

“You’re Going, Aren’t You?”: An Encomium for the State Association

Matthew J. Smith

“You’re going, aren’t you?” asked Dr. Candice Thomas-Maddox in reference to that fall’s meeting of the Speech Communication Association of Ohio (SCAO). I had known Candice from my time as a graduate student at Ohio University and after my return to the state to accept a position at Wittenberg University, she invited me to join her on a panel at the annual conference at Otterbein University in Columbus. I had attended at least one SCAO meeting while I was in graduate school, and to be honest, getting to another conference was not high on my priority list. In fact, it wasn’t on my list at all. I was a member and regular attendee of the Eastern Communication Association and the National Communication Association, and I figured those affiliations met the professional needs that I as an upcoming assistant professor had quite nicely, thank you. But as anyone who has ever worked with her knows, it’s difficult to say no to Candice Thomas-Maddox. And so my response to her question was a seemingly inevitable, “Sure, I’ll be going.” Little did I know how prophetic that promise proved to be and that I would be going and going and going to conferences and events sponsored by the SCAO—which of course was subsequently renamed the Ohio Communication Association (OCA)—for the next decade and more.

As was the case with me early on, I have heard many other colleagues over the years explain why participating in the state

Matthew J. Smith is the Director of the School of Communication at Radford University in Radford, Virginia. While a professor at Wittenberg University in Springfield, Ohio, he served as a regional representative (2004-2006), vice-president (2006-2008), president (2008-2010) and past president (2010-2012) of the Ohio Communication Association. In addition to affiliations with OCA, ECA, and NCA, he is a founding member of the Comics Studies Society.

association seems to be less of a priority, particularly for those who already engage with regional, national, or international associations. They have told me that there simply isn't the draw, the time, or the resources—among other reasons—to get involved. Given my own lengthy affiliation with Ohio's state association, I clearly beg to differ and offer here the reasons why I believe in the opportunities associated with a state association like OCA are so valuable.

My first SCAO upon returning to Ohio was a whirlwind experience. I presented on a panel that morning and by lunch I was asked to run and was elected to the Executive Committee. I saw old friends from graduate school and met new colleagues at nearby schools. I was taken by the vision of incoming president Jeff Tyus to grow the association and energized by the spirit of untapped potential within the organization. It was an intellectually, socially, and professionally meaningful experience, and I wanted more. Thinking back on it—and my subsequent tenure with the association—I believe that there were several good reasons for me to want to be a part of OCA and reasons why others find affiliating with state associations rewarding. As I detail below, state associations serve a vital role in promoting scholarship, creating professional networking opportunities, developing leadership skills, recognizing accomplishments, and enculturating students into the professional, all within a low cost/low stress context.

Advancing Scholarship

Like all other academic associations, state associations exist to help promote scholarship. In OCA, this is manifested most visibly in the sponsorship of an annual conference and the publication of an annual journal. The very reason we choose to come together is a shared desire to better understand the phenomena of communication and to better promote that understanding. As an organization, we focus on how to make new insights into our field accessible to one another and to the wider discipline.

As both an officer of the association and a member of its journal editorial board, I've had the chance to review a lot of the

scholarship that has been submitted for conference presentation and journal publication. Admittedly, not all of it has been “ready for primetime,” but a good deal of it is solid, professional work. Some of it is even rather impressive. Although quality inevitably varies in any open forum, the fact that the state association not only creates spaces for sharing scholarship but provides a process for peer review of that material is noteworthy. This process benefits the scholars who submit their work, either by finding a venue for its expression or from receiving constructive criticism for its refinement. It also benefits those of us participating in the review process, as we learn from the submissions and reaffirm among ourselves the standards for scholarly competence. Ideally, it ultimately benefits the reading audience who enjoy the final products. In this way, both the process and products of review benefit the community of scholars.

Networking with Peers

When I began attending my first state conference, I was newly returned to the state, and although I found a number of former faculty and graduate students from my alma mater involved, I also got to meet people who I would not have otherwise encountered. That’s a bit sad considering we live and work in the same state. But the virtue of a state association is that you do get to know the people in your neighborhood, relatively speaking, and you get to know their programs and their institutions by extension. Moreover, you get to interact with people who are at dissimilar kinds of institutions: people who work at community colleges, private four-year colleges, large state schools, non-profits, and others. They all may know and love communication, but many are working with it in different contexts, which brings an even wider appreciation of the applicability of the phenomena we study.

There is also the virtue of having and utilizing connections in the field when one needs them and being of help to others when they need you. I’ve called upon my OCA connections to help me as guest lecturers on topics I’m presenting in class, and I’ve been able to help others by serving as an outside reviewer on promotion committees, all due to the connections I was able to establish

through our state association. No one advances in the profession without some form of collaboration with one's peers, and the state association is one vital venue in meeting and developing relationships with those fellow professionals.

Developing Leadership Skills

More broadly than their much larger counterparts, state associations make available opportunities to develop one's leadership skills. Indeed, because of the demands of keeping the association running, its viability depends on successive waves of volunteers to step up and assume leadership positions. The value of this kind of professional development extends beyond its vital contribution to the association itself. Such experience is essential preparation for those seeking even larger responsibilities, such as offices at the regional, national, or international level. It also comes back into the mix in one's home institution, as one grows into leading others as a part of one's "day job."

As a former officer in OCA, I was always amazed at how much energy we got from people who were giving of their time and expertise to the betterment of the association without being directly compensated financially for their contribution. Because we operate on such a modest budget, we could never hope to compensate them for the value of the time and talent that they invested in the association's affairs, be that conference planning or journal editing or serving on the Executive Committee. The payoff I found in my own experience was in the way such leadership helped to develop me as a professional and prepared me for future leadership opportunities. The skills I learned in managing volunteers have proven to be valuable in managing contracted employees, as both want to feel valued and affirmed for their contributions to the enterprise.

