Demystifying the Abstract Submission and Conference Presentation Process

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Abstract

The exchange of information regarding research and programming is vital to the profession and practice of health education. Sessions at national, regional, and state professional meetings provide opportunities for conference attendees to share and acquire information related to health and health education. Students and novice professionals, however, often require guidance in submitting an abstract for presentation and, if it is accepted for inclusion in a conference program, help in preparing and making the presentation. This paper includes guidance on how to successfully prepare and submit an abstract related to research or programmatic initiatives for presentation at a health education conference. Additionally, the paper includes advice for the preparation and delivery of an effective oral presentation, poster session, and roundtable discussion at a professional meeting.

The Submission Process

Conferences sponsored by professional organizations provide health educators with fora for sharing findings and insights from research and programmatic initiatives. Students and novice professionals often seek assistance in writing abstracts and guidance related to preparing and making presentations at these meetings. Most health education professional societies offer advice, at an annual meeting session or in a journal commentary piece, on successful manuscript preparation and submission. There is a limited amount of information, however, on how to prepare and submit an abstract (American Public Health Association, 2009a; Boyle, n.d.) and skillfully develop and give various types of presentations at health education professional meetings. This article is designed to aid students and others new to the process, and without the benefit of a mentor (Ogletree, 2003), to successfully submit an abstract and subsequently deliver an effective oral presentation, poster session, or roundtable discussion at a professional meeting.

Why Consider Presenting at a Professional Meeting?

The exchange of information regarding research findings, program activities, and recent initiatives is vital to the field. Sessions at professional meetings provide opportunities for conference attendees to both share and acquire information related to health and health education. Presenters share knowledge and expertise with a broad range of professionals and, in turn, receive questions from attendees that help to garner new ideas, galvanize thoughts for future research and programmatic activities, and aid in future publication of the presentation material. Additionally, presentations at meetings aid in establishing networking that may lead to employment opportunities, educational endeavors, and collaborative activities with individuals who share professional interests in health education.

How to Begin the Process

Let's start with the basics. A paper from a course, research results, or a discussion of the design, implementation, and evaluation of a community program are all possible presentation topics. Certainly, seeking guidance from a mentor (Ogletree, 2003) can be extremely valuable when considering the dissemination of a paper, research project, or community program. One should also consider whether or not another author or authors should be included in the writing and submission of the abstract and presentation of the paper. When covering work performed as part of a thesis or dissertation, it is considered common academic courtesy to include the major advisor and other committee members who made major contributions to the research. If the abstract is related to a school or community project or program that was conducted with others, be certain to include those who were actively involved in the work. Preferably discussions regarding authorship of abstracts and manuscripts related to research and program evaluation activities and their submission to conferences and journals are held prior to, rather than after, the project has been completed. Additionally, proof of Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, if appropriate, must have been obtained for a project or program that involved the collection of data from human participants.

The next step is to communicate with potential co-authors prior to writing and submitting the abstract. This communication is important for a number of reasons. It is ethical to appropriately recognize the contributions of others to the study, project, or program. Permission to include fellow contributors' names on the abstract submission must be secured. Co-authors should have an opportunity to review the abstract, and verify credentials and contact information. Communicating with co-authors also helps to identify the appropriate forum for the presentation of research or program findings.

The next step is to locate and examine the call for abstracts. In general, the call for abstracts for larger national meetings is announced and posted on the organization's

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website six months to a year prior to the meeting. Sometimes the call for abstracts is also announced in an organization's published or online newsletters. Be aware that some national organizations may sponsor more than one meeting per year. The time frame between the call for abstracts and regional and state conferences is often shorter than the time frame for national meetings. If the call for abstracts for the national meeting is missed or the work may be of more interest for a regional audience, then consider presenting at the state or regional meeting.

