

## Getting your Feet Wet: Graduate Students and the Ohio Communication Association

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Like many Ohio Communication Association (OCA) members, my introduction to the organization was as a graduate student, preparing to deliver my debut conference presentation. During my first year as a master's student at Kent State University, I submitted one paper to the National Communication Association (NCA) and one to OCA for consideration at their fall conferences, and to my surprise both were accepted. Although both were intimidating to say the least, the sheer size of NCA was especially daunting. Thankfully, the OCA presentation was first, and my faculty mentors assured me it would be a supportive and encouraging environment in which to "get my feet wet."

My first OCA conference (October 2004 at Otterbein University) delivered all that was promised to me, and more. Dr. Jerry Feezel, now Emeritus Professor at Kent State University and former President of OCA (1980-1981), helped guide me through the conference, introducing me to scholars, past and present OCA leaders, and fellow graduate students from across the region. Finally, I understood what networking really looked like. College career counselors talk about networking, but to see it in action in a way that is not forced or too focused on a specific goal, such as acceptance into one's doctoral program of choice, was invaluable. My presentation was well received by a small, but engaged audience. I could hardly believe that my research sparked interest in actual scholars, and may have even taught them something new.

I arrived at Otterbein University's beautiful campus that day nervous, scared, and feeling a bit like a fraud. I was no scholar! Why would anyone want to listen to me? However, I left with a small seed of confidence in myself and in my research. What's more, I had a better sense of what the academy looked like outside

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of my home institution. A clearer understanding of the communication discipline in higher education continued to develop year after year on the first Saturday in October. As a graduate student, I sustained my involvement in OCA through regular conference presentations, which helped develop my networks and build my vitae.

I share this story not as a means of indulging my own ego, but as a way to identify what seems to be a common theme in graduate student membership at OCA. It is not *my* story, but one of *our* stories – indicative of the important role that OCA plays in the academic life of a graduate student. I believe the relationship between OCA and graduate students is mutually beneficial. Graduate students can reap many rewards from membership, and the organization gains a great deal from its graduate student members.

### **Benefits to the Student**

In my experience, membership in OCA and regular conference participation offers a number of benefits well beyond what the “brochure” may promise. First, and for many foremost, OCA membership and conference participation builds one’s CV through research presentation opportunities, awarded recognition, and service. Graduate students have the opportunity to turn course papers and projects into conference presentations, as well as organize discussion panels based upon course topics. It has become increasingly difficult to gain panel acceptance at national conferences, whereas OCA is an appropriate forum for these kinds of engaging panels. As students consider the important research “line on the vitae,” please take note that OCA offers something unique compared to other organizations’ conferences. Namely, there are opportunities to disseminate one’s research in an environment that is supportive and developmental. I have found less and less constructive feedback on my research at large conferences, yet at OCA, presenters can gain valuable suggestions and ideas – if they are open to them, of course – in a slower-paced, smaller environment. Furthermore, students can hone their presentational skills within the welcoming environment of OCA.

Along with research presentations, posters, and discussion panels, OCA recognizes excellence through top paper and poster awards, as well as special awards to recognize distinction among students and student organizations. Finally, students' CVs can be strengthened through service to the organization. The constitution calls for elected graduate student representatives, who are immersed in the inner workings of the organization. Through service, either as a representative or by volunteering for special projects, graduate students can learn more about the inner workings of an academic organization and develop communication skills.

In OCA, graduate students can build more than their CVs. They can also build meaningful and natural connections throughout the region. These connections are not only made with scholars in the field, but also amongst fellow graduate students who will one day be contemporaries in the discipline. Serving on panels with one another, meeting at the awards reception, or chatting over a muffin and coffee on Saturday morning all provide opportunities for socialization into the discipline. In recent years, the OCA Executive Board made a renewed effort to extend opportunities for networking and involvement outside the conference cycle through our active social media and our newly redesigned and reimagined website.

Finally, participation at the OCA conference is more affordable than many other conferences, and therefore more doable for the typical graduate student. As most graduate programs offer limited travel funding to their students, and most graduate students are quite limited in their own discretionary funds, the relatively short drive and one-night stay at OCA are much more affordable than larger conferences (not to mention the organization feeds you!). I am sure that many will attest that OCA can be very valuable to graduate students, but graduate students also offer important contributions to the organization.

### **Benefits to the Organization**

In its current form, OCA is highly reliant on the active participation of graduate students to achieve its goals. Graduate students offer a sort of "fresh blood" insight that is vital for the

organization to adapt and thrive. Graduate student presentations, posters, and panels often spark lively discussion about creative and innovative research ideas, which I can say are personally and professionally valuable for the faculty in attendance. Our graduate student representatives give voice to the student perspective, which is strongly considered when contemplating new ideas or evaluating existing programs and practices within OCA. I have found that graduate students are often the most eager to serve the organization by chairing panels and assisting in special projects, such as the recent archives work being done. Without the energy and new ideas from graduate students, I fear this organization would stagnate.

Another important way OCA benefits from the involvement of graduate students is through the investments made in the best and brightest of the region. Whatever OCA gives to a graduate student in terms of research, constructive criticism, networked connections, and even mentorship, the organization reaps 10-fold through the future contributions that scholar will make to the organization and to the discipline. Whether area graduate students stay local, helping to retain the “best and the brightest” in the region, or ultimately earn tenure halfway across the world, those students carry the OCA name with them. They make us look good!

### **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have outlined what I see to be the primary benefits that graduate students and OCA gain from graduate student membership. Now back to my story. While in graduate school, I was fortunate to experience the many advantages of OCA membership, from earning a top graduate student paper award, building a regional reputation, cultivating valuable connections with well-established scholars, and, of course, enjoying the discounted membership and registration rates. Following my doctoral program, as a junior faculty member at Kent State University at Stark, I made the transition from “graduate student member” to “regular member.” It was time to return the favor, and serve the organization that had given so much to me. A few years into my faculty appointment, I served as a regional representative,

and then later as Executive Director (2013-2015). I believe my story is an example of the symbiotic relationship between graduate students and OCA; we need each other to thrive, and thankfully today that relationship is strong.