Recognizing Accomplishments

State associations also possess an ability to recognize professional accomplishments at a more prestigious level than one's home institution can. Certainly, one's home institution can

acknowledge accomplishments in research, teaching and service, but there is something particularly meaningful in having peers from across the state recognize a job well done. During my tenure as an officer of OCA, we expanded the slate of awards to further recognize accomplishments in the craft of teaching. It wasn't that we needed to attract more teaching professionals to the association, though. It just seemed like the kind of thing we'd want to do and affirm the good works being done by so many of our members. Teaching is, in my opinion, the most intrinsically rewarding job one can have; the state association has the ability to make those rewards more extrinsic by spotlighting our state's best efforts. This benefits not only the individual recipient but also the wider discipline, which can point to examples of accomplishment and excellence for administrators and peers in other disciplines.

Enculturating Students

State associations are a convenient vehicle for enculturating our most promising students into the discipline. Being able to have students bring their best work before an external audience and show them that such work is valued by academics greater than an "N" of one is a welcomed opportunity for those of us who want to encourage the next generation of scholars, teachers, and professionals to pursue the discipline further. It also helps for them to see the variety of work being conducted across the discipline and to ascertain a wider scope on the field and the opportunities within. Taking undergraduates to conference seems to be particularly valuable, especially when they can meet with representatives of graduate programs, size up those programs, and consider applying to them for further graduate study. The association also affords undergraduate and graduate student representatives the opportunity to serve on its governing board, thus developing their leadership skills as well.

I've always admired colleagues who have packed groups of students into a van and carted them across the country to conferences. The beauty of the state association is that travel to and from the conference is typically much shorter—and less expensive a project, opening access to larger numbers of talented

students than not. Nothing has been more satisfying to me as a professional than to see students who we nurtured through our undergraduate program following in our footsteps and enter the professorate, and our state associations are an important venue for making those introductions possible. (Dr. Laura Russell of Denison University, one of my former students—and an OCA attendee in her formative years, recently made me especially proud when she joined the OCA Executive Committee.)

Providing a Low Cost/Low Stress Alternative

Participating in the state association is of course, not only a less expensive prospect for students but for faculty and professionals as well. Quite frankly, all of the virtues listed heretofore can be derived from a regional, national or international association to one degree or another, but those larger organizations come with heftier costs, brought on by their own expansive overhead and sizeable travel costs to and from their convening sites. As travel budgets for academics stagnate or shrink, the sheer value of the state association is a virtue unmatched by its sibling organizations.

State associations also offer a degree of intimacy that larger organizations lack. At the OCA conference we have a tradition where following the keynote all registered attendees sit down for lunch together. It's a wonderful moment to gather as a community of thinkers, break bread, and conduct the business of the association. For those who express frustration with the overwhelming nature of conferences with thousands of attendees, the comparatively smaller OCA event with hundreds feels accessible and welcoming in a way that more expansive events cannot.

And I like that. I like feeling part of a community and not lost in the crowd. Of course, I understand the prestige associated with attending national or international events, but I believe good things happen on the local stage, too. The discipline is well served when we support our state associations. A strong state association is an indicator of the vitality of the discipline within the state, and those institutions participating in its activities are praiseworthy

stewards, living into the sage adage, “Think globally, act locally.” As the small engines of the discipline, state associations do their part to advance scholarship, provide networking opportunities, develop leadership skills, recognize accomplishments, and enculturate students, all within a low cost/low stress context.

Given these virtues, I have to ask, “You’re going, aren’t you?”

A Postscript towards the 100th Annual Meeting

Those who heed that invitation contribute to sustaining OCA as a vital organization. While higher education continues to change in myriad ways, from the shifting reliance on adjunct instructors to the rise of online institutions, I believe that there will continue to be a desire among those individuals who teach, research, and practice communication to connect with others who share their craft. In my experience, few people are as successful going it alone as those who go forward with the companionship of others. If that understanding is borne out, then OCA will continue to be relevant for the next 20 years—and beyond.

While the need for an organization like OCA is likely to persist, its actual relevance will depend upon the continued investment its membership places into it. I have seen OCA thrive in recent times because of the time, talent, and sheer creativity devoted to it by hard-working professionals. Having a membership in general and leadership in particular who are putting forth the effort to be visible, to be adaptive, and to be professional will make all the difference in the continuation and growth of the association.

Personally, I always believed that OCA had the potential to be the most vibrant state communication association in the nation. Not only does the state boast an inordinate number of institutions of higher education, but they are of inordinate quality. Moreover, the state’s size, infrastructure, and geography make it conducive to more frequent meeting and collaboration opportunities. I would love to see OCA live in to that potential as it realizes its 100th annual meeting.

At that historic meeting OCA might be able to lay claim to a membership of several hundred, with an annual meeting spanning multiple days of high quality programming, and a slate of online publications that highlight the works of seasoned and emerging scholars. It might also boast a membership that welcomes more professional communicators whose interests in the field has extended beyond their formal education. It might also be even more of the premiere showcase for graduate programs and a hub of recruitment for undergraduate attendees. And more. . .

But that vision can only be realized with continued participation and investment by thoughtful professionals across the state and beyond. I am heartened that the prospects of that vision being realized is more likely than not at this time. I continue to see new members and new leadership step up to the opportunities that the association presents. So long as OCA continues to be a welcoming—rather than an exclusive—association, the potential for it to not only survive but thrive to and beyond its 100th meeting is bright indeed.