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# A New (Virtual) Reality: Lessons Learned from a Virtual Academic Conference During a Global Pandemic

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*Borah and Platz*

## Abstract

In early March 2020, new information about the imminent threat of the COVID-19 pandemic led to the cancellation of many large events in the US. As our 2-day in-person Military Social Work & Behavioral Health Conference was scheduled for April 2020, we recognized the need to either cancel or reschedule. With support from our planning committee, speakers, and sponsors, we rapidly shifted to an online format for the conference and faced a new challenge experienced by many other conferences facing the same dire situation. This paper offers our lessons learned from this experience, shares conference evaluation results related to participant engagement in a virtual conference, and offers a comparison of the benefits and drawbacks of virtual and in-person conferences.

## Introduction / Background

Regardless of industry or geographic location, the COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on how researchers and professionals were able to work, collaborate, and engage in opportunities to deliver and learn from professional development and continuing education opportunities. The necessity to offer virtual conferences and other learning opportunities challenged event organizers to develop engaging ways for attendees to participate in conferences. Offering virtual conferences has reduced typical barriers associated with attendance, including the cost of travel, health-related physical limitations, career stage, and other interpersonal and professional factors that may otherwise limit the accessibility of in-person conferences (Sarabipour et al., 2020). In addition, virtual conferences create an opportunity for sustained engagement and learning, as recordings can be distributed after the fact, increasing the reach exponentially (Vogel & Ajoudani, 2020).

## Equity and Inclusivity Challenges Highlighted

Due to prevalent hierarchical, prestige-based structures in place within many institutions, members of the academic and scientific community often face an inequitable imbalance in their ability to take advantage of conferences and professional development opportunities. Burris (2004) notes that this prestige-based system in academia is a form of social and economic capital, a concept which grants differential (or inequitable) access to professional growth and opportunities. As an example, professional conferences, which can be expensive and time consuming, are often only made available to those who are able to afford attending through the available funding within their organizations. Many organizations restrict travel and funds to faculty and staff who meet certain (often arbitrary) criteria. If individuals are not sponsored by their institution, they are often left to rely on personal funds, which likely are not sufficient to cover the cost of admission and travel required by these types of events. This paper will remark on how a shift to virtual events alleviates some of the equity-based challenges tied to in-person conferences.

Academic and scientific conferences play an important role for researchers and practitioners to present their current work, network, and exchange ideas that promote advancements within a given field. These opportunities are particularly important in military and veteran-focused research and practice. Historically, efforts made to improve military and veteran-focused research, practice, and policy have been siloed, lacking communication, collaboration, and a systematic approach to care (Kilbourne & Atkins, 2014). Conferences are typically offered within one federal or state level agency or are focused on a particular problem area. Yet, the multiple, overlapping needs, experiences, cultural implications, and various health care and support systems affecting the military and veteran community require multisector, collaborative opportunities among researchers, providers, and stakeholders (Franco et al., 2020).

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To address this need, conference organizers must create opportunities that foster cross-sector, interdisciplinary dialogue.

When planning began in June 2019 for the 2020 Military Social Work & Behavioral Health Conference, we selected the theme of interdisciplinary collaboration to ensure innovative and effective systems of care and strengthened partnerships with the Department of Defense (DoD) and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to involve stakeholders in conference planning and speaker selection. In March 2020, one month prior to the conference, we (along with the rest of the world) were faced with a stark, new reality. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, local, state, and national officials announced new restrictions on large group gatherings. While we initially hoped to postpone the in-person event to later in the year, due to the uncertain nature of the outbreak and local restrictions, we ultimately determined that a virtual conference was the most realistic, safe, and accessible option. In May 2020, we announced that the Military Social Work & Behavioral Health Conference would be offered as a virtual event, taking place the week of July 20, 2020.

