

Counseling Conference Presentations: From Concept to Proposal

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Abstract

The authors reviewed the literature and noted a dearth of literature published providing guidance for counselor educators seeking guidance for completing and teaching the process of writing proposals for professional counseling or counselor education conference presentations. This article fills the gap by providing specific content for preparing and submitting presentation proposals for professional conferences.

Keywords: counselor education, counseling conference, presentation proposals

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Sharing insights and connecting with colleagues and professionals at a national counseling conference can be a transformative experience for students, counselors, and faculty. Yet, for many aspiring presenters, the journey from innovative ideas to accepted proposals can feel daunting, often due to a lack of clear and accessible guidance on the process of submitting a conference proposal. Counseling conferences provide growth and development opportunities for those in the counseling field and offer the chance to engage in and contribute to academic conversations in the profession. Additionally, involvement in counseling conferences helps counselor supervisors, educators, and counselor education and supervision (CES) doctoral students develop their counselor educator identities and provides opportunities to network (Seidel, 2018). Hiring committees use conference presentations when contemplating potential professorships; other professional opportunities include further research, presenting at conferences, and writing. This manuscript aims to provide an innovative teaching guide and practical resource for presentation preparation.

Our extensive review of counseling-specific journals and professional development materials revealed a notable gap in comprehensive, incremental guidance tailored to the unique demands of counseling conference proposal submissions, particularly regarding the integration of theoretical frameworks and practical application within the proposal narrative. Limited research on this topic and limited experience of CES doctoral students and counseling professionals suggest the need for future research regarding conference proposal preparation. The lack of research-based resources creates substantial difficulties for CES doctoral students and early career professionals who lack official training and mentorship in developing proposals (Calbraith, 2020; Romano, 2020).

The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Programs (CACREP) specifies research requirements for CES doctoral programs but does not require demonstrations of competency in preparing proposals or presenting at conferences (CACREP, 2016). Students who attend programs that lack integrated support must independently manage this complex process or depend on intensive faculty mentorship. Studies demonstrate that mentorship through collaborative writing and presentation activities yields meaningful experiential learning opportunities while building professional community connections (Boswell et al., 2015; Vernam et al., 2022).

The authors of this manuscript were nine doctoral-level students across three sections of a dissemination of scholarship course in CES and their two faculty members. Following IRB approval, a survey was sent to the students before the course to determine their perceived level of preparedness in developing and submitting presentation proposals. Only 23% of students felt they were prepared to write a proposal for a professional counseling presentation. CES doctoral students in other programs and inexperienced faculty may feel similarly as there is limited comprehensive literature about creating and developing a counseling presentation proposal. This article aims to fill this gap in the literature by providing counseling professionals, doctoral-level CES students, and faculty with information on preparing and presenting proposals for local, state, regional, and national counseling conference platforms.

Phase 1: Preparation

Calls for proposals are often sent out up to a year in advance and can be found through counseling organization websites, publications, brochures, emails, and professional listservs. It is beneficial to research a variety of counseling conferences and communicate research interests to other mental health professionals who share expertise and interest in the potential presentation

topic. Networking with other professionals in the mental health field can also enhance knowledge of other associations and upcoming conference opportunities.

Begin by researching counseling conferences and organize a comprehensive list of conferences, deadlines, locations, themes, and submission requirements each year. Effective organization is paramount when navigating the conference proposal process. Implementing a system, whether a digital spreadsheet or a project management tool, can help track deadlines, abstract lengths, and required documentation. Also, keeping a clear record of financial considerations including potential reimbursement guidelines and associated deadlines can prevent unforeseen financial burdens. When choosing a conference, consider conference reimbursement amounts, proximity to home and work, travel required, additional expenses like food and parking, and consider if time away from work and family can be afforded. Some conferences often require one presenter to be a member of the hosting organization, and students may need a faculty sponsor to present at the conference. Review each conference's requirements for proposal submission to ensure the best chance of acceptance of the proposal (Corwin et al., 2018; Stevens-Smith, 2016). Conference presentation topics must reflect the overarching conference theme and fit the presenter's professional identity and their clinical and research expertise. The use of established content areas from credentialing organizations such as the National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC) helps position the proposal within recognized professional practice standards.

Phase 2: Development

The development stage involves creating a powerful and persuasive proposal. The proposal demonstrates its professional relevance alongside its scholarly basis and its connection to the conference theme (Lamar & Sheperis, 2021; Stevens-Smith, 2016). This section includes

details such as faculty sponsors, co-authors, collaborative submissions, and improving acceptance rates. The likelihood of proposal acceptance increases with eye-catching titles, measurable learning objectives based on Bloom's Taxonomy, and concise rationales. All presenters need to adhere to established formatting regulations and character restrictions.

Faculty Sponsor

Each call for proposals will clarify whether faculty sponsors are required for students to submit a proposal. When considering a faculty sponsor, students should seek a faculty member who has experience with both the proposal submission and presentation process, who has the time, desire, and willingness to work with you, and has a complimentary personality to yours. An encouraging faculty sponsor can positively impact motivation level and improve the quality of the proposal while providing feedback on clarity and content (Boswell et al., 2015; Vernam et al., 2022). Faculty sponsors provide essential support and constructive guidance while giving feedback to strengthen proposals at this stage.