Before submitting an abstract, there are a few things to keep in mind. In most cases, the organization sponsoring the meeting will also require that the person making the presentation is registered for the conference and a member of the organization. Conference fees may be discounted for presenters or include membership fees. Although conference registration fees for students are substantially less than for professional members of the organization, these fees plus the costs of travel, lodging, and meals can challenge any budget. Students should check with their academic advisor, professor, or Eta Sigma Gamma faculty sponsor to identify potential funding opportunities to help offset the costs of attending the meeting. Eta Sigma Gamma, for example, provides local chapters with opportunities to apply for funding to support the travel of Gammans to meetings that the organization holds in collaboration with other national health education organizations. Sometimes the organization sponsoring the conference will provide student travel awards or other ways to help reduce the cost of attending the meeting. New professionals should check their travel budget with their supervisor to determine opportunities for funding to help defray the costs of attending the conference.

How to Increase the Chances of Submitting a Successful Abstract

Consider the audience when performing any type of writing. The audience for the abstract review is generally comprised of leaders and active members of the organization who volunteered to give their time to a defined set of abstracts. These individuals may include health educators from local, state, and national health and education organizations (e.g., the local affiliate of the American Cancer Society) and agencies (e.g., the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) as well as faculty members and graduate students at colleges and universities.

Let's take a look at how the abstract submission process generally works. A program planning and/or abstract review chair usually gathers a committee to write the call for abstracts for an upcoming meeting. This call for abstracts may be based on the theme of the conference and the mission of the organization. Successful abstract submission, then, begins with a dissection of the call for abstracts, careful consideration of the criteria for selection, and adherence to the guidelines for submitting the abstract. Most organizations have an established set of criteria or a rubric used in the evaluation of abstracts. These criteria may be included in the call for abstracts or may be available from the program planning and/or abstract review chair.

One way to gain insight regarding the abstract review process is to volunteer to review abstracts for professional organizations. The program planner and/or abstract review chair is responsible for recruiting volunteers to review abstracts. Participating in the review process assists in understanding the process, increases knowledge of the field, and provides an opportunity to participate in service to professional organizations. Often volunteers to review abstracts are recruited by the program planning and/or abstract review chairs through published and online newsletters. Some organizations have appointed review committees. Therefore, in anticipation of submitting abstracts in the future, volunteer and provide a careful and timely review of the set of abstracts sent by the program planning and/or abstract review chair.

Although some organizations may place greater emphasis on certain criteria, most abstract reviews use a similar set of criteria in judging the work. For discussion purposes, the criteria have been collapsed into five basic categories.

The first criterion is connected to the writing quality of the abstract. Do not expect reviewers to look past poor grammar, sentence structure, misspellings, or incoherent punctuation. Proofread the abstract prior to submission and do not rely on spellcheck. A second criterion is often related to the extent to which the abstract is consistent with the theme or subthemes of the conference. Note the conference theme and subthemes highlighted in the call for abstracts and correctly identify the theme or subtheme under which an abstract should be submitted. In some organizations, the conference theme or subthemes constitute the grouping for the abstract review process. The third criterion has to do with the importance of the work. Show the relevance of the work to the professional society and why this work provides new insights related to research and/or practice in health education.

The fourth criterion is associated with the design and methods of the research, project, or program. Be sure to succinctly identify study design (e.g., cross-sectional), project (e.g., review of literature), or program type (e.g., intervention). Coherently and concisely explain to the abstract reviewers the methods used in the conduct of the work. Be sure to accurately describe participants, information or data collected, and procedures used to analyze the data or evaluate a program. The fifth criterion is related to the research, project, or program results. Many abstracts are rejected because research or programs have not actually been conducted. The fact that the work has not been completed is quite apparent to the abstract reviewer. Therefore, show the abstract reviewer, that the results have been collected and be certain to provide a recommendation to the reader regarding the results of the research, project, or program.