When faced with the need to shift to a virtual environment, we wanted to honor the conference theme of collaboration and recognized some overarching challenges in our new virtual conference reality:

- How would we promote cross-sector, interdisciplinary dialogue in a virtual format?
- What could a virtual poster session look like that mimicked in-person poster sessions?
- How would we create engagement opportunities during oral presentations?
- Could we easily “allow” attendees to move among simultaneous sessions?
- How could we best replicate the networking opportunities of in-person conferences that usually happen during lunch or at cocktail receptions?

Prior to the shift to a virtual format, 200 individuals had registered to attend the Austin-based

conference. After announcing that the conference would take place on Zoom, we were surprised that registration numbers rapidly and consistently increased from May to July. By June, one month prior to the conference, we increased the registration capacity from 500 to 700. By early July, we increased the capacity yet again, to 800, to accommodate demand for attendance.

### **Cost Comparisons of In-Person and Virtual Conferences**

Based on the need to cover the cost of the original venue, in-person conference registration was initially set at \$350 per attendee. As the cost of a virtual event was much lower to host, we lowered the registration cost to \$50/person, with a \$25 student rate. Based on attendee feedback, we learned that the reduced price, along with the elimination of other fees and logistics associated with travel, resulted in many participants being able to attend who would otherwise not have been able to. We believe this cost reduction significantly influenced the higher registration numbers. We also offered up to 17.5 continuing education credits for no additional cost. Other cost savings of the virtual event included not purchasing refreshments, conference “swag,” technology fees, and speaker travel funds which are standard costs for in-person events. The costs of the online conference were minimal in comparison and only included very affordable Zoom subscriptions and upgrades as well as staff time for event planning and management, although other online conference platforms may be more costly. Staff time was not an insignificant cost, though, which was needed to prepare speakers, field numerous and frequent questions from registrants, manage presentations, facilitate breakout room assignments, and message speakers and participants during the event. This effort required four full-time staff members to ensure that all activities ran smoothly and appeared seamless to the conference participants and an additional six volunteers who moderated sessions. Yet, in comparison, these same four-full time staff would also be needed to manage in-person conference activities to include registration, technology support, etc. Table 1 illustrates the relative costs of in-person and online conferences (based on our past in-

person conferences). These would vary by venue and location for comparable conferences. Both in-person and virtual conferences likely require equal numbers of staff and volunteers.

See **Table 1** for a comparison of in-person and virtual conference characteristics.

### **Pivoting to a Virtual Conference During a Global Pandemic**

When we made the decision to pivot to an online conference, we decided to maintain the original in-person schedule, comprised of over 50 speakers broken into multiple subject areas. However, this schedule was based on the traditional in-person experience of holding three simultaneous sessions in three large ballrooms at the conference venue. Although we could have designed the online conference to deliver simultaneous sessions through the use of breakout rooms on Zoom, because of the anticipated challenges of “moving” 800 people to various breakout rooms throughout the day, we felt this would require more work than the four staff managing the online event could manage. Thus, the solution to maintain the schedule while also keeping the Zoom facilitation manageable required us to extend the conference from two days to three.

### **Opportunities for Engagement on an Online Conference Platform**

We determined a number of ways to create opportunities for connection, such as breakout rooms, interactive polls, and Q&A sessions. In addition, we structured the event to address the potential for “Zoom fatigue” by offering a number of 10- to 15-minute breaks throughout each day. We also tried to create a signature “sound” for the event and played songs by Texas musicians each morning to give the event some of the flavor that Austin, Texas is known for and that attendees might have experienced if they had traveled to the event. Zoom breakout rooms were used to offer “happy hours” at the end of each day for participants to connect around topics of interest. During the day-long poster session, staff served as “telephone operators” and allowed participants to move from session to session by moving them from room to room. Although labor in-

tensive, this gave participants some semblance of choice and movement akin to a traditional in-person poster reception.

