

# Welcome to the Appalachian Studies Association Annual Conference: A First-Time Attendee Guide

## About Me-

Hello, I'm Dr. Casey LaFrance, professor of political science and director of graduate studies at Western Illinois University.

If you are a first generation conference attendee, I have been in your shoes and I'm here to pay forward some of the amazing home that I have experienced in my career development.

This plan will help you to become familiar with terminology at the conference and to get a better idea of how to optimize the experience. Sadly, I left the distinction between old Time and Bluegrass music to be taught to you and argued about around a community table at the conference :-)

I grew up in the Copper Basin, a place where transportation infrastructure was built for resources, not people. It wasn't always easy to feel valued, especially when outsiders came in trying to erase our accents and teach us that "ain't ain't a word." But here's the truth: our voices matter, our stories matter, and our perspectives make Appalachian studies richer.

This is a new time, and we need new voices. By bringing your first-time perspective to this conference, you are making it better. You are reminding all of us why we love learning. The Appalachian Studies Association is more than an academic society—it's a family that welcomes you with open arms. And if you ever need proof of that, ask me how I became an honorary Selu Sister at the Radford University Selu Women's Writers Retreat.

My mentor, Alice Sampson, saw something in me—some shine I hadn't quite recognized yet. So did her colleague, Ross Alexander. Together, they helped me learn the ropes and attend my first conference in Appalachian studies. Having mentors who believe in you is a gift, but something that took me way too long to learn is this: it's even more important to believe in yourself.

New things can be scary, but fear fades when you step into a space filled with meaningful conversations and people who share your passion. Like Jason Isbell says, "*Be afraid, but do it anyway.*" You belong here.

## Executive Summary

Attending your first academic conference can feel overwhelming, but you belong here. The Appalachian Studies Association (ASA) Annual Conference brings together scholars, activists, artists, and community members who are passionate about the region. This guide will help you navigate the experience, understand key terms, and embrace your role in the intellectual and cultural exchange. Remember, imposter syndrome only happens to people smart enough to be here!

# Table of Contents

1. **Welcome & Affirmation**
  2. **Understanding the Conference Structure**
  3. **Glossary of Key Conference Terms**
  4. **Navigating Networking & Engagement**
  5. **Bluegrass Lessons in Courage & Belonging**
  6. **Final Encouragement & Reflection**
- 

## 1. Welcome & Affirmation

Stepping into your first conference can be daunting but take a deep breath—you are in the right place. Appalachian studies is a diverse and welcoming field, and your voice matters. Whether you are a student, an independent researcher, a community organizer, or a first-time presenter, you bring valuable perspectives.

Think of yourself as a bluegrass musician stepping onto the stage for the first time. Doc Watson, blind since infancy, didn't let his disability stop him from changing the world of music. Ricky Skaggs began playing mandolin on stage with Bill Monroe as a child. Ralph Stanley once questioned whether he could carry on after Carter Stanley's passing, but his signature a cappella style proved he could. You, too, are stepping into an opportunity to contribute to something greater.

---

## 2. Understanding the Conference Structure

ASA's annual conference includes various types of sessions, networking opportunities, and cultural events. Here's what to expect:

- **Plenary Sessions:** Large gatherings featuring distinguished speakers discussing broad, impactful topics in Appalachian studies.
- **Keynote Address:** A featured talk by a prominent scholar, activist, or artist, setting the tone for the conference.
- **Panels:** Sessions where multiple scholars present their research on a shared theme, followed by discussion.
- **Roundtables:** Interactive discussions where experts and participants engage in dialogue rather than formal presentations.
- **Workshops:** Hands-on, skill-building sessions related to research, activism, or Appalachian arts.
- **Posters vs. Papers:** Posters visually present research findings, often displayed in an exhibition space, while papers are presented orally in panel sessions.
- **Performances:** Film/documentary and other forms of literary, visual, and performance art.
- **Conveners:** Individuals who introduce presenters and facilitate panels or discussions,

keeping time and guiding Q&A.

- **Groups & Special Interest Meet-Ups:** Gatherings for attendees with shared interests, such as young scholars, activists, or artists. Y"ALL & the LGBTQ caucus for example.
  - **Cultural Events & Performances:** Music, dance, storytelling, and film screenings celebrating Appalachian heritage.
- 

### 3. Glossary of Key Conference Terms

- **Abstract:** A short summary of a paper, panel, poster, or roundtable that presents scholarly research. **Summary:** Briefly describes a performance, panel, paper, poster, roundtable, or workshop.
  - **Breakout Session:** Smaller sessions within the larger conference schedule.
  - **Call for Papers (CFP):** An invitation for scholars to submit proposals for presentation.
  - **Convener:** The person leading a panel discussion or session.
  - **Concurrent Sessions:** Multiple sessions happening at the same time, requiring attendees to choose which to attend.
  - **Discussant:** A scholar who critiques and contextualizes panel presentations.
  - **Interdisciplinary:** Work that combines multiple academic fields—common in Appalachian studies!
  - **Peer Review:** The process where experts evaluate research before it is published or presented.
  - **Proceedings:** Published collections of conference papers or abstracts.
  - **Q&A:** Question and answer period at the end of most sessions.
  - **Registration Fee:** The cost to attend. ASA provides a discounted student rate. All attendees must register and pay. Membership in ASA is included.
  - **Scholarly Research Track:** Peer reviewed sessions that demonstrate sound theory, methods, and interpretation that address research problems or questions relevant to Appalachia/Appalachian studies.
  - **Scholarly vs. Community-Based Work:** Appalachian studies values both academic research and work by activists, artists, and community members.
  - **Volunteer Opportunities:** Many conferences, including ASA, offer ways to get involved by assisting with registration, tech support, or sessions. Contact [asa@marshall.edu](mailto:asa@marshall.edu) for more information.
- 

### 4. Navigating Networking & Engagement

Academic conferences are about connection as much as content. Here's how to make the most of your experience:

- **Introduce Yourself with Confidence:** “Hi, I’m [Your Name], and I’m new to ASA! My interests are [your topics of interest]. What brings you here?”
- **Ask Questions:** Approach presenters after their talks. Most scholars appreciate genuine curiosity.
- **Attend Social & Cultural Events:** These are great spaces for informal networking.

- **Use the Conference App or Program:** Plan which sessions to attend in advance.
  - **Engage on Social Media:** Follow the conference hashtag and share your thoughts.
- 

## 5. Bluegrass Lessons in Courage & Belonging

Many legendary bluegrass musicians started out as outsiders or underdogs, yet they carved out their space in history. Let their journeys inspire you:

- **Doc Watson:** Overcame blindness to become a master guitarist, proving that talent and perseverance matter more than obstacles.
- **Ralph Stanley:** Created his own distinct vocal style after losing his brother and bandmate Carter Stanley. He could have quit—but instead, he innovated.
- **Ricky Skaggs:** Started as a young musician and had to prove himself among seasoned performers. Hard work and passion made him a legend.
- **The Carter Family & The Carter Fold:** This musical tradition embraced family, storytelling, and resilience—just like Appalachian studies does.

If you ever feel like you don't belong at the conference, remember, neither did some of the greatest musicians of all time when they started. Like them, you are carving out your space.

---

## 6. Final Encouragement & Reflection

Congratulations on taking this step into the world of Appalachian studies! Remember:

- **Your perspective is valuable.** Everyone at this conference has something to contribute, and that includes you.
- **Feeling like an imposter is proof you belong.** The most capable people often feel like they don't belong—because they care deeply about the field.
- **The Appalachian tradition is one of inclusion and resilience.** Whether you come from the region or not, you are part of a living tradition that values scholarship, activism, and storytelling.

Just like Doc Watson played his first tune, just like Ralph Stanley found his voice, just like the Carter Fold kept tradition alive—you are now part of this story. Welcome to the ASA Annual Conference!

To explore all the sessions and events happening during the 2025 ASA Conference at Tennessee Tech University in Cookeville, Tennessee please see the final program.