

ACES CONFERENCE 2021 – A CHANCE FOR ADVOCACY

Events over the last year have continued to highlight the importance of a workforce of professional counselors who are able to cultivate culturally responsive and healing relationships while simultaneously advocating in response to the many environmental factors that influence safety, wellbeing, and access to services. These dynamics are visible in civil unrest related to centuries of racial injustice, racial disparities related to COVID-19, [rising hate crimes against the AAPI community](#), and introduction of [361 voter suppression bills across 47 states](#) (as of 4/1/21).

These issues facing the U.S. are playing out on center stage Atlanta, the location of ACES 2021 Conference. Certainly, Atlanta played a key role in the outcome of the 2020 presidential and congressional elections, in large part due to initiatives of BIPOC organizations from which we may learn much about advocacy. In the past weeks, we have witnessed violence against the AAPI community in Atlanta via the mass shooting that killed 8, including 6 women of Asian descent. And, we have heard outcry as Georgia led the way in signing a sweeping voter suppression bill into law. In response, several have asked: *Should ACES go to Atlanta? Will a face-to-face conference compel individuals to put their safety at risk to build a CV? Will our AAPI colleagues be safe in the city? Why would we support the economy of a state that is leading the way in suppressing votes of Black and Brown people?*

These questions are worthy of serious consideration and in need of *dialogue*, something that is increasingly out of reach as we have navigated our virtual world this year. As we sat with these questions and arrived at the **decision to proceed with the conference as planned**, we found ourselves weighing risks and opportunities. *What do counselor educators and supervisors need now so we can be most effective in doing the work that we do? How will holding (or not) the conference, help us to better prepare a workforce of counselors ready to be effective in communities so soaked with grief, trauma, and oppression? Does the argument of not supporting Georgia's economy hold when we consider the \$350,000 cancellation penalty ACES will pay directly to the most privileged in Georgia's economy? What of Stacey Abrams' statement urging organizations considering whether to patronize Georgia to "come and speak out." Most importantly, how do we honor the many different needs of our colleagues, especially colleagues of color who have borne disproportionate burden over this past year? Can we find ways to give space for those who need it while also building up a community of counselor educators and supervisors ready to address these issues in their programs and communities?*

First, if safety related to COVID-19 is a factor in your decision, know that our leadership team factored information about vaccine availability, vaccine efficacy, and member voice into the decision to proceed in Atlanta. Know that the Hyatt's COVID-19 precautions meet or exceed CDC recommendations and will continue to do so.

Still, we understand that some colleagues may be unable or unwilling to travel this fall. Whatever the reason, we honor that choice. As you will see in the conference update, we have

a virtual option complete with live-stream recordings of select sessions *and* a month-long virtual conference bonus to allow interactive presentation opportunities expressly for virtual attendees. We hope you find these options responsive to your needs.

So, what if you do choose to come to the conference? We ask you to come in a spirit of building a community of counselor educators and supervisors deeply committed to developing a workforce of counselors to address the toll of grief, trauma, and oppression within our communities. In that vein, you can expect to see the following initiatives integrated into the conference:

- Keynote speaker, Dr. Annelise Singh, *Racial Healing: Practical Activities for Counselors to Explore Racial Privilege, Confront Systemic Racism, and Engage in Collective Healing*
- Dedicated anti-racism education track
- Return to community via two empty plate fundraisers led by and addressing the needs of BIPOC communities in Atlanta
- Dedicated guide to help you understand opportunities for supporting restaurants and tourism owned by BIPOC individuals who are invested in their community

Just last week, we began dialogue with leaders of the Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development. We are proud to announce that we will be collaborating on additional responsive programs to enrich your conference experience and return to community in Atlanta. Initiatives under consideration include a day of service under guidance of community leaders, free continuing education for counselors in Georgia who have faced unprecedented demand this year, and/or continuing education focused on legislative advocacy.

We hope you will choose to come to Atlanta, build up our counselor education community, and invest in the local community. It is our hope that you will leave energized, enriched, and equipped with new tools for developing counselors responsive to parallel challenges in your own communities.

Casey Barrio Minton, ACES President-elect

Heather Ambrose, ACES President

Kris Goodrich, ACES Past-president