### **Conference Audience**

As previously mentioned, marketing for the conference targeted behavioral health providers and researchers from all military and veteran-serving sectors. Outreach was primarily conducted through virtual platforms, including listservs, social media, and committee members’ networks within their organizations. While there were 809 conference registrations, roughly 650 individuals were logged on to Zoom at any given time throughout the three days. Registration came from many participant types: VA providers and researchers ( $n = 274$ ); DoD providers and researchers ( $n = 204$ ); students ( $n = 53$ ); and community providers, academics, and other stakeholders ( $n = 269$ ). The proportions of those attending the virtual conference were similar to attendance by these subgroups in past iterations of the in-person conference.

### **Conference Evaluation**

After the conclusion of the conference, participants were sent a survey to rate aspects of the conference format and the extent to which the overall event met its learning objectives. Participants seeking continuing medical education (CME) and continuing education unit (CEU) credits also rated each presentation they had attended and the quality of the presenter. All 809 registered individuals received the postconference email linking them to the evaluation survey. Of the 648 postconference survey respondents, 94% found the conference to be beneficial to their professional development, 93% gained new knowledge that could be used in their work, 88% would attend the conference again if offered virtually, 81.2% felt there were enough engagement opportunities, and 80% would attend the conference again if offered in-person. Areas that point to needs for improvement were rated less highly by participants; for example, 52.8% were satisfied with how breakout rooms were used for engagement, and only 48.9% were satisfied with the way in which the conference allowed networking at happy hours. Full results from the program evaluation data are presented in Table 2.

See **Table 2** for full results from the program evaluation data.

### **Discussion**

Although virtual conferences may reduce the extent that participants can engage in ad hoc conversations and networking that supports collaboration within their fields of study or practice, they have great value in expanding accessibility and inclusivity to professionals who may be unable to easily attend costly in-person conferences. The experience of adapting a conference planned for in-person attendance to an online platform led to many lessons learned as well as knowledge about the respective values of each conference delivery format.

As this was the first time that we hosted a large-scale virtual event, and notwithstanding the stress experienced by all of us during a pandemic, we faced some notable challenges. These included technological challenges, effective communication with a broad range of participants and speakers, and human errors that were outside of our control but which are amplified with such a large number of attendees. Finally, we recognized the high demands placed on staff in a virtual format beyond a typical in-person event.

#### ***Technological Challenges***

In our current landscape, technology is relied upon more than ever when planning large scale events. Regardless of whether the event is being hosted in-person or virtually, technology is often used for outreach, recruitment, registration, and evaluation activities. At best, technology can offer a more efficient, streamlined approach to planning and executing a conference. At worst, technology restricts the range of user comfort and ability and involves unavoidable glitches and unforeseen roadblocks. From the onset of planning the conference we relied on digital platforms to recruit attendees, communicate with speakers, and develop and distribute postconference evaluations. However, after pivoting to a virtual conference we were forced to rely more heavily on virtual systems. Specifically, we now had to familiarize ourselves with Zoom to ensure the platform would be accessible to all 800 attendees and

speakers, regardless of their technological proficiency. At the onset of the pandemic, in the spring and summer of 2020, the Zoom platform was experiencing rapid growth due to the unexpected demand of remaining connected for work and education throughout the world. As a result, the platform was making frequent changes to accommodate these new needs, and these changes were not completely functional at the time that our conference required them. For example, despite the purchase of a 1,000-person package that Zoom indicated would support 50 breakout rooms, in reality this system did not perform as was promised and the breakout rooms that were planned for small group engagement did not launch during the live event. Upon learning of this, Zoom was not able to offer technical support to address this technical glitch in a timely manner in order to correct it for the subsequent conference days.

#### ***Communication***

We found that regardless of the clarity and specificity of their instructions leading up to the conference, many attendees and speakers experienced difficulty accessing registration, email updates and instructions, and day of login accessibility. While some of these barriers were unique to organizer and platform error, the majority of the challenges came from the inherent difficulty of communicating granular details to such a large audience. We found that many participants did not read emails closely or receive instructions, many experienced limitations on their personal device or wireless hookups, and many had a very elementary understanding of technology, missing the crucial experiential context necessary to engage so heavily on a virtual platform.

