

**Counseling Conference Presentations: From Concept to Proposal**

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### **Abstract**

Despite the many benefits counselors, professors, supervisors, and students obtain by presenting at counseling conferences, unfamiliarity with the many steps and considerations involved in preparing and submitting a proposal for counseling conferences can be barriers for potential participants. The authors reviewed the literature, available documentation, and their experiences on how to prepare and submit counseling conference proposals. They noted a lack of written guidance for those wanting to learn about or teach the process of writing conference proposals for professional counseling presentations. This article fills a gap in the literature on considerations involved in choosing a counseling conference, choosing a topic, and preparing and submitting presentation proposals.

*Keywords:* counselor education, counseling conference, presentation proposals

### **Public Significance Statement**

This study identifies the need for additional research on counseling conference proposal and presentation preparation. Specific guidelines and recommendations are presented to assist counselors and counselor educators in developing conference proposals and presentations.

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### **Counseling Conference Presentations: From Concept to 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 a practical resource for presentation preparation.

Despite the benefits of conference involvement, there is a dearth of literature on preparing counseling conference proposals. Searches were conducted using the terms: presentation proposal, conference proposal, preparing proposals, presentation preparation, mentor, presentation guidelines for CES presenters, conference, proposal, counselor, CES, presentation, professional, planning, prepare regional, educator, and supervisor. An extensive search within Counseling related journals yielded a single article related to conference proposal preparation. Lamar & Sheperis (2021) described a master's level course that taught students how to find a research idea and conduct a literature review to submit a proposal for a poster presentation.

An expanded search discovered presentation preparation articles in journals from other disciplines including the *International Journal of Mentoring, Coaching and Education*, *Nursing Standard*, *CBE Life Sciences Education*, *Children and Libraries*, *Journal of Multidisciplinary Healthcare*, *Journal of Management and Inquiry*, and the *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance*. Corwin et al. (2018) explored classroom-based practices when

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developing conference presentations for scientists . Furthermore, Stevens-Smith's (2016) article for physical education professionals highlighted submitting proposals that included helpful information on selecting topics, setting the focus, and developing learning objectives. Two prevalent obstacles to conference participation include the limited research on this topic and limited experience in proposal development and conference presentation of many CES doctoral students and counseling professionals (Calbraith, 2020; Romano, 2020). Research suggests that there is an absence of pertinent research for counselors regarding conference proposal preparation.

The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Programs (CACREP) specifies research requirements for CES doctoral programs . However, these standards do not require demonstrations of competency in preparing proposals or presenting at counseling conferences in their course offerings (CACREP, 2016). Therefore, individual programs decide whether to include proposal and presentation training in the curricula. In CES doctoral programs without intentional coursework related to proposals and presentations, developmental mentoring of students by more senior faculty can be an experiential avenue for generating scholars who engage in professional dialogue through presentations (Boswell et al., 2015; Vernam et al., 2022). Working in a collaborative team of professionals can be an excellent starting place for inexperienced presenters and mentees to work with mentors and senior faculty to develop and present proposals (Swank et al., 2019).

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. 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. Most students did not feel

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adequately prepared, indicating they felt *not at all prepared*, *a little prepared*, or *somewhat prepared* to write a proposal for a professional counseling presentation, with 23% indicating they felt *prepared*. 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 in similar fields. Networking with other professionals in the mental health field can also enhance knowledge of other associations and upcoming conference opportunities.

### **Conference Selection**

Begin by researching counseling conferences and create a comprehensive list of conferences, deadlines, locations, themes, and submission requirements each year to improve personal and/or group organization. When choosing a conference, considerations may include conference reimbursements, location, travel, expenses, and time away from work and family. Some counseling conferences have presentation requirements, such as being a member of the organization hosting the conference, and for students, counseling conferences may require a faculty sponsor. While some examples of conference requirements for proposal submission opportunities are provided, being aware of conference-specific requirements is paramount when

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preparing a proposal to ensure you meet the conference requirements (Corwin et al., 2018; Stevens-Smith, 2016).

### **Detail Selection**

Choosing a topic that aligns with personal interests and expertise will help enhance the overall experience from proposal submission to presentation. When selecting a topic, presenters need to consider their target audience and whether their selected topic coincides with the conference audience, location, and theme. For example, the National Board of Certified Counselors categories serve as guidelines for the 2024 Southern Association of Counselor Education and Supervision (SACES) conference and any presentation proposals need to fall within these parameters. When SACES holds a conference, the topics are specifically focused on counselor education and supervision. The audience for the SACES conference includes students, counselor educators, counselors, and counseling supervisors. Authors must select a 50-minute poster presentation, a 20-minute lightning presentation, a 50-minute presentation, a 50-minute round table discussion, or an educational presentation which may occur in person or virtually (SACES, 2020).

