker, "We are preparing for our final approach to the airport, the current local time is 1:45pm. We should have you at our arrival gate in about 15 minutes. Please fasten your seatbelts, put your seat in the upright position and make sure your tray tables are securely fastened in the seat back in front of you. Thank you for flying with us, have a great afternoon." Taking a quick glance at the papers in front of you, you make a mental note of the hotel name and address so you can take the correct airport shuttle. You have a little over two hours before you have to be at the newcomers reception. The conference hotel (according to mapquest) is only 20 minutes away. You have plenty of time, as long as your bags arrive promptly, you find the shuttle and you can check into the hotel immediately.

### *2.1.2.1 Arriving Early*

Many conference participants arrive a day or so early. This allows for "schmoozing" time. This also makes for a less hectic entry into a new city. You have time to find the airport shuttle or rent a car, time to explore the new surroundings and find out more about the place you're staying, you'll also have time to meet people and start the networking process.

### *2.1.2.2 Staying Late*

Remaining after the conference is over even just the one extra night can be a great time to secure your newly formed friendships and professional relationships. Activities can include dinner on the town, visiting the tourist sites or just sitting in the hotel lobby talking about your academic institution.

## **2.2 Checking In**

You found your bags, you locate the shuttle and you've arrived at the conference hotel. Checking into the room was a breeze and you're ready to start your conference experience.

### *2.2.1 Registration*

The first people you meet are the friendly faces behind the registration desk. They ask your name and give you a bunch of goodies. How wonderful, you now have more information to look through while trying to figure out what you will learn and what to do first. Now onto the newcomer's reception.

## **3. THE MEANING OF SIGUCCS**

You put on your nametag and go to the newcomer's reception. You open the doors and find that you are in a sea of people who look completely unfamiliar. Many of them are perusing the materials given to them when they registered. Others are working on their laptops, using their cellphones and some are striking up conversations with others. One common thing you notice is that they are all friendly faces who look eager to learn and get to know others. You remind yourself that you are all in the same boat. According to Lynnell Lacey, Coordinator Special Events Program, University of Illinois Champaign, (personal communication, May 24, 2006) "SIGUCCS represents the opportunity to network with others who walk the same – or similar – walk that I do in my job. The technical program is incredibly important and while it remains a key element, the greatest benefit really comes in networking with others and developing professional relationships (friendships) from which I can gather useful information about how I can improve my performance as well as the performance of those with whom I work."

### **3.1 The Conference as a Whole**

What is the SIGUCCS conference? For some participants the conference is about collaboration. Chris Wiesemann, Computing Lab Manager, University of Oregon, (personal communication, May 24, 2006) says, "The SIGUCCS conference provides me with human knowledge and experience. It shows me what others do nationwide and allows me to meet, brainstorm and collaborate with them. It connects me to other IT staff in the country, enabling easy and instantaneous access to experts in the areas I know the least."

For other's it's a time of reflection and focusing on new ideas. Heidi Wasem, Help Desk Manager, University of Puget Sound (personal communication, May 24, 2006) says "It is longer conference than just three days because of the travel and adjustment factors (time zones, extra vacation added on, etc.) The additional time is part of the benefit of SIGUCCS. You have the travel time going there to review the program and determine your immediate needs from the conference. You spend the return trip synthesizing the information gathered and the most important "take away" ideas you want to implement. It allows you to hit the ground running when you get back to the office. It is helpful that SIGUCCS ends mid-week so you don't return to a Monday morning deluge which would dilute your enthusiasm for the new ideas."

### 3.2 The Newcomer's Reception

You find a seat at the back of the room by yourself. You scan the people to see if by chance there is anyone you might know. You see no one. You then open up the conference materials and start reading through them. All of a sudden you hear someone say, "Hi, where are you from?" You look up from your folder to read a nametag that says, "Terry Murphy, Helpdesk Specialist". You see an outstretched hand for you to shake. You stand, make eye contact and shake Terry's hand and begin to have a conversation about where you're from. Terry then says, "I noticed you are a Helpdesk Specialist too. How many people do you support?" The conversation continues from there.

Whether you know it or not, your name tag was key to Terry approaching you. Your registration information appears in many places; on your name tag, the website, as well as the attendees list. When registering for the conference, use a descriptive functional title. This will help people quickly identify with what you do.

Terry sits next to you as the activities begin. You are welcomed to the conference and given the opportunity to participate in an icebreaker activity. This is a great time to superficially meet other people. Remember you are all new and experiencing this for the first time. Try not to be shy and just say "hi" to whomever you come across. Before you and Terry leave, you arrange to meet up again to go to the sweatshirt reception together.

### 3.3 The Sweatshirt Reception

You go back to your hotel room to change into your school attire. Everyone's doing it, so you should too. Don't underestimate the power of your sweatshirt. According to Chris Wieseman, (personal communication, May 24, 2006) "Having school gear on allowed me to look for people from my state, and branch out from there".

Extroverts will likely not have a problem walking into a big room filled with 400 people. Introverts may find this a little more daunting and according to Mat Felthousen, Manager of Classroom Support, University of Rochester, you would "find the nearest plant to hide behind" (personal communication, June 1, 2006). If this is your initial response too, you should come up with coping strategies before hand. So instead of hiding behind a plant, Mat looks for friendly faces that are more outgoing than he. Bill Murphy, Director, Salem State University suggests,

"Don't try too hard. Just be yourself, open up a little and see what happens." (personal communication, May 31, 2006)

Fortunately, Terry is very outgoing and seems to have already met a number of people, for when you walk into the reception you see him surrounded by people and laughter. It's up to you to create your experience. Remember everyone has similar work environments and all have a desire meet, learn and grow from other's stories. After the reception Terry invites you to dinner with other colleagues. Don't say "no", go. According to Bill Murphy, "the best networking tends to occur after-hours at non-conference events. But, this is only possible because we are attending SIGUCCS together during the day. You will often meet someone briefly in a session or other conference event, but it isn't until you meet up with them on a more social level, that you make a connection." (personal communication, May 31, 2006)  
The Presentations

The next morning you wake up excited to go to the opening plenary session and the various presentations. You met more people the night before, so there are a few more friendly smiling faces when you walk into the room. You don't sit by yourself, but go to where Terry is sitting.

The technical presentations are not only about gaining knowledge about a particular problem, but it's also a good opportunity to continue making connections and building friendships. Lynnell Lacey, she tries to "meet new people in sessions. I listen for people who are sharing information that is similar in nature to experiences I may be faced with, or have had, and seek them out at break or lunch time in an effort to get to know them better. But it's not about simply making the connection." (personal communication, May 24, 2006).

Penny Crane was a very active participant and board member in SIGUCCS for over twenty years. She is often quoted as saying, "newcomers, you don't have to go to every session, old-timers, make sure you make it to at least one." In SIGUCCS, the opportunity to build relationships is valued as highly as the technical knowledge in the presentations.

After the opening plenary session you look at the program schedule and highlight what sessions you want to attend. People choose session for a variety of reasons. Jim Osborne, Computer Support Specialist Senior, University of Wyoming, says "I usually choose the sessions that deal with my specific job responsibilities or an issue that is critical to us. When I'm torn between two sessions, or don't have a better idea of what to attend, I'll go to the session my friends are attending. I've found a great benefit in going to sessions with someone else, as we can compare perspectives and notes. It's much richer! I have attended some sessions because of the presenter. I've attended other sessions to offer moral support for a friend who's presenting. I've also followed speakers over time simply because they are good and do things well in their environment." (personal communication, May 24, 2006)

You attend two morning sessions that pertain directly to your job. When you walk into the session, you sit next to someone from Idaho and introduce yourself. The confidence you've gained in one day has already paid off. You're starting to realize that the technical solutions are only a portion of the conference. The

people connections and networking can expand your boundaries both personally and professionally.

### **3.4 Outside the Structured Presentations**

Many conference goers feel the real “meet” of the conference goes on outside the confines of the formal presentations. Networking effectively begins with personal initiative.

## **4. NETWORKING AT THE CONFERENCE**

During lunch Terry sees you and asks you to join his table. You sit at the table and are immediately involved in conversation about how you meet new people.

### **4.1 Be Pro Active**

Introduce yourself to people. John Carnicella, Pennsylvania State University says that he, “tries to find someone who is sitting alone, then he sits next to them.” (personal communication, June 1, 2006) No matter how many conferences you’ve attended, taking people under your wing helps make the conference experience less intimidating for everyone.

### **4.2 Coat Tail Approach**

When you already know someone who is attending the conference, it’s easy to use them as the connection to others. Mat Felthousen believes that if you are an introvert, it can be hard to make the first step toward meeting someone. He’ll often sit back and allow his core connections do the initial step for him. Even for extroverts an easy way to begin to meet new people and develop conference confidence is to capitalize on the connections already made by someone you know.

