

## On the Value of Academic Conferences, from Department Faculty

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*Journals are one way that academics – professors and students alike – share their original research with a broader audience. Conferences and other academic meetings are another important venue for sharing our work, learning about the most recent research of colleagues, and exploring archives. And, as you will see below, making connections!*

*Editor Lukas Ducker asked several faculty members to reflect on how conferences have enriched their work.*

Dr. David Carlson

This past summer, I was lucky enough to attend a research institute at Michigan State University on the creation of databases for the study of enslaved people. This institute had people from around the globe with interests that ranged from colonial American enslaved children to enslaved labor in Brazilian park creation to formerly enslaved populations on the island of Madagascar and beyond. Because my research focuses on the American South, it is easy to get blinded to the true scale of this topic, and the discussions one has at gatherings such as this reopens one's eyes to alternative research methods and perspectives.

In fact, I shared a cab to the airport with a researcher from New York City who had never really looked at the kinds of church and baptismal records that were going to be at the center of her project. I'm sure the shuttle driver quickly grew tired of our discussion on the importance of witnesses to christenings in piecing together networks linking white and black communities in late colonial Massachusetts.

Perhaps the greatest benefit for me was the exposure it gave to the various digital platforms available for researching and publishing online and to the people skilled in their use. Even though these were only introductory sessions, the meeting produced a community of researchers interested in similar topics and methodologies who can and do continue to communicate with one another. For several months after the institute, I continued to work with a software developer at Vanderbilt finetuning his database software. I continue to pose questions to institute directors. I venture to say that without this institute, the research project that I was developing on my own would not have continued without the direction this institute gave me.

Dr. Jay Valentine

While I teach classes in philosophy and religious studies, my research focuses on a somewhat minor Tibetan Buddhist religious group known as the Northern Treasure Tradition. Over the past ten years, I have strategically organized panels at regional, national, and international conferences with the intention of drawing more scholarly attention to this understudied area of Tibetology.

At the International Association of Tibetan Studies (IATS) conference in Paris, France in the summer of 2019, I met like-minded colleagues with whom we formed a research group called "For a Critical Study

of the History of the Northern Treasures” (FCHNT). Over the next few years, our group secured a grant through the French government to hire young scholars to work for the FCHNT.

In the summer of 2022, I chaired a panel at the IATS conference in Prague, Czech Republic, which featured scholars from the United States, France, Germany, Tibet, and Japan. In addition to expanding awareness about the Northern Treasures, we also interviewed potential scholars for the paid positions in the FCHNT.

Since the fall of 2023, the FCHNT has met weekly and plans to publish a series of volumes on the history of the Northern Treasure Tradition in the coming years. We plan to collect the papers from the conference and publish them as our third special issue of a journal that focuses on Tibetan Studies.

The FCHNT is also organizing a small conference focusing solely on the Northern Treasures to be held in Paris, France in the fall of 2024. We have already received presentation proposals from scholars around the world.

As can be easily deduced from the above narrative, the connections made at conferences have been absolutely central to my progress within the field. International travel is also relatively expensive, but conference travel is very often supported in part or in full by various institutions to make attending conferences attainable. For example, the FCHNT is offering free hotel rooms and most meals for all of the scholars delivering presentations at our conference in Paris.

Dr. Karen Ross

As a board member of the Southern Association for the History of Medicine and Science (SAHMS) and former editor of the Association’s journal, I have been able to foster relationships with faculty and graduate students from four continents and more than a dozen different countries. Attending conferences – and presenting my research – has been invaluable. More specifically, it has improved my scholarship and teaching. At the most recent SAHMS meeting this spring, for example, I attended a workshop on developments in artificial intelligence and what this means for higher education. I heard papers from colleagues from other institutions that help me think about my own research in new ways. Conferences are places where you learn from – and engage with – top researchers, and this often leads to collaborations or exchanges that develop you as a researcher and teacher. The give and take of live meetings – and the many conversations shared in the hallways (or in cabs as David wrote above) – are a critical component of our profession.

Conferences are also beneficial for Troy University undergraduates. Troy history students have given papers at the Troy Student Research Conference held by the Psychology Department each spring, the Phi Alpha Theta Conferences at the state and national levels, and at the Alabama Historical Association annual meeting.

Last spring, with support from the Dean's office of the College of Arts and Sciences, we were able to take history majors to the Alabama Historical Association's meeting in Prattville where they heard from historians on a rich variety of subjects relating to Alabama history. The event also offered soon-to-be-graduating seniors the opportunity to meet with the Alabama Department of Archives and History, faculty from history graduate programs, and state and local museums.