The abstract must not only catch the eye of the reviewer, but also show the importance and interest of the work to the conference attendees. The significance of the abstract is either

judged explicitly as one of the criterion used to assess the abstract or implicitly as the reviewers provide their overall impressions of the abstract. Make no assumptions regarding the significance of the work; instead be clear about the usefulness of the work to conference attendees. Finally, all good abstracts possess a "wow" factor. Be certain to provide a hook early in the abstract that will draw the reader in and show the significance of the work. Consider the "wow" factor (e.g., statistics), within reason, when developing the abstract title, describing the importance of the work, and writing the concluding sentence.

Abstract submission guidelines are included in the call for abstracts. Be sure to adhere exactly to the submission requirements. The requirements usually include the maximum number of words for the abstract and instructions for the inclusion of a duplicate submission that has names and identifying information removed. Submitters may be asked to identify objectives for the presentation and the Certified Health Education Specialist responsibility area, competency, or subcompetency that will be addressed in the presentation. Sometimes, submitters are asked to designate the preferred presentation format (oral presentation, poster session, or round table). In order to maximize the likelihood of abstract acceptance, be flexible regarding the presentation format. Be certain to meet these requirements because in the initial stage of the abstract review process, the program planner and/or abstract review chair will usually reject abstracts not adhering to the published guidelines.

Abstracts conforming to guidelines will be distributed to abstract reviewers. In general, each abstract is reviewed by three to five professionals and scores are averaged by the program and/or abstract review chair. In some organizations reviewers may be designated based on their expertise in a particular area of health education. In many instances, however, abstracts are sent at random to the reviewers. Be certain that the abstract can be read and understood by anyone in the discipline of health education.

If a decision is made to call or e-mail the program planner or abstract review chair to obtain review criteria or to better understand the call for abstracts or the guidelines related to submission, it is important to keep in mind a few points to guide interactions with this person. Bear in mind that this individual is usually a volunteer who has been selected for his or her fairness, understanding of the discipline, and willingness to serve the organization. Be aware that the program planner and/or abstract review chair is very interested in putting together a program that will be of interest to conference attendees. Although the program planner or abstract review chair cannot guarantee abstract acceptance, he or she may be able to offer an impression of the extent to which an abstract topic would be of interest to the membership of the organization.

Most national organizations are moving toward online submissions of abstracts in order to defray mailing costs and streamline the process. Online submission, however, can create a fair amount of chaos for the individuals submitting the abstracts as well as the organizations soliciting the abstracts. Many people wait until the deadline to submit their abstracts and this can result in website overload. Therefore, it is highly recommended that abstracts be submitted at least 24 hours prior to the deadline. No submissions may be made after the posted deadline, but occasionally some organizations will extend the deadline in order to increase the size of the pool of submitted abstracts. Therefore, watch for an extension of a submission deadline by frequently checking the organization's website.

Do not submit the same or similar abstract to more than one meeting. Select the best venue for the presentation of the work represented by the abstract rather than sending the same abstract to multiple organizations. Additionally, unless the research data set is quite large or the project or program is unusually complex, do not carve the work into small slices for presentation. This practice may increase the number of presentations, but it will greatly diminish the holistic quality of the work.

What Kind of Abstract is Accepted for Presentation?

Accepted abstracts are those that, in general, meet the criteria described in the preceding section. Sometimes, abstracts that conform to the conference theme are given preferential treatment. An abstract that is well-written and has a strong description of its design, methods, results, and recommendations, and reflects current or emerging science has a high chance for acceptance. If an abstract is rejected by one organization, consider revising and submitting it to a different conference. It is extremely unusual to receive reviewer comments for a conference abstract, so critically examine the abstract prior to submission to another conference. Be sure to rewrite the abstract using the specific abstract criteria and submission guidelines for the second conference.

Preparation of the Presentation

The congratulatory letter or e-mail of acceptance of the abstract will also include notice of the presentation method. The date and time of the presentation may be given in later correspondence. Be sure to register for the meeting as early as possible in order to pay the least amount in registration fees, make travel arrangements, and secure funds to help with the costs of presenting at the meeting. As the conference approaches, begin the presentation preparation.