Co-Authors

Students benefit from working collaboratively with co-authors to help evenly distribute the workload and improve content quality. Working with colleagues and collaborating on ideas with a team can benefit the preparation process by adding varied perspectives, creativity, encouragement, and cohesion to the project (Seidel, 2018; Swank et al., 2019). Presenters may consider starting with a brainstorming meeting to identify the specific topic of the presentation, determine learning outcomes, select a conference, discuss how the topic compliments the conference's overall theme, and review the proposal requirements. Teams can distribute workloads during each phase of the process, meeting as needed to finalize the project. The lead presenter is ultimately responsible for reviewing the entire proposal for flow and consistency

before submitting the proposal to the conference for consideration. Insights from colleagues who are not on the team can also offer a fresh perspective on current content and offer suggestions that may enhance the proposal (Seidel, 2018). Working collaboratively often improves the content of the proposal and ensures the message of the presentation is cohesive with the conference theme and audience (Seidel, 2018; Swank et al., 2019). Once a proposal is accepted, professionals can then collaborate and co-author the presentation to present together at the conference.

Elements of the Proposal

Proposals must include presentation titles that contain appealing buzzwords that draw attention to the presentation. When reviewing the title guidelines, ensure that the requirement for word count or the number of characters complies with the proposal guidelines. Not adhering to these requirements can result in the proposal being rejected before it can be considered based on content. Appendix A illustrates the similarities and differences among proposal requirements for local, state, regional, and national conferences (Association for Counselor Education and Supervision, 2023; (name of the author's university), 2024; Southern Association of Counselor Education and Supervision, 2024; Virginia Association of Counselor Education and Supervision, 2024). Although there are similarities, character spacing, presentation length, and formatting may be specific to individual conferences.

Learning objectives outline the presentation's content to the audience and should always begin with the words: *the participants will...* followed by details of the objectives (Shrestha et al., 2019; see *Appendix A*). Objectives also define the goal of the presentation and illustrate the information the authors want to convey to the audience. Since most counseling conferences require learning objectives, it is important to be familiar with how to define and write them for

submission. Participants may use Bloom's taxonomy provides terms to create clear and measurable objectives that ensure audience learning (Armstrong, 2010).

Program details provide proposal reviewers with an overview of the topic's relevance and importance and the educational components included within the presentation. Most counseling conference proposal submissions require citations and references because proposals and presentations are scholarly endeavors. Some conferences require a written rationale and written original follow-up questions with their correct answers to be used for the continuing education portion of the conference. While they are usually outlined clearly, having a specific record of required conference content can help avoid missed materials that may delay the acceptance process or prevent a proposal from being accepted.

Most conferences require presenters to submit citations along with professional biographies which detail their relevant qualifications and experience. Presenter information should include name, highest degree earned, licensure/certification, institutional affiliation, primary mailing address, email, and phone for all presenters (Southern Association for Counselor Education and Supervision [SACES], 2020). This section would also include the presenter's expertise, including past research, teaching experience, or current client population related to the speaking topic. These should be engaging, yet succinct, and there is usually a recommended word count for this section of content.

Phase 3: Submission

Successful submission requires strict adherence to the specific conference guidelines in the third phase. For example, conference guidelines will specify a proposal due date, and many have word and character restrictions for specific sections of the proposal and time allocations for the presentation. Additionally, many counseling conferences require presenters to be members in

good standing of the sponsoring organization. Therefore, it is crucial to check the specific requirements early to ensure all criteria are met. (Corwin et al., 2018). Write proposals using a word processor and perform a grammar and clarity check before you upload them to the submission portal. All identifying details must be eliminated from proposals because they are subject to blind review to maintain anonymity. It is essential to check the content of each transferred section for accuracy as changes cannot be made once the proposal has been submitted (Corwin et al., 2018). Common mistakes that cause a proposal to be rejected include submitting the same proposal under multiple sessions, grammatical errors, exceeding word count limits, inaccurate credentials, including identifying information in areas it is not specifically requested, or submitting a topic that does not align with the conference theme (Shrestha et al., 2019). Depending on the conference, proposals can be submitted through email or electronic portals. The authors suggest downloading a copy of the proposal template and reviewing the portal questions for submitting content requirements early in the process. Developing the proposal submission in an MS Word document is advisable rather than typing directly into the portal. By doing so, sections can be quickly reviewed and revised before the actual submission, improving the accuracy and ease of proposal completion. The proposal can then be copied and pasted from the MS Word document into the corresponding spaces in the actual proposal.

Phase 4: Waiting

The submission process moves presenters into their fourth phase which involves waiting. The duration of review periods spans anywhere from several weeks up to multiple months. Most grant funding requires an accepted conference proposal for funding, so the timing of writing a proposal and requesting grant funds is important. Once all conference and grant funding paperwork has been submitted, there is a lull in activity for a season. While waiting for

responses, it can be helpful to engage in self-care that nourishes and refreshes the individual or the team. Enlisting in self-care practices can help manage uncertainty surrounding the awaited outcome and can encourage momentum once the conference proposal has been accepted.

