

## **Simulating a Professional Conference Poster Session in the Classroom to Enhance Student Knowledge and Professionalism**

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### **Author Biography**

Lee Edmondson Grimes is an Associate Professor of Counseling and Program Director for the Counselor Education Programs at Valdosta State University. She earned a B.A. and B.S.Ed. from Valdosta State College and an M.Ed. and Ph.D. from the University of Georgia. Dr. Grimes started her career as a high-school teacher then transitioned into school counseling where she worked for ten years at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. Connected to her work as a counselor educator, Dr. Grimes is active in community, state, and national advocacy and professional organizations for counselors. Her research interests focus on rural school counseling, P-12 career development, and interventions for meeting the needs of diverse learners. Dr. Grimes publishes and presents frequently on school counseling topics, and when she is not teaching or writing, she can be found on a trail in north Florida.

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The Master of Education in Counselor Education Program at Valdosta State University (VSU) has two tracks, *School Counseling* and *Clinical Mental Health Counseling*. Our program is nationally accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP). We adhere to CACREP programmatic standards including the teaching of specific core counseling and specialty counseling content standards.

In addition to the standards-based content, VSU program objectives include training counselors who practice ethically and professionally and work beyond their practice at the local, state, and national levels through professional organizations. Our goal is to produce graduates who not only excel as practitioners well-trained on counseling content but who also are involved in their communities and with other professionals through membership and active involvement in professional organizations such as the American Counseling Association and the American School Counselor Association. To meet this goal, we require students to submit proposals to state professional conferences during their internship courses. We are delighted when their proposals are accepted, but not every student experiences acceptance and the opportunity to present professionally.

In the fall of 2016 when teaching the course COUN 7420, Counseling Children and Adolescents, I found myself with a larger number of students than usual. Planning the schedule in the summer before the course started, I was unsure how I would have students do the presentation assignment given the time frame of our two-hour, forty-five-minute class. With the number of students and the typical presentation time of a half hour, I would need to allow two class sessions to have enough time for presentations. Added to this consideration of time was my consideration of the CACREP standards I needed to cover in the class.

I soon realized that I could not devote two class sessions to student presentations and still have time to cover all standards. I asked myself, how would every student have time to present on the core CACREP standard 8.b., identification of evidence-based practices? Especially in just one class period of roughly two and a half hours? At about the same time, I learned that a few of my students had not received acceptance for their conference proposals. These students would not get to experience the research, planning, creation, and presentation of a counseling topic they were interested in. That's when it hit me that I could create in my classroom one of my favorite parts of a professional conference, the poster session.

Poster sessions at professional conferences offer attendees the opportunity to view information and interact with presenters in a timesaving manner, allowing both attendees and presenters to experience multiple

presentations in a brief timeframe. As is true so often, necessity was the mother of invention. I decided to make one of our last class meetings a mock conference poster session. Every student in my class would have the opportunity to present in a fashion more aligned with what they might actually experience at a conference rather than the typical half-hour, stand in front of the room, classroom presentation with a PowerPoint. And every student could present in one class session.

I worded the syllabus assignment description somewhat like an acceptance letter to a conference.

### ***The Evidenced-based Counseling Intervention Conference***

*Congratulations! Your proposal to the Evidence-based Counseling Intervention Conference, the premier national event for the organization the Children and Adolescent Counseling Association, has been accepted for a poster presentation. Your poster will be presented in a session called Focused Interventions: Evidence-based Counseling Practices for Use with Children and Adolescents. This session is described in the conference brochure as featuring reports from the scholarship on evidenced-based counseling practices.*

*Your presentation should describe the intervention, provide research for evidence of its success, explain the population for whom it is recommended, provide a step-by-step explanation for at least one example of the intervention or practice, and conclude with questions or implications for further research on this practice. During your session, please provide a handout with your references and artifacts that illustrate your presentation if possible.*

*Please prepare your session content on a standard-size poster board. Tri-boards will be provided to presenters for their posters. The poster session is scheduled for forty-five minutes.*

On the night of the poster session, I required students to dress professionally and interact as they would with conference attendees. I welcomed everyone to the conference in the role of guest speaker and explained how the sessions would work. Students were divided into three groups. One group presented while the other two walked through the session as conference attendees, then the groups switched roles. Each session lasted for forty-five minutes. With five students per session, students had ample time to discuss their topics with attendees as they walked from poster to poster. Students in the role of conference attendees used a rubric to rate presentations as they walked from poster to poster.

Students reported enjoying the more informal feel of poster sessions over the traditional stand and deliver feel of classroom presentations. Observing student interactions during our mock poster sessions, I noted active student learning whether in the role of presenter or session attendee. SOI feedback indicated students found the poster sessions to be a highlight of the course. One student wrote, “Great activities...especially the evidence-based poster sessions.” Another added, “My favorite part was the poster sessions at the end.” Classroom poster sessions allow every student to present in a lively and real-world professional manner. Who doesn’t love a poster session? I highly recommend this teaching and presentation method discovered purely through necessity.