It is not unusual to be confused by the various formats of conference presentations. The following sections provide brief descriptions of, and suggestions for, developing and delivering successful oral presentations, poster sessions, and roundtable discussions. The American Public Health Association provides more detailed information about oral presentations, poster sessions, and roundtable discussions as well as detailed tips for creating PowerPoint presentations (American Public Health Association, 2009b).

Oral Presentations

An oral presentation at most conferences is comprised of a number of presenters who have been allotted an equal number of minutes. Each oral presentation session is assigned a moderator who will make introductions, monitor the time, and ensure a smooth-running program. Provide the moderator with an index card that includes the title of the presentation, the phonetic spelling of the authors' names, and professional affiliations. The presentation must be made in time to make way for the next presenter. Questions are typically taken after all speakers have made their presentations.

Most oral presentations are evaluated by conference attendees, so logically plan and thoroughly practice the presentation. Most conferences require learning objectives, so be certain to achieve them.

Always bring back-up copies of the presentation including a copy on a jump drive or CD. Conference organizers frequently request a number of hard copies of the presentation for distribution at the session; these copies come in handy when there is a software or hardware malfunction during an oral presentation. Additionally, some national organizations (e.g., the American Public Health Association) now require presenters to upload the slides related to their oral presentations at least 24 hours before the session is scheduled to begin.

Poster Sessions

Poster presentations are very different from oral presentations. The standard poster board display surface measures four feet by six feet, with the measurements being provided by the organizers. There are a variety of approaches to the fabrication of the poster boards. The font used, however, should be readable from at least two feet. Some presenters will print out 8.5 by 11 inch sheets of paper, glue these pages to cardstock or foam core backing, and hang each individual board on the display surface. With advances in technology and reduction in the price of producing large posters at print shops, many presenters use a PowerPoint™ format to develop the work and, then, print a poster that will fill the dimensions of the poster board display surface.

Poster sessions, like oral sessions, have assigned moderators who will monitor the proceedings. Plan to arrive at the poster session 30 minutes prior to the scheduled start. Locate the assigned board and affix the poster. Please bring extra long tacks, if using foam core backing for the poster pieces. During the poster session, presenters stand by their poster boards and answer questions from conference attendees. It is usually a good idea to have a handout related to the presentation. Be certain to place all contact information on the handout.

Roundtable Discussions

Some individuals enjoy roundtables and some do not like this format. Presenters sit at a round table with members of the audience. The presenter makes a short presentation and then must be ready to answer questions and lead a discussion related to the research, project, or program. The moderator of the roundtable session will let the participants know when is time for each group of attendees to move on to another table (usually after a 15 to 20 minute period). This process will repeat itself two or three more times, depending on the length of the overall session.

Prepare for this type of presentation by preparing a very brief oral synopsis of the work, developing a set of talking points, generating a list of frequently asked questions and answers, and giving a mock roundtable to colleagues. A practice roundtable session will aid in honing the skills needed for this type of presentation, increasing one's comfort with sitting directly next to attendees, and rehearsing responses to potential questions. Mock participants should include people familiar and unfamiliar with the work. It is usually a good idea to have a handout related to the presentation which includes contact information.

Final Advice for Success in Conference Presentations

Always carry the presentation and a back-up copy of the materials for the presentation with you. Many conference veterans wear or carry-on their professional attire. An emergency shopping spree for professional wear is stressful and can be very expensive.

Upon completion of the presentation, record any comments or questions that were asked about the work. Use this information in the formulation of the discussion section of the thesis, dissertation, or manuscript. The information may also be useful in developing future research projects and programs. Be sure to respond quickly to requests for presentation copies or additional information. Finally, continue to network with other conference attendees. Conference attendance and presentation provide opportunities for continuing education and advancement of the field.

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