

Untapped Potential: The Role of Faculty and State Associations in Developing the Undergraduate Student Researcher

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It begins like a rite of passage every semester: junior students transition from freshman/sophomore level courses to the more important and rigorous junior/senior level courses. These are the primary courses that are preparing them for their targeted future in their desired area of Communication (broadcasting, social media, journalism, etc.). At Youngstown State University, one of the first courses students tend to take is our Designing Communication Research class. This course will set the stage for how students perform in their other junior/senior level courses, as they learn principles of conducting research that they will use when constructing research papers in other Communication courses, as well as in other facets of their education (Rodrick & Dickmeyer, 2002).

While students take this course with some trepidation (because who wants to learn about methodologies and qualitative/quantitative research techniques), I've found a few strategies to encourage students to embrace Communication Research. One primary goal when teaching this course is to get our undergraduate students to present their research within a supportive, professional environment. State associations, and in our case, the Ohio Communication Association (OCA), offer the perfect opportunity for undergraduate students to experience a blend of both scholarship and professionalism. This article examines four ways I have taught Communication Research and mentored undergraduate students to become valued members of the Ohio Communication Association.

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Group Learning

The first step begins with the approach I take when teaching the Communication Research class. I remember sitting in a Communication Research class as an undergraduate wondering if I would ever grasp the material. I had heard from those who had taken the course previously that it was difficult to comprehend in terms of things like statistics and various terminologies. When I started teaching the course, I could see that same look of confusion on my students' faces. The comprehension of important principles, like quantitative vs. qualitative research, was poor. As a result, I decided to teach the class in a format where students conduct research projects in groups, and thus, could also learn various principles from and with one another.

The successful group project papers are then submitted to OCA to be reviewed, hopefully accepted, and then presented at the annual conference. By doing this as a group assignment, it allows several students to experience the opportunity to share their research with others. The students would be presenting their GROUP papers, and thus there was less pressure on them as opposed to presenting individual papers. In fact, many of them agreed to submit and participate because their peers in their group had also agreed to participate—they wanted that experience. I am not sure that would have been the case had I asked them to complete and submit an individual paper. Furthermore, OCA has Top Undergraduate Paper awards that feature cash prizes, providing more incentives for students to conduct research and submit them to the state associations. Lastly, as Nelson (2000) states, there are several categories that constitute undergraduate communication research, from scholarship of discovery that is geared towards peer-reviewed publications to application scholarship that examines new technologies, uses, or methods. Sometimes students have a hard time conceiving topics that are considered Communication research. However, there are several avenues these groups can take to explore research topics they may find appealing, yet also contribute to the field of Communication as a whole. This leads me to my next point, getting students to see value in their contribution to the field of Communication.

Valuable Contributions

A second way I encourage students is by highlighting the contributions they could make to the field of Communication. In the Communication Research course I teach, the group project assignment is entitled “Let’s Get Published.” Students are taught to research topics that are unique in some aspect, where they would be advancing new knowledge or perspectives and not continuing to research topics that have been exhausted. Too often my students choose to study topics that have been studied to death (If I have to hear one more “Use of Facebook to establish relationships” research projects, I am going to scream!). Therefore, by challenging students to go above and beyond what has already been researched, we are also encouraging them to leave their imprint on the field of Communication. Rodrick and Dickmeyer (2002) argue that having undergraduate students engage in Communication research can be beneficial on multiple levels, from the student, to the faculty mentor, to the department and university, and ultimately to the field being investigated. As their faculty mentor, I want my students to take what they learn in Communication Research and apply it to the research papers they conduct in other courses, like Media Relations Campaigns and Organizational Culture courses. The benefit for OCA comes in the diversity of paper submissions and the subjects they cover. That takes me to the third step—getting students to OCA!

Showcasing Student Research

The third step is to inspire my students to take their research project and present it on a grand scale. Students are used to presenting their research among their peers in the classroom because these are individuals whom they have taken multiple courses with and with whom they have developed a comfort level. Therefore, presenting on a “grand scale” means they are taking their research and presenting it in front of people they have never met before, both established professionals and graduate and undergraduate peers at other colleges and universities in the state. For most undergraduate students, this could be a very uncomfortable and intimidating experience.