### **4.3 Making Yourself Approachable**

Communication takes place both verbally and non verbally. Smile, look around and make eye contact. These are all ways to make yourself approachable. Then follow through with those you make a connection with and introduce yourself.

### **4.4 Look for a Familiar Face**

As you begin meeting people at the conference you’ll be able to connect names and faces. At other events, look for those faces and begin building on your initial connection.

### **4.5 Goal Setting**

Before attending the conference, set achievable goals to learn something in particular (i.e., an approach to training students or how to implement a particular piece of software or technology plan). Or choose to expand your professional and personal networking by setting a goal to meet one new person at each function.

### **4.6 One on One**

Whether you’re a newcomer or an old-timer at the conference, everyone is vital to the success of it. Everyone brings new ideas and fresh perspectives. Getting to know people one-on-one will prove this. Sit down with an individual you’ve made a connection with and get to know them more. Discuss facets of your jobs, problems you’re faced with, successes you’ve

achieved. As you get to know them in a professional manner, you’ll also be getting to know them as a person and friend. Consciously set aside time to do this, many of the conference events are group functions.

## **4.7 Group Interactions**

Small groups of five or more people allow for great social and networking time. Throughout the conference you’ll find some people staying with the same cluster of people, while others enjoy being with multiple groups throughout the conference. Each type of group has its own reasons for being together. Heidi Wasem says, “it’s reassuring to find that many schools are just coming up to speed on programs you have already implemented. Being able to return the knowledge gives you a greater appreciation for the work you do.” (personal communication, May 24, 2006)

### *4.7.1 Single Group Network*

Finding a single core group of conference participants to spend your non formal conference time together always makes for deeper connections. When staying with a single group you’ll get to know struggles other institutions are facing, projects and initiatives people are working on and you’ll be able to share the related knowledge you have. Using this approach you’ll be with the same group of people through all the social events during both formal and non formal times.

### *4.7.2 Multi Group Network*

Experiencing multi-group networking (moving from group to group) allows you a broader understanding about institutions and trends, not to mention it increases the number of people you get to meet exponentially. This approach takes personal initiative to recognize the other network clusters of people and approach a different one at every opportunity.

## **4.8 Cell Phones**

To keep in touch and make plans, cell phones are a great tool. The first thing many groups do is to swap cell phone numbers.

## **4.9 BOF-ing**

Attending the Birds of a Feather session is a perfect opportunity to meet other’s struggling with the same problem. The saying, “misery loves company” is very true, but in this case, “misery and success love company”. The BOF sessions are designed around a specific topic. You’ll find participants in BOF sessions eager to discuss their trials, tribulations and successes. Be prepared to leave the BOF session with loads of information and a number of new connections to follow-up with.

## **4.10 Swapping Cards**

It’s always important to bring a stack of business cards to the conference. Some people are good at remembering names, other’s are not. One approach to remembering people is to swap business cards. To help remember who each individual is, you can write on the back of the card keywords which will help you remember the person. These things can include, “met at the BOF on networking” or “funny Texan with tattoo on face and strong accent – all y’all”.

## 4.11 Approaching the Presenters

It's important to remember the conference is all created by volunteers and a majority of the presenters are conference participants too. Everyone loves to discuss topics they know a lot about, and presenters are no different. Going up to the presenter after their presentation is a perfect opportunity to meet someone new and learn more about their topic. An opening line to start the conversation could be, "I really liked what you said about X, and I have a question about..." Presenters are very receptive to questions and comments.

## 4.12 Formal Conference Opportunities

SIGUCCS has many volunteer opportunities. Taking these opportunities can be a great strategy to getting to know people. The more you participate, the more responsibilities you have, the more people you will meet, making networking that much easier. Some of these opportunities include, writing a paper and presenting, mentoring, attending the newcomers reception (even as an old timer), being a session chair, reading papers, helping at the registration desk and more. For some attendees, participating in this fashion helps gain institutional support and funding.

## 4.13 Non Traditional Approaches

There are many ways to meet people. Don't be afraid to have fun and play. Throw sugar packets at the person to get their attention. Balance spoons off your nose and see if you can get other's to try it too. Learn to make a rose out of a paper napkin and give it to the next person you see. Tell a joke (have you heard the one about the penguin?). Rent a minivan and invite six people you don't know to join you sightseeing. Sing karaoke like nobody's watching. Swing dance on the sidewalks.

