

What's in a Name(tag)?

Eric L. Muller

Last fall the LAWPROF discussion list saw a spirited debate about what's good and what's bad about the AALS annual meeting. It was precipitated by a post protesting purportedly preferential priorities in the process by which presenters are picked.¹ Something like a consensus seemed to emerge that the scholarly presentations were considerably worse than those at conferences in other fields, and that the AALS needs to do something about it.

This debate struck me as overblown, because the panels at the annual meeting have always seemed a bit of a sideshow. The real purposes of the annual meeting, as we all know, are two: networking, and getting free doodads from Lexis and Westlaw.

I am at the AALS as I write this, and I would like to praise the AALS for the way in which it helps us meet the second of these two goals. The free stuff this year is as good as it has ever been. This morning I made off with two bright red pens, gray pencils with two erasers arranged rather like the head of a hammer-head shark, and a nifty brain-teasing puzzle that, once solved, doubles as a coaster or a paperweight. It doesn't get much better than that.

But I maintain that the AALS is doing a poor job with its networking support.

The problem is the nametags that the AALS provides. If you have ever been to an annual meeting, you'll know immediately what I mean. The scene replays itself countless times every January. One person comes upon another, in a corridor or an elevator. Perhaps they find themselves in the Exhibit Hall, reaching for the same free Aspen Publishing totebag. Their eyes meet briefly, long enough to confirm that each does not know the other from Adam.² The same thought flashes through their minds: Is this a person it would benefit me to meet?

Their eyes then flicker downward to the nametags hanging at chest level from their necks. Typically they can afford only the most furtive of glances. For if it turns out that they actually *do* know one another, but one has grown so

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1. Never allow it to be alleged that the legal literature lacks alliterative allure, for that is a lie.
2. Or, as the case may be, Eve.

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fat and the other so bald that they simply do not recognize one another, it will be crucial to pretend that they did not need the cue.³

What will that furtive glance downward reveal? Nothing. And that's the problem. If they manage to find the nametag at all—if it is not flipped around backwards or wedged beneath a jacket or tie—they will see a small white rectangle bearing the person's name and school affiliation in squint-proof five-point type. And then they will face the awful moment of decision: should they pretend they never saw each other and look away, or should they take a chance and introduce themselves?

I cannot overstate the importance of this choice. Each might strike gold: the other person could be, say, the chair of appointments at Texas. On the other (and far likelier) hand, each might strike out: the other person could be, say, a legal-research-and-writing teacher from Wyoming.⁴ And make no mistake: that second possibility is disaster. Who wants to waste valuable networking time with someone off the network? Just yesterday I myself spent (read "wasted") several minutes on idle pleasantries with somebody who could not advance my career in *any way!* Time at the AALS is too short for that sort of thing. That is what LAWPROF is for.

I would therefore like to propose a new system of identification for the AALS annual meeting, one that will help us all network more efficiently and with less eyestrain.

My proposed nametag would not hang from the neck; we must be able to see one another's names without the embarrassment of looking down at one another's chests. I would issue each person attending the meeting one of those Groucho Marx-style nose-and-glasses combinations, with a small hook for a nametag just at the tip of the nose. With our nametags nearly at eye level, we will be able to approach anyone we meet and confidently pretend that we know them and have read their work.

Some will say that the nose-and-glasses setup makes too frivolous an impression for an academic conference. To them I would like to say, "Oh, lighten up." But I recognize that this might be seen as rude—or, to use the appropriate argot, a marginalizing of those who are differently abled comedically. Thus, as an alternative to the nose-and-glasses, I propose those nifty collegiate skimmer hats, with a place for a nametag in the hatband.

And the nametag itself must change significantly, so that it helps us decide who is worth our time. I envision a nametag that is as concise and effective in communicating rank as those little military lapel bars. When, after all, was the last time you saw a three-star general mistakenly snap to attention for a buck private?

First of all, we must take advantage of the possibilities offered by color. Faculty from fourth-quartile schools should have their names printed in black; faculty from third-quartile schools in bronze; from second-quartile schools in

3. And if one of them is a woman, well, that complicates things further. I think I may have just ridden the elevator with a prominent feminist scholar I've been dying to meet, but I'm not sure because I didn't want her to catch me glancing at her chest.
4. I used to be the legal-research-and-writing person from Wyoming, by the way. Remember? I smiled and said "Hello" to you a bit too eagerly in the elevator at the annual meeting in San Antonio back in '95. No?

silver; and from top-quartile schools in gold. Faculty from top-ten schools might also have their school's numerical ranking embossed in one corner of the tag.⁵ Those who have published articles in top-ten law reviews might be permitted a single broad black stripe down one side of the tag for each such article, unless the article placed into the *Yale Law Journal* or the *Harvard Law Review*, in which case the line would be blue (in the former case) or crimson (in the latter). An essay or book review in a top-ten journal would merit a narrower line.

Second, we must make our names more readable. Only the surname should appear on the tag, and it should be printed in huge bold letters.⁶ Two exceptions to this rule might be permitted. First, those who have had someone from a top-ten school as a coauthor might be permitted to include, in small letters, the coauthor's name, so as to help the viewer make the connection. And second, faculty from Harvard and Yale should be permitted to omit their names from their tags entirely, as anybody who does not already know who they are has no business talking with them in the first place.

Third, to avoid the legal-research-and-writing-person-from-Wyoming problem, we must develop symbols that easily identify our areas of expertise or, failing that, the areas in which we teach and write. I do constitutional and criminal law and procedure, and I note that the clip art that comes with Microsoft Word includes a miniature image of the Constitution and a little bank robber that would work well for my nametag. Contracts people might use a little handshake icon, and a cartoon of a car wreck might work nicely for torts folks. If you see a nametag with a © symbol, you'll know you're looking at an I.P. person. (The critical theory people are going to have to come up with something on their own.)

Finally, we would do well to adopt a system of symbols or abbreviations for communicating other key networking information. Nametags of tenured faculty should of course bear a large T. P&T, along with a small skull-and-crossbones, should adorn the nametags of those on their school's tenure and promotion committee, so as to warn those around them of the risk that they are about to be asked to write a letter evaluating someone's scholarship. Members of appointments committees should have a large A on their tag for easy identification in crowded, cocktail-party-type settings.⁷ (If they are simultaneously interviewing for lateral positions at other schools, their A should be scarlet.) Deans' nametags should bear a large dollar sign (\$), and those of legal writing faculty might identify them with a related emblem (℄).

I do not mean to suggest that my proposed list of nametag markings is exhaustive. Undoubtedly other sorts of visual cues will help us network even more efficiently, and I invite your suggestions, although I do wish to make clear at the outset that the idea of issuing emeritus faculty nametags in the shape of gravestones strikes me as crass and insensitive.

5. Disputes among the top ten schools over the correctness of their rankings would be submitted for resolution to the AALS executive director, Carl Monk, with the understanding that NYU must always be ranked above Columbia.
6. This will obviously work to the detriment of the Smiths and the Cohens, but they'll just have to find other ways of distinguishing themselves.
7. If an appointments committee member is also tenured, his or her nametag will have to read A&T rather than T&A so as to avoid being mistaken for an obscenity law scholar.