

The Long Road to Tenure: How the Ohio Communication Association Can Help

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Picture this: You are a new faculty member fresh out of graduate school. As the academic year begins, you are working to “find your way” in your new institution while worrying about how to balance your teaching load, service, and establish a new line of research. One day a colleague shares with you information about the state convention to be held in a city near you and advises you to submit a paper. You think, “Why not?” and submit recent research conducted in your final year of graduate school. Unpredictably, this one-day conference turns into years of service, education, and professional growth. In short, your willingness to attend a conference and share your work could ultimately impact your tenure case in a positive way.

Similar to the scenario above, I was a first-year faculty member advised by a colleague to submit a paper to the annual Ohio Communication Association (OCA) convention. To be honest, this was when I first learned of OCA. It was my initial introduction to my state association, which would eventually become my “home” association. That year, I attended my first OCA conference, and during that same convention I was approached to take on the newly formed position of Assistant Editor for the *Ohio Communication Journal*. Wow! A leadership position in OCA – I was beyond thrilled! As a junior faculty member, I could never say “No,” so began my service to the Ohio Communication Association. More importantly, this was the impetus of the invaluable lessons I would learn on my tenure journey. My teaching, service, and research would all be positively impacted by my work in this association.

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As any academic knows, teaching, research, and service are considered the three pillars of a faculty member's job. As Albert Einstein stated, "The only source of knowledge is experience." There are many lessons we learn in graduate school as we prepare for a profession in academia, but the majority of learning comes as we embark in our new roles as a faculty member. Moreover, as we work toward tenure, we experience and learn.

This journey to tenure, however, should not be a "solo" expedition. Just as an athlete training for the Olympics depends on mentors, coaches, and supporters; an untenured faculty member often finds support from colleagues and mentors. The mentorship I found via OCA was invaluable.

OCA and Teaching

State associations – as opposed to regional or national associations – are oftentimes more intimate. As a result, if a state association holds an annual convention, it likewise is smaller - comparatively speaking. The Ohio Communication Association hosts an annual convention every October. While the official call for submissions is likened to any other convention, one could argue that a large majority of submissions (at least within the past decade) are centered on pedagogy. Because of this, the OCA annual convention is a great place to seek out support with regard to teaching.

As an untenured faculty member, I was consistently seeking out innovative teaching methods. Short courses, panels, poster sessions, and research often focused on innovative teaching methods that I was able to easily integrate into my classroom. For instance, one year I attended a short course on "Enhancing Millennial Student Learning." This presentation engaged me as an educator and the discussion in this short course really helped me gain a vision for my own teaching. Though I had taught as a graduate student for many years, as we all know, students seem to change from decade to decade. Working with colleagues on ideas specific to this "new" student generation was truly helpful in finding strategies to implement into my own classes. Likewise, over the years

I attended many short courses and panels that were contributors to my own teaching. For example, “Capitalizing on Technology in the Communication Classroom,” “Teaching Students how to Write in Communication Classes,” and “How to Integrate Service Learning Projects into the Communication Classroom” all presented novel ideas on how to provide innovative teaching in an intimate space where colleagues can truly hold meaningful discussions and share ideas to integrate in the classroom.

The institution for which I work is primarily teaching-oriented; our primary mission is teaching. In effect, the lessons centered on teaching I received at OCA were appreciated as I worked toward tenure. As part of my tenure case, I had to demonstrate that I was open to new ideas and constantly working toward a novel, innovative curriculum. Furthermore, I was required to show that I was making an effort to consistently improve my coursework and integrate innovative teaching methods. The work presented at the Ohio Communication Association conventions helped me to enhance my own course curriculum. At larger conventions, such as NCA, I often learned about the newest research in the field, so I relied on the more intimate OCA conference to hone my teaching skills. As any educator knows, the ability to teach is rewarding beyond words. That being said, it is a common truth that one cannot achieve tenure without research. Thus, we now turn to how the Ohio Communication Association contributed to my research efforts.