## 5. KEEPING THE NETWORK GOING

As lunch ends, your thoughts are racing around networking tips, tricks and ideas. You look to see what other presentations you want to attend, and you notice there is one on "Networking: SIGUCCS and your professional and personal development (expanding your boundaries)". You and Terry decide to go and see what more you can learn.

You walk into the room and there is standing room only. Clearly this is a sought after soft skill needed in a hard skill environment. The presentation begins with a "Adventure Guide" handout. This handout includes strategies and activities for building and maintaining your network of friends and colleagues. Some of the sustaining strategies are:

### 5.1 ListSers and Email

A great way for groups to keep in touch is to setup an email listserv it's a great way to keep in touch without everyone having to maintain their own distribution lists. One person should host, setup and maintain the listserv. Make sure you continue to add new SIGfriends after each conference.

Listservs allow for easy access to friends with faces. You'll get quick responses to questions you have. For example, our listserv was used in writing this paper. We sent an email out with ten or so questions to get our SIGFriends feedback. Within a week we

had more material than we could use and a whole lot of encouragement.

Please do not confuse this with the formal SIGUCCS listserv. This is in additional resource idea.

## 5.2 Instant Messaging

Using Instant Messenger (IM) is a quick approach to keeping in touch. A very useful tool is a program that combines multiple protocols (i.e., AIM, Yahoo, ICQ, MSN and IRC) such as Trillian, GAIM or Adium (for the Mac), in a single package. Then it doesn't matter what medium of IM your colleagues use, you only have to launch one application.

Another suggestion is to setup a "group" within your IM Chat program and put all your SIGFriends in it. At a glance you can see who is online and say the quick "hellos". It's important to note that IM conversations are often interrupted, so be willing to not always receive responses instantly (as the name suggests).

## 5.3 Photo Galleries

Pictures, picture, pictures. In the age of digital photography, you'll come away with many pictures of the conference and the surrounding area. Creating a photo gallery is a nice way to share the experience and re-connect with those you shared it with. Mat Felthousen is one of the roving photographers and has created his photo gallery of SIGUCCS trips located at: <http://www.obtuse.org/mat/gallery/SIGUCCS-trips>

## 5.4 Blogging

Web logging or "blogging" is a way to keep an online journal. It makes it easy for friends and family to keep up with your life without you having to send emails or IM's with the latest information. A number of SIGUCCS participants use this technology as a way to keep others informed.

## 5.5 Phone Calls

Nothing is more personal than "reaching out and touching someone". Often the next best thing to being there is a phone call.

## 5.6 Celebrations

Birthdays, wedding, anniversaries, award ceremonies are all these celebrations are events you will be invited to as your relationships flourish.

## 5.7 Attending Other Conferences Together

According to Jim Osborne, attending SIGUCCS is like an "annual family reunion where we happen to geek out and learn too." (personal communication, May 25, 2006) But this reunion doesn't have to only take place at SIGUCCS conferences. A way to feel comfortable at other conferences is to use your SIGFriends to see who is going to other conferences and meet up with them. Rene Murphy, Director, Client Services and Co-CIO, St. Lawrence University says, "before I leave for any conference, I send email to my network of SIGUCCS friends and see if anyone else will be attending. Then I know who I can connect with at the conference." (personal communication, June 5, 2006)

## **5.8 Spread the Word**

The conference is an extremely valuable experience to all. It's important to spread the word and tell others about it when you return to work. Try to bring at least one or two new people to the conference each year.

The contacts you make are real experts with no big consulting fee, real people with honest opinions. They become a group of people that you can turn to who understand the environment you work in and are willing to listen and help. This is a valuable asset for everyone in the organization.

## **6. SUMMARY / CONCLUSION**

Your flight home leaves a few hours after the closing session. You are sad when the conference ends. You have learned a great deal, seen the wonderful sites and have met many interesting people. You know that next year you are going to be sure to attend the conference early and bring your networking "Adventure Guide" to make more of the conference.

As Mat Felthousen puts it, "Not every minute has to be productive so long as something meaningful is gained that will have a lasting impact on the year(s) to come."

Keeping that in mind, you and Terry stay in touch throughout the year. You send email to each other regularly. You call each other often. You've established a great relationship and now count Terry as a personal friend. You've even gone so far to meet half way between your towns for lunch. You learned so much from the conference and your friends that you can't wait until the "same time next year".

## **7. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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