

# Lessons from Orlando



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**A**fter the excitement of GFOA's 118th annual conference in June, it's time to focus our attention on all the events scheduled for this fall, our ongoing initiatives, and next year's 119th annual conference in Washington, D.C. But first, we need to take a moment to make sure we've learned from our experience.

What a conference! The location, program content, peer interactions, social events, and overall energy made this one of the best—perhaps the best—conference I've attended. This was my 8th conference as GFOA's executive director. Knowing more of the details that go into planning the event has made the experience more rewarding. I'm proud to be part of an event that has truly become the “can't miss” conference for state/provincial and local government finance professionals.

GFOA's annual conference provides a unique opportunity to interact with members, get feedback, and better understand the challenges government leaders face. Walking around the convention center and talking to members helps me understand the role GFOA plays in supporting finance professionals, governments, and the overall public finance industry. As we work on not only next year's conference, but other major events throughout the year, I wanted to share my major takeaways, highlight what I learned throughout that week, and provide my thoughts about what the event means for GFOA and our strategies for best serving our diverse network of members.

## 1. GFOA has amazing members.

GFOA's conference has always been a place where finance professionals are able to showcase their ideas, innovations, research, lessons learned, case studies, and stories. This year's conference highlighted more members' stories than ever before. I am so proud that we can host an event that features GFOA members advocating for best practices, working collectively with their peers to solve some of the most pressing challenges facing our communities, and championing not only sound financial management principles but also GFOA's values and ethics. The sessions I attended were engaging, educational, thought provoking, and inspiring.

Our goal is to continue that momentum. We want to leverage the talent of our members, and we intentionally create opportunities for them to engage with the association. GFOA offers many opportunities to get involved, beyond the annual conference, from writing articles for *GFR*, to speaking on a webinar, to leading one of GFOA's affinity groups. We plan to provide a platform to as many members as possible for sharing ideas, mentoring those who are new to the profession, contributing to a task force, or participating on a committee. To get more involved with GFOA, please visit [gfoa.org/volunteer](https://gfoa.org/volunteer) for a listing of current opportunities.

## 2. Technology plays a huge role in the conference experience.

Technology is everywhere, and GFOA has been working to better integrate our mobile app into the conference experience. This year, it became the primary method for researching sessions, planning an

agenda, looking up exhibitors, asking questions in a session, and more. Not only does the app provide a better experience for attendees, it also helps GFOA staff members analyze data and make better decisions. Integrating social media into the conference experience this year allowed us to document, in real time, what being at the conference is like.

It's hard to escape the importance of technology in public finance overall, and how necessary it is for finance officers to be knowledgeable about its uses. This year's conference featured a keynote speaker focused on artificial intelligence (AI) and technology, and a dedicated session track for technical topics. More than half of the concurrent sessions highlighted or touched on the implementation of technology, and vendors had an important presence in the exhibit hall. We invest our resources to bring you relevant and useful information about technology-related topics like AI and government, technologies for financial reporting, critical information on cyber risks, and lessons learned and success factors for better enterprise resource planning system implementations.

**3. Relationships are essential.** Before 2020, I didn't fully understand the importance of being able to connect with our peers and build relationships in person. During the two years that the COVID-19 pandemic forced us to cancel our annual conference, GFOA was able to pivot and provide a virtual conference. It was a high-quality educational event, but the social aspect and networking experiences couldn't be replicated. David Brooks, one of the keynote speakers at

this year's conference, talked about the importance of relationships and getting to know each other, and I couldn't agree more. In person at the conference center, it's easy to notice colleagues becoming friends and developing those bonds that will be used to make us all better finance officers and better people.

Personally, I appreciate the opportunity to reconnect with so many people I only get the chance to see once a year at the GFOA conference. Our challenge is creating a similar experience for the majority of GFOA members who don't attend the annual conference. First, we hope to get better at reaching members who have not attended in the past, communicating the return on investment for governments, and attracting more delegates. Second, we continue to explore other opportunities. In 2025, we will modify the format of our national training offerings to more resemble a conference experience, including networking opportunities, social events, and opportunities to connect. We will add programming around our affinity groups, and groups like the Alliance for Smarter School Spending will also start offering "mini" conference-type experiences that integrate education and networking. GFOA has also been building partnerships between finance and other peer groups, providing resources and educational materials to help our members strengthen relationships with their colleagues in procurement, public works, fire service, parks and recreation, and other areas of local government.

**4. Details matter.** There are parallels between planning an event like the GFOA conference and the work that many of our members do every day. The overall experience and impression the conference makes on people is a result of complex planning, bringing together hundreds if not thousands of details, building plans, and executing them well. Making the conference enjoyable depends on high-quality, compelling, and entertaining speakers, appetizing food, short wait times, pleasant interactions with GFOA staff and other members, reliable



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buses, good hotel options, availability of tourist attractions, affordable prices, good weather, and more. Bad experiences in any of those areas may cloud an attendee's overall experience. The goal in public finance is trust, transparency, accountability, better decisions, and better outcomes for the community, made possible by the combination of policies, business processes, and countless transactions, reports, communications, and interactions. Errors, even small ones, can reduce our ability to achieve important outcomes and damage the perception of our profession or our organization. Pulling off a conference and managing a finance office both require leaders, managers, and skilled technical staff working collaboratively toward a greater goal.

GFOA serves all levels of finance professionals. While we continue to expand our leadership offerings, we will also keep adding programming to meet your needs for building technical skills. We are developing demand training opportunities and working on additional live training sessions to serve our expanding membership. A recent GFOA member survey identified access to subject matter experts

as the leading benefit of being a GFOA member. We know that public finance can be complex, and details matter. GFOA's strength has always been having staff, volunteers, and other resources who serve as subject matter experts who can guide you through the details, answer questions, and produce high-quality resources. GFOA has a different model than most professional associations. The teams within our Research and Consulting Center, Technical Services Center, and Federal Liaison Center are subject matter experts, many of whom have experience working for local government. These knowledgeable staff members are your resources for information, support programs, and help in responding to the challenges you face in serving your community.

Planning for GFOA's 2025 annual conference is already underway, and we aim to make next year even better. We're looking for your help to make it bigger, as well. Registration will open in Fall 2024. Stay tuned to GFOA for conference updates. I look forward to seeing as many of you as possible next year in Washington, D.C. at our 119th annual conference. 📍

Sincerely,

*Chris*