### **Phase 2: Development**

A suitable counseling proposal is focused on a topic, demonstrates the presenter's scholarship ability and expertise, is relevant to the conference's theme, and presents a clear and direct plan for a presentation (Lamar & Sheperis, 2021; Stevens-Smith, 2016). This section includes details such as faculty sponsors, co-authors, collaborative submissions, and improving acceptance rates. For further illustration, an example of a 50-minute content session proposal can be found in Appendix B.

### **Faculty Sponsor**

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Students submitting proposals to counseling conferences may be required to have a faculty sponsor. Each call for proposals will clarify whether a faculty sponsor is 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 process and presenting at state, regional, and national counseling conferences. Consider a faculty member that has the time, desire, and willingness to work with you as well as a complimentary personality. An encouraging faculty sponsor can positively impact motivation level and improve the quality of the article while providing feedback on clarity and content (Boswell et al., 2015; Vernam et al., 2022). Sponsorship benefits both the student and the faculty by strengthening presentation skills, identifying new ideas, and collaborating on current research agendas (Boswell, 2015).

### **Co-authors**

A new presenter can also benefit from collaborating with a co-author. Working with colleagues and collaborating on ideas with a team can benefit the preparation process by adding varied perspectives, creativity, and encouragement. There is also an opportunity to expand collegial experiences while improving the quality of the content through group discussions and revisions. Co-authors can also help distribute the workload during the scholarly literature review, proposal preparation, and completed presentation. Each team member brings unique experience that contribute to the discussion and planning process. Potential 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. When developing a proposal, the proposal write-up can be divided into sections, and each team member can complete one of the proposal sections. Once that is completed, all team members can work on various presentation materials.

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The team members can meet as needed, but the lead presenter is 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.

### **Improving Acceptance**

Adhering to the conference submission requirements contributes to improved acceptance rates for conference proposals. 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.

### ***Titles***

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. In Appendix A, the local conference [name of author's university] does not indicate a



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word or character space limit. However, the state conference, Virginia Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (VACES), the regional conference, Southern Association for Counselor Education and Supervision, (SACES), and the national conference, Association for Counselor Education and Supervision, (ACES) each have a character limit of 100 in the title requirements.

### ***Learning Objectives***

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; 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. Bloom's taxonomy provides terms to create clear and measurable objectives that ensure audience learning (Armstrong, 2010). The local conference did not require learning objectives, [name of author's university], while the state (VACES), regional (SACES) and national (ACES) conferences require three learning objectives.

### ***Program Details***

Program details provide proposal reviewers with an overview of the topic's relevance and importance and the educational components included within the presentation. As seen in Appendix A, the only call for proposals not requiring a rationale and educational content section is that of the local conference. Most counseling conference proposal submissions require citations and references because proposals and presentations are scholarly endeavors. As seen in Appendix A, three of the four call for proposals require citations and references to be included in the proposal. They also require that handouts are available to conference participants during the

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presentation. Of note, Research Week, the local conference, is the only call for proposal in Appendix A that does not require citations and references within the proposal.

### ***Presenter Biographies***

The call for proposal for counseling conferences requires that each presenter's name and qualifications be included. Presenter information should include name, highest degree earned, licensure/certification, institutional affiliation, primary mailing address, email, and phone (for all presenters). This section would also include the presenter's expertise, including past research, teaching experience, or current client population related to the speaking topic.

## **Phase 3: Submission**

### **Submission Process**

Each counseling conference provides instructions for the proposal submission process, usually outlined or linked within the call for proposal. It is vital to follow the submission guidelines to ensure proposal acceptance criteria are met. 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).

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,

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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. 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).

### **Proofreading**

Following all the listed guidelines increases the likelihood of acceptance. Some common mistakes that may cause a proposal to be rejected are submitting the same proposal in multiple session types, making grammatical errors, exceeding the word or character count limits, listing inaccurate credentials, including identifying information when the guidelines specified a blinded proposal, or submitting a topic that does not align with the conference theme. It is important to comply with all conference requirements listed in the call for proposals. Requirements may also include being a member of the hosting entity, an educator, a student, specific educational achievements, or required credentials such as a licensed provider or prior presentation experience. Once all the required information is gathered, it is essential to review it for compliance with the conference requirements. (Shrestha et al., 2019).

### **Phase 4: Waiting**

After submitting a proposal, it is not uncommon to have to wait between two and twelve weeks to receive a response.. Upon proposal acceptance,,,opportunities for grant funding can now be explored and submitted for approval. Grant opportunities may be available through local educational or employment institutions and often improve accessibility to conferences. 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

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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.