A common aspect of the proposal review process for many counseling conferences is the blind review process. In a blind review, the reviewers do not know who authored the proposal or their institutional affiliations. To clarify, no identifying information should be written in the proposal or included on a submitted MS Word document. This is an integral part of the peer-review process to reduce conflict of interest or bias issues on the reviewer's part. Reviewers accept or reject a proposal based on how well the submitted proposal meets the criteria for the specific conference. Elements of the rubric will include all proposal guidelines, including the formatting and character space requirements. Additional evaluation considerations may consist of the presenter's qualifications, the type of presentation, and connection to the conference theme. Authors may have the option of participating in multiple presentations within the conference, but there can be a limit. Proposals receiving the highest scores move onto a selection process determined by the conference presentation organizers. Following the selection process, conference presentation organizers will notify those who submitted proposals on their status. Conference guidelines will state when proposal decisions can be expected and how notifications will be made (Romano, 2020; Shrestha et al., 2019; Stevens-Smith, 2016).

Phase 5: Acceptance

Accepted proposals move into the final stage where presenters must prepare their presentation materials. Presenters who receive acceptance may need to send a short program summary which will be part of the conference documentation. Accepted presenters must work together to create their presentation materials and complete any necessary travel or

reimbursement documents. There is often a deadline for submitting any changes to program material, and some material cannot be changed after the proposal is accepted. Remember to also follow proposal and presentation guidelines regarding font size, handout requirements, presentation attire, Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) accessibility standards, and poster dimensions to increase the likelihood of approval.

Considerations and Future Research

Varying requirements for counseling conferences make it difficult to provide a comprehensive list of guidelines for all the conferences within the counseling profession. While similarities and differences in guideline requirements were provided from a few selected counseling conferences (*Appendix A*), this compilation by no means reflects a definitive list of options from which the prospective counseling conference presenter can choose.

There is limited peer-reviewed research to assist in the modeling process for doctoral students who want to pursue the proposal preparation and submission process, providing an opportunity for future research and for creating instructional literature regarding conference proposal preparation. Research is also needed to address the benefits and limitations of faculty member or mentor involvement and the impact of course material on proposal presentations, as well as step-by-step guidance for submitting proposals and the challenges students may face throughout the proposal process (Romano, 2020; Shrestha et al., 2019). This article fills an important void in counselor education by delivering clear and accessible instructions for creating and submitting conference proposals. These steps guide CES doctoral students along with faculty members and emerging professionals to make significant contributions to their field while establishing their scholarly identity through professional presentations. Counseling professionals

who thoughtfully participate in each phase of the process will enhance their confidence and skills while gaining visibility in academic and practice settings.

Conclusion

The process of proposal development and submission to local, state, regional, and national counseling conferences significantly contributes to building a professional identity and aligns with CACREP standards for university programs. This article was developed to alert potential counseling conference presenters, counselor educators, and supervisors of the gap in the literature on preparing proposals for counseling conferences and scholarly presentations while also providing a guide for counseling proposal submissions. Engagement with other counselors and clinicians offered by participation in counseling conferences is beneficial in professional development, however, the tools to navigate the different processes and guidelines when submitting counseling proposals are not readily apparent. Therefore, this article was developed to address the literature gap and assist potential presenters, counselor educators, and counseling supervisors in better understanding and navigating the proposal development and submission process for local, state, regional, and national counseling conferences.

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Appendix A
Example Counseling Conference Proposal Guideline

Conference platform	Local	State	Regional	National
Submission criteria	[Author's University] Research Week	VACES Graduate Student conference	SACES Conference	ACES Bi-Annual Conference
Length of session	15 minutes	30 or 50 minute session types	25 and 50 minute session types	30, 50, and 80 minute session types
Faculty sponsor	Required	Required for students Graduate and doctoral students residing or attending a school in Virginia	Required for students	Required for students
Presenter qualification	Current student		Primary presenter SACES member	First presenter ACES member
Title of presentation	Required	Required	100 character maximum	100 Characters maximum
Summary for conference program	Not required	50 words maximum	1500 character maximum	3000 character maximum
Learning objectives	Not required	Three learning objectives	3 objectives, 500 character maximum	3 Objectives 300 characters maximum each
Primary topic	Topic approval from faculty/mentors	Research and development of practices for clinical treatment	Based on NBCC categories	CORE, NBCC, and counselor education related categories
Citations and references	Not required	Required	Minimum of three	10000 character maximum
Abstract	200-300 words	500 word maximum	500 character maximum	500 character maximum
Identify preferred session format	Required	Required	Required	Required
Handouts	Required	Required	Required, accessible in app week prior to conference	Required, electronic submission ahead of deadline

Note. Local = University; State = Virginia Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (VACES), Regional = Southern Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (SACES), National = Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES)