

Professional Development During a Pandemic: Transforming a Conference for Library Paraprofessionals

The annual, one-day Paraprofessional Conference is hosted, planned, and coordinated by East Carolina University's Joyner Library. Since 2004, the conference has provided professional development opportunities geared to library staff from academic, school, and public libraries across North Carolina. Its unique focus on paraprofessionals has made the conference a consistent success over its 15 years in existence. In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic complicated planning and logistics for the conference originally scheduled for early May. Working as the Paraprofessional Committee, our team successfully executed a shift from the traditional face-to-face conference styling to that of an entirely virtually held conference, thus reimagine a face-to-face conference as a completely virtual synchronous experience. Through our process, practical lessons learned, successes, and shortcomings we look to support others who are interested in creating meaningful and engaging virtual conferences, whether by choice or necessity through this 2020 experience.

Conference attendees represent the broader community of paraprofessionals across North Carolina, from public, academic, and school libraries, institutions, and other areas of academia. This conference is often one of the few options available to paraprofessionals because of the topics offered and the low cost of attendance, with prices typically between \$15 and \$25. Each year, the planning committee selects a theme around which session proposals and keynote speakers are focused. We have a predetermined theme, rotating

between Technology and cyber awareness, Inclusion and diversity, Motivation, energy and teamwork, Engagement and customer service, or TIME. Participants report choosing to attend annually to experience each year's topic as well as the in-depth networking opportunities for attendees from across the state.

The planning committee that coordinates the logistics and content of the entire conference is made up of seven Joyner Library paraprofessional staff. Of the seven two act as co-chairs that share the duties of overseeing the progress of the conference planning while playing active roles in acquiring a keynote speaker, recruiting sponsorships and presenters, managing the conference budget and more. The other committee members perform duties that include contacting potential presenters, coordinating technology and space needs, organizing conference volunteers, and other important tasks. The group consists of veteran paraprofessional conference planners and newer members who are eager to offer new insights, ideas, and assistance.

After a successful 15th annual conference in 2019 and heading into its 16th year in 2020, the Paraprofessional Conference was on track to continue its mission of providing professional development opportunities to the library paraprofessionals across North Carolina. With an increase in attendance of more than 20% from 2018 to 2019, the planning committee's goal for the 2020 conference was to keep momentum up and continue to improve attendees' experience. The date for the in-person event was set for May 15, 2020.

Throughout the fall of 2019 and into early 2020, the planning committee had been productive through weekly meetings, creating documentation, and adhering to a strict timeline. The keynote speaker was secured, the website up to date, and marketing efforts were underway. The committee had also developed a new process to match presenters to rooms based on technology demands. The only remaining task was to order food for the event once registration was set.

Of course, throughout these planning efforts, the uncertainty surrounding COVID-19 continued to be reported in the news. By March 2020, the planning committee began discussing the possibility the pandemic would affect the upcoming conference. The greatest concern was how to minimize health and safety risks for attendees and presenters. Additionally, the procedures for providing refunds to attendees and the possibility of losing non-refundable deposits needed to be addressed if we needed to cancel as the originally scheduled opening date of early registration fast approaching. On March 12, the university indefinitely suspended in-person classes and events until further notice. Fortunately, only two people had registered for the event by that point and no payments had been made for any catering services.

In under two weeks, the tone of planning meetings went from "if the conference happens" to "if and when the conference happens," to "when the conference happens." The committee co-chairs were in constant communication with administration and the planning committee members as ECU closed its campus. The location of the

conference in the main library building was in doubt. The timeframe of early May was also heavily debated. Should we postpone? Should we cancel? How can we have a conference amid a pandemic, especially as conferences across the state started sending refunds and warning of cancellations?

We opted to go online and push the date of the conference back to June 17th and 18th. Other conferences began to announce similar decisions around the same time which helped the push to try going virtual. However, this change required direct communication with our stakeholders. This included coordinating with presenters who may not have had the availability due to changes in their own workflow or our rescheduling. It also meant a change of a keynote speaker which sets the tone for the entirety of the conference. Another hurdle would be picking the right technology that would be easy enough to use. Additionally, a traditionally in-person affair being moved online caused some fears of attendees' experience and if people would even come. And most importantly, could we still get barbeque?

Communication is the Driver

To make sure our conference goals would still be realized, the first step in our adjusted formatting was to communicate with registered attendees and presenters. Within days of the university's decision to suspend events, we offered refunds to registrants and told presenters that there would be a delay and more information would be forthcoming. We also contacted previous attendees and shared that we would be delaying and awaiting more guidance as the pandemic was still developing. By starting our communication early, and being clear in our intent to have our presenters present virtually, we were able to maintain our original schedule and give adequate time for

our participants to adjust their presentation style, fitting the new virtual theme.

As time passed into April and May, it was increasingly apparent that our conference would not be held in person anytime soon. Delaying the conference date further and planning for an in-person event could impact the 2021

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conference, as having two conferences within months of one another would be a logistical nightmare or push the conference and to have it coincide with the start of the fall semester, which can be a remarkably busy time for any academic library! Neither option was ideal.

In our continued updates to presenters, we asked if they may be more comfortable delaying the conference, cancelling entirely, or presenting online. We found the majority understood the need for a delay, but only around 50% were comfortable with presenting online. Some were unsure of their work schedule due to the pandemic while others just felt their presentation was better suited for an in-person event. As a result, some presenters no longer wished to participate. This included the keynote speaker. With the survey suggesting we would have enough continuing presenters for at least 10 sessions, we felt confident we could go online if university restrictions prohibited us from offering an in-person event. We had presenters, potentially, but no keynote.

Once the university cancelled in-person classes and events, the meetings of the planning committee also became all virtual. This was a major change for us as a group. In previous years, we communicated consistently via email, informal hallway conversations, and face-to-face meetings, formats that allow for a lot of information to be shared quickly and minor issues to be resolved. By shifting to more structured virtual meetings, we worried that some issues would fall through the cracks. Luckily, this was not the case as we quickly replaced those informal meetings phone calls or quick chats in WebEx.

Our communication methods helped us to determine which path was most efficient and was ultimately the foundation of our success. We were able to support our decision to hold a virtual conference by holding many frank conversations and communicating openly amongst the committee and with presenters. Through that communication, we realized we could do not only hold the conference, but also do so successfully.

The planning committee shifted our attention to the possibility of going fully online through the WebEx platform. This shift was an approach that other conferences began to announce around the same time, which helped our own push to move to a virtual event. Deciding on June 17th and 18th, the committee locked down the date of the conference but only after much debate on whether we should cut some presentations to fit it into one or offer multiple sessions for some parts of the day. Two days of the conference would be given to each presenter, allowing for a large enough platform of communication to the audience as well as allowing for flexibility with individual and day-of scheduling.

The Importance of Keeping a List

While we were short a keynote, we learned from previous years that things can happen and we needed to prepare backup presenters - possibly even backups for backups. A major part of the search for a keynote speaker each year is encompassed with the attempts of matching our conference theme while also being mindful of budget. This year, our theme was Engagement and Assessment, so we compiled a list of speakers we felt aligned with the theme and allotted funds to spend on the keynote. These names were derived from our own research along with suggestions from coworkers and colleagues across the state. Building the list of potential keynotes remains important to the success of our conference because an engaging keynote can make the conference more vibrant by energizing all participants throughout the long conference day.

After our first keynote could no longer participate, the committee addressed the list of backup options. Once we found ourselves in need of a keynote to fit our new format, we set about contacting Sharon Eisner, who had been recommended to us. We reached out via email with a pitch about what the conference was and if we could meet to discuss the possibility of her acting as our keynote. In our meeting we discussed the complexities of presenting over WebEx, a challenge to be sure, as well as our timeline and what the Professor felt she could do as our keynote. It was an energizing and productive meeting for the co-chairs. They then presented to the rest of the committee information provided by the professor, including an abstract of the keynote speech. We agreed the speaker fit our goals and theme, prepared a contract, and were able to check off the keynote with confidence.

Moving online was going to be a challenge and required contacting all the presenters to see if their presentations could work in a virtual format or if they would be able to do it. While we still had 10 presenters express an interest, we had other presentations from interested parties that we could also use if that number dwindled. Luckily, we never had to refer back to that list, as all the interested presenters were able to attend and present.

Without a list of potential speakers, we would have been scrambling. Using our networks to find names and leads for speakers and keeping those names in a list for easy access in case the situation changes helped us be successful with our conference. While these lists take time and effort to create and compile, by starting early and tapping existing networks both within the library and across the state, we can maintain a set of potential pre-vetted speakers. By maintaining a list of potential presenters and keynotes, the Paraprofessional Committee was able to stay ahead of reduced participation or hesitancy of presenters. Our virtual format led many presenters to adjust, and our keynote was especially excited to prepare for the new virtual tech set up. By creating early communication and having back up options, future conference can experience the same success and trouble-shooting opportunities with presenters, ensuring a wide range of participation on coherent and enriching topics.

Connecting Attendees to the Virtual Option

While the sudden shift to a virtual conference was daunting in terms of logistics, it became apparent that attendance to a virtual conference had potential to be larger than an in-person event. With the boundaries of a physical environment now obsolete, the worry of an attendance limit vanished.

In the past, recruitment to our in-person conference included sending promotional emails to past library Paraprofessional Conference attendees, library listservs, and other assorted library staff contacts. Outreach to organizations, such as the North Carolina Library Association and ECU's Master of Library Science program, was key in spreading the word about our conference to those who may potentially attend for the first time.

One potential positive for the delay of the conference was that many individuals had been working remotely in some capacity since early April. This provided them with ample time to adjust to virtual meetings and a virtual workplace. While remote working is never ideal, the silver lining for the planning committee was that attendees would have had some experience with teleworking software by the time our conference was held. This could help us avoid too many issues of new users having problems during the conference.

Utilizing our connections and listservs, we found it beneficial to spread the word that we were moving the conference online and to the WebEx platform. By doing so, we ensured that our adjusted presenters were prepared in a timely fashion and comfortable with the chosen platform for presenting. WebEx was simple and intuitive enough for our staff to use when the pandemic began and was and similar to other teleconference software so that we expected it to be relatively easy to adapt to for our event.

Working with Presenters

With the keynote speaker arranged, attendees registering, and the move to a virtual setting fully underway, we turned our focus toward our presenters. While many of our selected group were seasoned presenters, few claimed to have much expertise presenting virtually.

To overcome this hurdle, the planning committee scheduled individual meetings with presenters a week prior to the conference. During these meetings, the conference committee members walked the presenters through the process by modeling and facilitating screen-sharing, testing microphone quality, providing feedback on the video feed, and monitoring for feedback or other technical issues. While this was occurring, other members of the committee logged in at various times and through various means to the meeting to test situations which may arise on the day of the conference. Testing scenarios included the following: audio via a telephone login, attendee with a webcam, and an individual viewing the session from their cell phone. By scheduling individual meetings with presenters beforehand, a future conference committee could benefit by addressing technical and scheduling issues before the day of the event. Often, during the face-to-face conference, these same adjustments need to be made, but give the virtual standing of the situation, we found preparedness was key to our success in working with presenters.

During these sessions, presenters were also given an overview of the format of each session. Each presenter would have a host, a member of the committee, who would introduce the session and the presenter. The host would begin recording each presentation to share with the attendees after the conference with the presenter's approval. The chat and attendees would be monitored by the host who would facilitate the question-and-answer period at the end so that presenters could focus on sharing their content. Hosts and other members of the committee would also monitor the chat keeping an eye out for questions or any problems which may arise. Finally, the hosts would help wrap up sessions and move attendees to the next session.

While time consuming, these pre-conference meetings were highly beneficial. During the conference there were no technical hiccups with presenters who met with the committee beforehand. A post-conference survey sent to presenters also reinforced the benefits of the sessions. Half of the presenters completed the survey, and 100% of respondents replied that WebEx was easy to use. Given the lack of technical problems with the presenters, 4 out of 5 indicated that they would be willing to present virtually in the future. Furthermore, when asked how the conference committee could improve interactions with presenters in the future, one presenter responded, "The committee was very gracious and helpful with those of us with limited experience in doing a virtual event." Two other presenters also remarked on the committee's helpfulness. By working with presenters beforehand to demo their presentations and prepare them for situations which may arise, their confidence with presenting virtually increased and the natural anxiety that comes with speaking at a conference was reduced. In turn, this led to higher quality presentations and a better conference experience for presenters and attendees.

The Big Day Arrives

The adjustment from a physical conference to a virtual setting was not easy. In years past, we needed to reserve rooms months in advance, occasionally negotiating room swaps with other departments in the university that needed library space on the same day. The night before the conference would often include setting up hundreds of chairs, checking and double-checking equipment, prepping tables for food, and setting up coffee makers. Readyng our space for 150 or more attendees was time-intensive and required a lot of planning to make sure it all went

smoothly, and, even then, one or two things would be missed, and we would be rushing conference day to address.

Typically, our day-of conference preparations involve an "all hands-on deck" type of approach in terms of utilizing the library staff and faculty to carry out duties for the conference. In years past we have had anywhere from 25-40 volunteers, needing every one of those to ensure a smooth flow of operations. Organizing the volunteers and ensuring that they were appropriately utilized in necessary roles was a large enough job that the committee designated one member to focus solely on this throughout the planning process and on the day of the conference. Much of the conference set-up occurred the day prior to the event. Day-of conference volunteers often assisted attendees with parking and directions, set up food and snacks, ensured technology worked in classrooms, and much more. For this event, the hours spent on conference set up were instead spent coordinating with presenters, navigating technical issues, and testing equipment.

The physical set up for the 2020 conference consisted of unlocking an instructional classroom an hour before the conference was set to start. The major issue faced was an incorrect password for the main WebEx station, which was resolved in 10 minutes with a few messages between our IT department (although it was a nail-biting 10 minutes). The classroom allowed for social distancing, with outlets and plenty of desk space for everyone. This allowed for the committee members who needed to be physically present during the conference, for technical support, the adequate space to socially distance and maintain the University-presented standards for COVID19 safety. Instead of greeting instructors at the door, we met them in WebEx rooms and tested equipment

before starting the official session. No major issues occurred, thanks in part to our test runs with presenters the week before. These test runs and check-ins with presenters were greatly appreciated and allowed for troubleshooting problems that arose in the new virtual setting in which we hosted. To reduce any confusion for attendees, and avoiding management of multiple WebEx meeting rooms, the committee decided to utilize the university assigned WebEx room for our Paraprofessional account for all sessions. This was done to allow for easier transition between sessions and for users at home. It did create some issues with adding new presenters, but those acting as hosts for the different sessions were able to quickly resolve them.

The day before the conference, the committee finalized who would be physically present in the instructional classroom and who would virtually monitor the sessions from home. Having a mix of committee members attending virtually and hosting physically in the library allowed for some committee members to have the same experience as attendees, so they could clearly call out any issues or problems that may arise. Having individuals in person in the building to act as hosts allowed for a constant internet connection, relieving fears that a host's home connection could cut out, as well as offering a 'home base' where issues could be discussed and fixes could be applied in real time. Having a combination allowed for the conference to provide an optimal environment for all attendees and presenters.

The conference was opened with remarks by a planning committee co-chair and library assistant director. The planning committee co-chair provided a brief history of the conference and addressed the move to an online format, as well as the various house-keeping rules for the conference,

including staying muted and posting questions in the chat. The assistant director spoke about the importance of engagement in libraries and with their communities emphasizing the conference theme of Engagement and Assessment.

As the opening remarks continued, we watched in earnest as the attendees signed in. We had had more than 300 registered attendees—a number that astounded us, being more than any of the previous fifteen years of the hosted conference—but we did not know how things would look once the conference was fully underway.

As the keynote speaker began, we started to breathe more easily. While not 300, we had well over 150 attendees sign in for the start of the session. And while attendance numbers would not be finalized until after we double checked login information, we had an impressive showing for the keynote. Even in the virtual setting, the speaker was able to engage with the audience and received several positive comments in our follow-up survey.

