

# Virtual Research Conference Presentations: A Research Course Assignment Students Love

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## Abstract

Developmentally appropriate research experiences can help students develop an interest in research and motivation to engage in the research process. This conference proceeding will introduce a conference presentation assignment for students in an online master's level counseling research course. Through this comprehensive assignment, students, in a virtual setting, learn the process of developing a research topic, doing an extensive literature review, submitting a conference proposal, providing a blind review for their peers, creating a conference poster, and presenting their virtual poster. Discussion includes various software and technology used for this assignment, along with best ways to support students throughout the process.

## Keywords

research, counseling, pedagogy, counselor education, research identity

It has been established that research is essential to promoting and developing the counseling profession (ACA, 2009). Counseling leaders and researchers have advocated for counselors to include the scientist-practitioner model as part of their professional identity (ACA, 2009; CACREP, 2015; Gale & Austin, 2003; Jorgensen & Duncan, 2015; Jorgensen & Schweinle, 2018; Lamar & Helm, 2017; Wester & Borders, 2014). The master's level research course is an ideal time to pique student interest in research. Faculty can help students make a connection between their area of clinical interest and how research is developed, executed, and effectively put to use. Gelso (2006) touted the value of developmentally appropriate research activities to raise research motivation and interest for students. The comprehensive student research assignment presented here leads students through the process of developing a research idea, conducting an extensive literature review, submitting a conference proposal, serving as a peer reviewer, and presenting a conference poster in a virtual format. This assignment, while developed for a research course, is easily adaptable to many courses in the counseling curriculum.

## The Assignment

The Virtual Research Conference Presentation is divided into six smaller assignments designed to help students navigate the research and presentation process in a manageable way. Scaffolding the activities allows students to take learning from each step and adjust or enhance their line of inquiry as they go through the process. Each assignment varies in its length, time needed, resources required, and point value within the course.

## Identify a Research Idea

At the beginning of the term, students are tasked with identifying a research idea. Because the concept of how a research idea develops has not even been taught yet, we actually send an email prior to the course start to encourage students to begin thinking of ideas and areas of interest based on their prior readings and courses. We also share with them information about different ways to identify a research idea. We emphasize that this project is, essentially, a literature review, and that they will not be collecting any data. Given the brevity of the quarter-length term, getting IRB approval to actually conduct a project is not

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possible. Instead, we hit the ground running with a basic idea. Our first assignment is due the first week of class and it only requires them to submit a 1-sentence description of their research idea. To keep this as low stress as possible, we have created it to be a pass-fail assignment. We offer to meet with students individually and dedicate the first class to idea generation so failing the assignment would likely be because a student simply did not do it.

### Conduct a Literature Search

The next assignment is designed to help them learn how to conduct an extensive literature review. Students are provided with videos and resources to teach them how to find articles, books, and other scholarly sources in our library and on the internet. Set up as another pass-fail assignment; students are asked to submit APA formatted references for three articles on their topic. Additionally, we extend the offer to meet with any student for 15-30 minutes to help them organize their research idea; help them focus their literature review; identify search terms; refer them to a librarian; or work on any aspect of their proposal. Many students take us up on this offer and it makes the first month of this course busy. While research comes later in their course sequence in our program, it is always challenging to see how difficult they find the actual library search process and we are able to help them be much more efficient. In these meetings, we have found an excellent opportunity to develop relationships with students; mentor them; and encourage the development of their researcher identity (Lamar & Helm, 2017).

### Submit a Conference Proposal

During the fourth week of our eleven week quarter, students are required to submit a conference proposal for their topic. The conference proposal portal is made using the Qualtrics platform, though other sites like Google Forms would also work. The proposal submission form is patterned after the American Counseling Association National Conference Proposal form, so students have an authentic experience of submitting to a national conference. The assignment also gives them a proposal ready to submit to most conferences. To complete this assignment, students submit the following information, just like we as faculty submit when we prepare a proposal: personal information (name, degrees, titles, etc.), title (120 character limit), rationale for the proposal (2500 character limit), 3 learning outcomes (1000 character limit each), educational content (2500 character limit), target audience (250 character limit), presentation structure (1000 character limit), expertise (1000 character limit), addressing diversity (1000 character limit), references, and program guide

description (400 character limit).

As you may imagine, most students have never seen a conference proposal. We offer them examples of proposals, both research-based and practice-based, to use in developing their understanding of conference proposals.

### Blind Review

After proposals are submitted, they are then blinded and sent out to for review. Students also serve as blind reviewers of the conference proposals, giving them additional opportunities to student the construction and presentation of research. Each student receives three to four proposals to review. At this stage of the class, students have been learning how to critically review the research they read. For the assignment, they receive a review rubric to complete in Qualtrics. The review rubric, which is similar to the grading rubric, includes the following questions, with instructions for reviewers to rate on a 5-point scale:

- The program proposal is written in a clear, professional style
- Relevance to professional counselors
- Appropriateness of rationale
- The rationale for the proposed program is strong and persuasive
- Clearly stated learning objectives
- Appropriate learning objectives
- Well-developed presentation to assure accomplishment of objectives
- Consideration of cultural diversity and ethics
- The proposal is innovative and likely to advance the field
- Substantive content to be covered in the presentation
- The program is likely to be of interest to counselors
- I, or a colleague interested in the topics, would attend this program
- What do you like most about the proposal? (open-ended question)
- What suggestions do you have for the presenter? (open-ended question)

We have found this to be a great project for a teaching assistant to manage if that resource is available to you. We find that this part of the assignment gives students an authentic review experience which also helps them make their own proposals and projects stronger. Of course, we continue to talk in class about how the review process will help them learn to write stronger conference proposals

## Conference Poster Presentation at the Virtual Research Week

Using their reviews to help shape their work, students then create and submit their posters. We give them templates and examples from our previous work. We have created a video that highlights Do's and Don'ts of posters, complete with examples. Upon submission, we create a space to post their posters publicly and share the link with faculty, other students, and administrators. Students in the course are encouraged to share the link with family and friends. Viewers can comment on the poster, so the student has the experience of interacting with "attendees." To accomplish this from a technological perspective, we have used the blogger/blogspot platform as well as the Folio platform, which is a highly user-friendly extension of Canvas, our Learning Management System.

## Discussion

As counselor educators teaching research to master's students, we realize we are not always the most popular. Students are not typically excited to take our class and we embrace the challenge to make research accessible, applicable, and even fun. Our goal in this project is to give students the experience of the entire conference presentation experience and to allow them to explore their research topic. We attempt to make the structure and formatting of the assignment as easy as possible so they can use their energy to have fun with the research itself. We want them to leave our class excited to submit their presentations to conferences and we have had many students present them at both state and national conferences. When students want to submit a proposal to a professional conference, we offer to consult and, if they need more help, we have a conversation about authorship and determine what they need to be successful in their proposal and presentation. This conversation furthers their research education. According to follow up surveys of the classes, the Virtual Research Conference Presentation assignment is loved by students because they get to be creative and explore a topic of interest to them. It is also a favorite of the faculty because we get to know the students and the areas of counseling about which they are passionate.

## Conclusion

Preparing master's counseling students to consume, apply, and enjoy research is a challenge many of us enjoy. Finding assignments that push their limits and allow them to work within their area of interest or clinical passion is something that we find helpful in addressing that

challenge. The Virtual Research Conference Presentation assignment is a term-long, five part assignment that allows master's students to begin to investigate a line of inquiry and develop a meaningful presentation about that inquiry. Educators adopting this model may find that their students are as passionate about research and virtual presentations as ours have been.

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