OCA and Research

As a junior faculty member, establishing a new line of research can be tough. Yes, you work on publishing a dissertation, but where does one go from there? How do you apply for grants? Where do new ideas come from? To which journals should I submit my work? These are typical questions that run through a junior faculty member’s mind time and time again.

Soon enough we learn that a common practice in academia is to collaborate on research projects with others in the field. Collaboration can frequently make the research process a bit more

manageable while you are still learning your role as an untenured faculty member. Smaller associations such as the Ohio Communication Association are excellent venues to network and establish working relationships. Once you begin networking, you may find common research interests and create collaborations.

As mentioned earlier, sessions at state conventions are usually smaller than regional or national conferences, which lend to greater discussion. This academic conversation can potentially generate research ideas. Personally, I have had the opportunities to talk with others about shared research interests much more at OCA than at any other convention I attend. I have built strong working relationships through OCA that have lasted for years.

Another asset of OCA is the journal, *Ohio Communication Journal*, sponsored by this organization. Dependent upon one's tenure requirements, a publication can certainly be a great addition to your curriculum vita. Not all state associations have journals, so we are fortunate to have an outlet for our research. Not only is the *OCJ* a great place to share our work, it is a great resource to learn about current research in the field and learn what others - specifically colleagues within the state of Ohio - are publishing.

Finally, an incredibly important contribution to my research was the mentorship I received over the years. Any faculty member can tell you that mentorship in the research process is meaningful. While we began learning about the process in graduate school, as a faculty member you are without specific teachers and advisors to guide you through. The Ohio Communication Association has always been a great place where mentors truly support junior faculty members and guide them through the research process. In addition to teaching and research, professional service is a key component in a faculty member's work.

OCA and Professional Service

Perhaps the most significant impact in which the Ohio Communication Association can benefit an untenured faculty member is the "service" area. First, there are many service opportunities in OCA as a student and/or faculty member. As I mentioned, I was appointed to a service position early on in OCA.

Because the association is smaller than the National Communication Association or a regional association, the workload is also relatively less. This is helpful for a faculty member trying to work toward tenure, yet still engage in professional service.

Service is not only a “vita hit” or a “mark” in the tenure report card, but also a great way to network with others in the field. As a graduate student you can run for a Graduate Student Representative position or volunteer to help with the annual convention. As a faculty member there are always numerous service opportunities including District Representatives, working with the *Ohio Communication Journal*, coordinating the annual conference, serving as Communications Coordinator, and so much more. These positions can help an untenured faculty member “get their feet wet” and gain invaluable experience. This professional service, however, is not only beneficial to the faculty member, but to the association. In order for any association to grow and evolve, new leadership and fresh ideas are needed – new faculty members can bring these things to the organization. The Ohio Communication Association would not be celebrating 80 years without the hard work and devoted service of its members.

Conclusions

I have now served in several positions for the Ohio Communication Association for nearly a decade. It seems like I just joined this organization yesterday. I have had the opportunity to watch the organization evolve and play an incremental part in shaping its future. As a faculty member who submitted my case for tenure a few short years ago, I can confidently state that my involvement in OCA strengthened my tenure case. Not only in terms of “vita hits” or lines on my evaluation reports, but in the experience I gained in my years at the Ohio Communication Association.

In addition to being a part of a wonderful organization and gaining valuable experience, the true backbone of OCA is what helped me the most – the members. The members in this organization are mostly local (geographically) and always willing

to lend a helping hand. The mentorship available via this association is, perhaps, the greatest benefit offered to a new faculty member.

As we celebrate 80 years of the Ohio Communication Association, I am honored and privileged to be a part of such a great organization. I am confident that we can expect great things in the next 20 years of this organization if we continue to grow together. In the words of Walt Disney, "*We keep moving forward, opening new doors, and doing new things, because we're curious and curiosity keeps leading us down new paths.*"