The other presentations went very well, and other than a slight sound issue with one presenter, we were able to have a successful first day. Members of the planning committee created copies of the chat logs, monitored chat for questions, and reported individuals who turned their microphones on so the host could mute.

The second day of the conference was comparable to the first. We were even able to maintain similar numbers of attendees throughout the day, although there was a slight drop off of 15-25% of attendees, depending on the session. We felt that we would likely lose some attendees if we added a second day, but we were pleased that we were able to maintain a steady number of attendees across both days. We wrapped up the conference by having a co-chair thank our sponsors,

presenters and attendees, and sprinkle in some library jokes to keep everyone entertained.

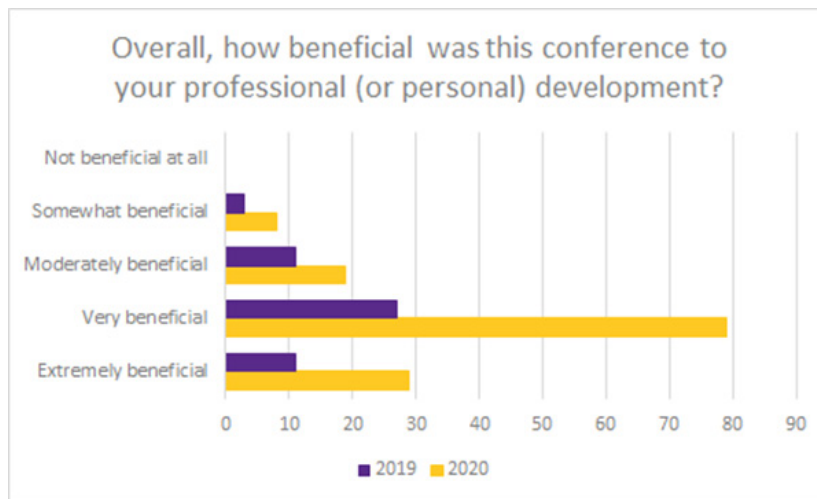
Survey Says...

As the conference wrapped up, the committee worked on getting feedback from attendees through a survey. Achieving high response rates for surveys can be tricky, even when using incentives like gift cards or other prizes. Past conference surveys had response rates ranging from 15% to 70%. For the 2020 conference, we offered gift bags as an incentive to complete the survey and ended up with a response rate of almost 40% of all attendees, or about 135 responses. This was an improvement of over 250% from the previous year's survey.

Based on the survey responses, the hours of effort were not in vain. More than 1 in 5 respondents said the event was an extremely beneficial conference for their professional development. This was a slight drop from the previous year of 25%. Nearly 60% of responses indicated that the conference was very beneficial to their professional development, compared to 46% in 2019. This is a significant increase and is something about which we are incredibly proud considering the circumstances under which the conference occurred.

The attendees also responded very positively to the virtual setting, with 97% of respondents saying they liked the online conference. Feedback also indicated that in the future we should consider offering certain sessions online, even if the conference is in person. The committee is wholeheartedly interested in pursuing this option.

Another goal of the conference is to expand our reach and allow for more members of the paraprofessional community to attend the conference. While we had not asked the question in previous conference surveys, we wanted



to know how many attendees had attended the Paraprofessional Conference before: 45% were first-time attendees. This was an amazing number to see and provided us with more evidence and motivation to offer part or all of the conference online and free of charge in the future.

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With all of the changes to a virtual conference and juggling the challenges of scheduling over two days, there was some concern that moving to a two-day conference could result in much lower attendance from Day 1 to Day 2. In reality, 70% of respondents said they attended both days of the conference, while 20% attended Day 1 alone and 10% attending Day 2. This retention helped justify holding the conference over two days and gives us some evidence to explore holding multi-day conferences in the future. While it is difficult to extrapolate why attendees were willing to join both days of sessions—for example, it could be a result of individuals working from home and having reduced hours in their library—it demonstrates the

demand for our conference and the professional development opportunity it provides.

