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

Authored By: Elisa Borah and Molly Platz

Regardless of the tradeoffs of this new virtual reality, it can alleviate equity based challenges

WHY IS THIS RESEARCH IMPORTANT?

- 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 participate in continuing education.
- The COVID 19 pandemic challenged researchers and providers to develop professional conferences where participants could adequately engage with the content and one another, while also acquiring needed continuing education.
- **Offering virtual conferences reduced typical barriers** and created opportunities for sustained engagement and learning, as recordings can be distributed after the fact, while also alleviating some of the **equity-based challenges tied to attending in-person conferences.**
- Academic and scientific conferences play an important role particularly for military and veteran-focused research and practice because **there is a need for multisector collaboration.**

WHO WAS INVOLVED AND HOW WAS THE RESEARCH CONDUCTED?

- In March 2020, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, local, state, and national officials announced new restrictions on large group gatherings. Despite initial plans to postpone a planned in-person event to later in the year, due to the uncertain nature of the outbreak and local restrictions, **it was determined that a virtual conference was the most realistic, safe, and accessible option.**
- Participants included **274 VA** providers and researchers, **204 DoD** providers and researchers, **53 students**, and **269 community** providers, academics and other stakeholders.
- Conference planners **promoted cross sector and interdisciplinary dialogue**, supported delivery of virtual poster sessions, and replicated networking opportunities typical in in-person conference settings.
- The pivot to a virtual conference led organizers to **extend the conference by one day** making it three days and incorporated **breakout rooms, interactive polls, and Q&A sessions**.
- 80 percent of conference attendees completed the **post-conference surveys.**

WHAT DID WE FIND?

- **Virtual conferences have great value in expanding accessibility and inclusivity** to professionals who may be unable to easily attend cost prohibitive in-person conferences.
- Survey respondents found the conference to be beneficial to their professional development (**94%**), gained new knowledge that could be used in their work (**93%**), and felt there were adequate engagement opportunities (**81%**).
- A majority of respondents would attend the conference again if offered virtually (**88%**) compared to those who would attend if offered in-person (**80%**).

ACTION STEPS

- **Record presentations** for more people to access over time.
- **Give sufficient breaks** and be mindful of the schedule length each day to avoid screen fatigue.
- **Integrate creative virtual engagement tools**, while also focusing on quality over quantity.

The University of Texas at Austin
Institute for Military and Veteran Family Wellness
Dell Medical School & Steve Hicks School of Social Work