In hopes of adequately preparing attendees for the conference, we attempted to train all speakers on the virtual format, including how to use Zoom for large-scale presentations (see Table 3). While many speakers felt they were adequately prepared to present on Zoom and did not attend the training, they did not always understand the nuances of presenting through our Zoom account rather than their own. For example, speakers did not realize (until their presentation) that they could not launch their Zoom poll if they had not shared

it with us to program into our Zoom account due to having fewer controls as a cohost rather than a host.

See **Table 3** for training attendance rate.

### ***Demands on Staff***

To address these communication and user barriers, staff were forced to navigate both technical and logistical support while simultaneously facilitating the event. With in-person events, we can expect logistical support from venue and IT staff to ensure daily events run smoothly. While the majority of the conference ran smoothly, staff encountered challenges with speakers running late, attendees sending last minute emails staying that they were unable to access Zoom, and attendees requesting resources (such as the conference program and presentation slides) that had been sent prior to the conference and/or shared in the Zoom chat.

### **Conclusion**

Despite the challenges faced in a virtual environment in the midst of a pandemic, the technology available allowed us to pivot quickly to deliver a successful online conference addressing how to better serve military and veteran communities to over 800 people around the world, which we are proud to have accomplished. We have recognized the pros and cons of each format and are now able to understand the tradeoffs made when one format is used over another. A comparison of each format's strengths and weaknesses is presented in Table 4.

See **Table 4** for a comparison of in-person and virtual conference characteristics.

Through this experience, we learned many lessons and share them in Table 5.

See **Table 5** for best practices for a virtual conference.

When reflecting on all that we have learned and evaluating the pros and cons of virtual and in-person conferences, two questions emerge: Are virtual or in-person conferences preferable? In the future, will we offer virtual or in-person opportu-

nities? While in-person conferences present challenges of inclusivity due to high costs of attendance, they also create more opportunities to engage in the meaningful connection inherent in face-to-face interactions. On the other hand, virtual conferences have proven to be much more accessible, reaching a wider audience, transcending region, funding, and personal and professional commitments. As such, we have concluded that a hybrid conference that offers in-person opportunities while virtually streaming all presentations (with opportunities for engagement and networking) for those who cannot attend in person is the most equitable solution moving forward. Recording and storing presentations for more people to access over time is also a clear best practice learned from virtual events that should continue post-pandemic to ensure greater dissemination of knowledge.

**Table 1**  
*Comparison of In-Person and Virtual Conference Characteristics*

	In-Person	Virtual
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<i>Host Costs</i>		
Venue & Food	\$112,000	\$300
Equipment Rentals	\$1,000	\$0
Swag and Printing	\$9,000	\$0
Reception	\$10,000	\$0
Registration Platform	\$2,566	\$4,450
	(\$5.50 x 450 registrations)	(\$5.50 x 809 registrations)
<hr/>		
Total	\$133,566	\$4,750
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<i>Attendee Costs</i>		
Registration Price	\$350	\$50
Travel Per Person	\$1,550 (avg)	\$0
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Total	\$1900	\$50
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## A New (Virtual) Reality