OCA, through their leadership, has done a good job of advocating for undergraduate research. The call for proposals encourages submissions from faculty, graduate and undergraduate students. When I think back to when I started with OCA in 2002, it was an organization of mostly faculty and graduate students. After serving as President from 2004-06, I started thinking about who was missing from the association I spent the last four years serving. Clearly, we had not done a good job of getting undergraduate students involved. Since then, OCA has grown as an organization because of the involvement of undergraduate students from colleges and universities like Youngstown State University, Ashland University, and Findlay University. As a result, OCA can offer information tables at their annual conference to better inform undergraduate students about graduate programs in the field of Communication at universities from across the state. Therefore, by offering an opportunity to present research projects that they have worked hard on, and by offering an opportunity to interact with peers from other universities, and finally by offering an opportunity for undergraduate students to learn about graduate school options, OCA has provided a supportive climate for undergraduate students to get involved.

Furthermore, due to funding issues at most colleges and universities, undergraduate students are more likely to present research papers at a state or regional conference than they are at a national conference. My transfer to Youngstown State University in 2007 provided me an opportunity to get my students involved in submitting their research papers to OCA. Because OCA offers a low-cost option for undergraduate students to present at a professional conference, some institutions like Youngstown State University are willing to pay the full cost for students who are presenting their research. This cost includes hotel rooms, gas, meals, and conference fees. I encourage my colleagues at other institutions, within Ohio and across the United States, to speak with campus administration regarding funding undergraduate student travel to present research at local conferences. It stimulates the college student experience, gets students excited about engaging in research and contributing to their field of study, and from a university standpoint, it provides exposure for the university and the type of students they attract.

In 2012, I took several students to the annual Ohio Communication Association conference at Kent State University. There were four undergraduate group papers submitted and accepted. Two of those papers were nominees for Top Undergraduate Communication Research Paper in the state of Ohio. At the conference, it was announced that one of those papers won the Top Paper award. The students who won Top Undergraduate Communication Research Paper offered positive exposure for Youngstown State University and the Department of Communication, providing an excellent example that could be used when recruiting future students to our program/institution. My colleagues and peers everywhere should strive to use this type of undergraduate research opportunity as a means of gaining university support for student travel to state association conferences. This will help lead more undergraduate students to enter graduate school.

Transitioning to Graduate School

Finally, if we nurture undergraduate students to embrace research, scholarship, and presenting at professional conferences, then it leads to more of our undergraduate students choosing graduate school as a viable option moving forward post-graduation. Rodrick & Dickmeyer (2002) state that one benefit of a renewed focus on undergraduate communication research “is that it provides an opportunity to produce students who are more prepared for major graduate programs” (p. 49). At Youngstown State University, our Master’s program is in its infancy, yet a large number of our graduate students were homegrown through our undergraduate program. In my Communication Research class, I discuss graduate school because I want students to embrace research at the undergraduate level if they wish to succeed at the graduate level. By providing that reality check at the undergraduate level and providing opportunities to develop an excitement for Communication Research within OCA, my hope is to see that excitement extended to the graduate level.

In closing, undergraduate Communication students provide a valuable voice for our discipline, one that needs to be guided and encouraged. Too often, our state Communication

associations model the National Communication Association, tailoring itself towards professionals in the field and graduate students who are on the verge of transitioning into professionals. The cost to attend the national conference naturally tends to place undergraduate students on the outside looking in. Therefore, state associations provide the perfect low-cost structure and opportunity to allow undergraduate contributions to our discipline to be spotlighted. Furthermore, the individual and institutional exposure state associations provide offers an opportunity to bridge the gap between the undergraduate and graduate school experience. Each step mentioned in this article highlights the fact that oftentimes undergraduate communication research begins with faculty-student mentoring, which helps to produce scholarly research, which state associations can provide an outlet for that research to be shared with an appropriate audience (Hakim, 2000; Rodrick & Dickmeyer, 2002). It's time for both faculty and state associations to step up to ensure a more well-rounded and rewarding undergraduate research experience.

References

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