Conducting result surveys that highlight the outreached thoughts and opinions of presenters and attendees is extremely important to the success of a virtual conference. By obtaining

the feedback, the Committee is continuously working towards improvements for future years and has supported documented evidence for what they can be working towards in the immediate year. For a successful virtual conference, surveys and group outreach are encouraged to get this type of direct feedback, even when participants are not directly interacting. This continues the theme of virtual interaction even after the virtual conference has concluded, and even sets up the tone for a potential virtual conference to come.

Planning Committee Debrief

In previous years, the committee reviewed the feedback received and debated suggestions that may make the conference better at a local restaurant

or over a box of donuts and coffee. This year, we did not have that luxury due to the pandemic. However, we still were able to meet over WebEx to go over the surveys and share experiences which we can improve upon for attendees, presenters, and ourselves. Pulling suggestions from the surveys, we hope to implement some if we move back to an in-person event or remain virtual. These include more audio checks with members, offering a WebEx for attendees to check equipment, and announcing decisions about the conference earlier.

Once the conference wrapped, the committee took a month off. During that time, we decompressed, continued to reflect on our virtual event, and brainstormed ideas for the 2021 conference, including ideas for keynote speakers and potential presenters. This year was different, as we were pushed back a month from our usual conference. We have been hard at work meeting and discussing opportunities to make next year's conference broader and more appealing. We have a lot to consider as we move on into the next phase of planning for 2021 but are extremely excited for the opportunities and challenges that we will face.

Conclusion

Every year, the goal of the Paraprofessional Conference is to provide

professional development opportunities for paraprofessionals in public, academic, and school libraries across the state of North Carolina. Despite a pandemic and shifting to a virtual setting, we feel like we were able to accomplish this goal in 2020.

It took a lot of experiences from other virtual events to help us produce the plan we were able to implement this year. From having to pause our conference just days before opening registration and overcoming the litany of technology-related problems that arise from individuals working from home or using a new conferencing software, the planning and preparation for this year's conference was unlike any we had done before. Yet, it was possible due to the best practices learned from others among the first to hold large scale, virtual events.

Worries about attendance and serving our stated goal were important to consider as we moved online. Luckily, they were not as big of an issue once we started seeing individuals log in. This is due in large part to our frequent and open communication methods with attendees. We had attendees from the western part of North Carolina, who normally cannot attend due to travel limitations for paraprofessionals, as well as nearby states like Tennessee and Florida. We even had international attendees, from Nigeria,

West Africa and from Tbilisi, Georgia! In addition to expanding our attendee reach, we also had presenters from across the state, including one from Iowa.

With the increase in survey response rate, broader geographic reach, and expanded audience and presenter opportunities, the committee feels that the move online was a success. The move to a virtual conference was a bit daunting at first. However, approaching the conference with our shared experiences from other virtual events, we were able to compile a list of concerns and, one by one, move down that list and check them off. It was those shared experiences that helped us put on our conference and walk away feeling accomplished. The committee remained in weekly contact during the crucial planning months of April and May, as the co-chairs logically divvied up new roles and responsibilities for members. The constant email contact and weekly WebEx meetings kept members informed and confident in our new roles. The communication was especially important as confusion, disconnect, and doubt could have prohibited the conference from moving forward in an organized and orderly fashion.

By following the given recommendations listed here, our hope is to heed guidance for other groups looking to

successfully transition their conference during this virtual age. While every conference is unique and has its own thematic highlights, by having early and proper communication, maintaining direct lists, following up with presenters, and providing follow-up statistical surveys, a virtual conference can become a lasting success.

While we cherish hosting the event in person, knowing that we are able to move the conference online provides many new options as we navigate the pandemic and the unknown future following the development of 2020. Even if we are given all clear for the 2021 conference to be face to face, we may explore future options for online sessions given the positive feedback and experience. We encourage those who are interested in hosting an online conference to learn from our process, communicate as frequently as possible, and focus on the positive outcomes for success. These tips, paired with an engaged team dedicated to the goals of the conference no matter the format, you can provide high quality professional development within your communities. The result creates an experience that provides great professional development to paraprofessionals and others across the state leading to future developments and opportunities for all.



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