**Table 2**  
*Conference Evaluation Results*

Evaluation Prompt	Strongly Disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly Agree (%)	N/A (%)	N
I found this conference to be beneficial in my professional development.	3.7	0.2	1.8	18.6	75.7	-	617
Attending this conference was a good use of my time.	4.1	0.2	2.8	19.3	73.7	-	617
I felt that there were enough opportunities for participant engagement.	3.7	4.2	9.9	32.5	48.7	1.0	616
I was satisfied with the way in which the conference allowed me to engage with others in breakout rooms.	5.0	9.6	20.9	20.8	32.0	11.7	616
I was satisfied with the way in which the conference allowed me to participate through polling.	3.1	0.7	5.7	33.9	54.2	2.3	616
I was satisfied with the way in which the conference allowed me to network with others by attending happy hours.	3.2	3.6	22.6	19.2	29.7	22.9	616
I have gained new knowledge during this conference that I can use in my work moving forward.	3.7	0.5	1.6	24.4	68.8	1.0	616
This conference offered an adequate number of breaks throughout the day (s).	7.5	17.5	14.3	29.4	29.9	1.5	616
I would attend this conference again if offered virtually.	4.1	1.3	5.7	20.0	68.0	1.0	615
I would attend this conference again if offered in person.	4.1	4.7	9.6	23.9	55.9	1.8	615
I found the use of the Zoom platform effective for attending the conference.	3.9	1.5	6.5	31.6	55.5	1.0	614



**Table 3**  
*Training Attendance Rate*

	<b>Number of trainings</b>	<b>Number invited</b>	<b>Number attended</b>	<b>Attendance rate (%)</b>
Speaker Orientation	2	54	29	53.7%
Poster Presenter Orientation	1	33	18	54.5%

**Table 4**  
*Comparison of In-person and Virtual Conference Characteristics*

	<b>In-person</b>	<b>Virtual</b>
Staffing (paid and volunteer)	Slightly higher	Same
Cost of hosting	Higher	Lower
Networking Opportunities	Higher	Lower
Engagement Opportunities	Higher	Lower
Cost of attending	Higher	Lower
Access to content after conference	Lower	Higher (if recorded and shared)

## A New (Virtual) Reality

**Table 5**  
*Best Practices for a Virtual Conference*

Task or Practice	Lessons Learned
Preparation	<p>Create a firm timeline (including marketing, CE approval, registration launch, registration deadline, virtual platform subscription, speaker approval, etc.) Market consistently at least 6 months leading up to the event. Consider that some organizations have strict email firewalls making it difficult to reach them through email marketing platforms. This is often the case with government entities (including the VA and DoD). When this is the case, determine an alternate plan for reaching these groups.</p>
Staffing	<p>Ensure sufficient staffing depending on size, scope, and conference activities that require more staff support. Assign specific planning responsibilities to each staff member (e.g., technology, recruitment, logistics, CE prep, speaker coordination, registration, and participant troubleshooting).</p>
Training	<p>Create opportunities to orient speakers to the virtual platform being used so they can practice presenting and navigating within the platform prior to the event. Assign at least one staff member to troubleshoot technology during the event. If possible, hire consultant to support logistics and troubleshooting.</p>
Format/Breaks	<p>Schedule multiple breaks, with plans for making schedule shifts due to delays or technology hiccups. Schedule 15-minute breaks each hour, with an extended break for lunch (30 minutes to an hour).</p>
Length	<p>Be mindful of the schedule length each day, always considering the attention span of attendees. It can be challenging to fully engage for three long days. Consider shortening each day to three, four-hour days, or two, five-hour days.</p>
Registration Process	<p>Establish a user-friendly registration system. Clearly note price, cancellation policy, dates, and times. Create automated email reminders, highlighting login information, dates, times, and organizer's contact information.</p>
Number of Speakers	<p>Focus on quality over quantity. Select fewer speakers who are engaging, effective presenters rather than a full day of speakers. This shortening of speaker time also allows for more breaks, networking, and time for Q&amp;A.</p>
Engagement	<p>Get creative with engagement opportunities. Use polls, break-out discussion groups, informal networking break-outs, web-based apps that involve participants, and encourage attendees to engage with speakers, connect and network.</p>
Backup Plans	<p>Always have a Plan B and a Plan C, as not everything will go as planned. Prior to the event, determine an internal priority list if time is limited, e.g., ensure speakers have time to present and cut back on breakout sessions if needed.</p>

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