### **Proposal Review Process**

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**

Program summaries are brief overviews printed in the conference handout that should provide audience members with a succinct description of the presentations. The only conference that does not indicate the need for a program summary is the local conference [name

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of author's university]. Character limits vary by conference, therefore, checking the requirements and working within the specifications can improve the chances of a proposal being accepted by the review committee (Shrestha et al., 2019; Appendix A). 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**

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, this compilation by no means reflects a definitive list of options from which the prospective counseling conference presenter can choose. Therefore, due diligence is recommended when sending a proposal to a counseling conference to ensure adherence to the conference guidelines. Conferences may reconsider offering hybrid formatting for attendance and presentations, so flexibility will be required of all potential presenters to adjust to the needs of conference officiants and attendee preferences. This manuscript provides a recommended guide to enhance compliance with the key CACREP component for research by adding counseling conference participation to the resumes of counseling students and educators, but does not address the funding and staffing differences in academic communities.

### **Future Research**

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. This dearth of

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literature provides an opportunity for future research and for creating instructional literature regarding conference proposal preparation. Additional 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. In addition, there is a need for literature that provides a step-by-step process to follow when submitting proposals to counseling conferences and the challenges students may face throughout the proposal process (Romano, 2020; Shrestha et al., 2019). Additional research on the benefits of mentorship between faculty and students may be helpful to provide a model for future relationships. Because there is a lack of research on conference proposal preparation, there is ample opportunity for exploring the different facets of this topic.

### 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	Required for students	Required for students
Presenter qualification	Current student	Graduate and doctoral students residing or attending a school in Virginia	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)

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**Appendix B****Example Regional [Organization] Conference Proposal****Name:**

[Full name]

**Program Title**

Treating Military PTSD using Equines

**Type of Session and Format Flexibility**

50-minute content sessions

**Primary Topic Addressed**

Counseling theory/practice

**Presenter Information and Qualifications**

[Full name] [credentials]

[University/practice]

[Address/city state zip]

[Email]

[Phone]

**Presenter Expertise**

The author has worked and currently works with clients impacted by this topic. She has been certified to use horses in psychotherapy by the Equine Growth and Learning Association since 2017. She has been exposed to and participated in the equine portion of the work done by Save a Warrior, an organization committed to intervening with combat veterans who have attempted suicide. **Conference Program Abstract**

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The Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs recommend treating posttraumatic stress disorder with exposure-based therapies. These therapies focus on processing trauma, which is difficult for many and often fails to meet this population's immediate needs. Equine assisted psychotherapies are experiential therapies and focus on resolving current problems in the present, foster engagement in treatment, and reduce PTSD symptoms.

### **Synopsis of Program**

Therapists who treat clients diagnosed with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), particularly military combat veterans, should be aware of the possible benefits of using equine assisted psychotherapies (EAPs) with this population. Exposure-based therapies are often used and have significant empirical support for their efficacy in treating PTSD, but the research indicates that many who need treatment do not choose to face exposure to their trauma and not starting treatment and drop-out rates are both high from these therapies. Additionally, this population suffers from notable negative life impacts that exposure-based therapies do not address. Research on EAPS suggests that these therapies offer advantages over standard-protocol exposure-based therapies as they are more acceptable and better tolerated, foster engagement in therapy, and improve therapeutic relationships. Furthermore, EAPs are experiential therapies so they use experiences in the present to address and resolve participants' problems, both current and from the past. Although presently the research-base for EAPS is weak, the literature supporting their use with combat exposed military and veterans is growing. As the US Departments of Veterans Affairs and Defense and research universities continue their involvement in research on EAPs the strength of the research is improving. This presentation shares the results of a literature review focused on recent studies that are building empirical support for using EAPs in the treatment of PTSD.

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### **Learning Objectives**

Provide three objectives attendees can expect as a result of participating in your program; they must be relevant to the work of professional counselors, supervisors, and counselor educators.

1. Participants will be able to describe what is required to qualify as an EAP.
2. Participants will be exposed to possible explanations for why equine assisted psychotherapies work better than exposure-based treatments with some PTSD clients.
3. Participants will gain knowledge of how EAPs may positively impact client engagement and strengthen therapeutic relationships.

### **Session Level**

Beginner level (explores introductory concepts and skills)

### **Presenter Agreement**

You must agree to the following:

- Individuals' names may only appear on two presentations, whether you are lead presenter or co-presenter.
- All presenters will be available to present Friday [date] and Saturday [date] from 8 AM - 5 PM and must be [organization] members through the conference.
- [Organization] will provide one LCD projector/screen combo in each content presentation room. Any other A/V needs (e.g., Computer VGA/HDMI adapters, Internet access, DVD/CD players, televisions, etc.) are the responsibility of the presenter.

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- All presenters must register by [date] to appear in the conference materials, including the conference website, PDF of the conference program, and conference app.
- Presenters will make your presentation and related handouts available to participants in the conference app within one week of the conference.
- You have reviewed the [organization] registration cancellation policy. Please note, cancellations received after the PDF program and conference app has been released/posted may result in a presenter/proposal disqualification for the next [organization] conference.

All presenters must be active [organization] members by [date] and remain active through the conference. Proposals with inactive members will be cancelled.