

Writing a Section Officers' Handbook

By Lara Pudwell

How do new officers in your Section learn their jobs? When I joined the Indiana Section executive board I was given a one-sentence description of what the vice chair does. I gathered from watching my predecessors that there was more to the job than that, but I had to piece it together over the course of my term. On the other hand, every agenda during my year as vice chair included “officer handbook”. The idea of an officer handbook had been floated in our Section for at least a decade but seemed to keep getting put off. I decided at the start of my 2018-2019 term as chair that my first goal was to make sure the handbook got written so that future officers would have more to work with than I had.

What goes in an officer handbook? Each officer and each standing committee submitted a written description of their role. Now, when we recruit new officers to positions, we have a clear way to communicate what the job entails. Similarly, we have a shared tool to convey things we’ve learned to new officers, especially since the handbook includes instructions that it should be reviewed and updated annually!

Once word got around that this handbook was coming together, many other Section documents appeared. For example, one previous chair had drawn a map of Indiana with past meeting locations charted along with their attendance. This visual helps us select future meeting locations in parts of the state that haven’t hosted Indiana MAA recently. Another previous Section chair had organized 15 years of plenary speaker information in one document including the times of day the plenary lectures were scheduled; this list helps plan consistent meeting schedules without having to look up old programs one document at a time. For years, the Section has hosted an annual problem-solving competition for undergraduates. Having the handbook motivated our Student Activities Coordinator to generate a document of advice on how to write good problems for the competition. The whole executive board teamed up to update a local meeting host checklist and draft a brand new “outreach strategy” chapter.

One of the most crucial chapters of the handbook had been in the works for years. While serving as Section secretary from 2008-2013, Andy Rich had generated a document of executive board decisions from his minutes, organized by topic rather than chronologically. When the handbook officially came together during summer 2018, Andy graciously spent the summer updating his document to run up through 2018. Now, when new officers ponder a motion and wonder about past precedent, we have a convenient reference, even when knowledgeable past officers aren’t present.

Maybe your Section already has a handbook; if so, fantastic! If not, you might consider compiling one. In the past, the Indiana Section had officers who devoted time to a variety of Section leadership roles before becoming chair. As departmental expectations of faculty have evolved, those candidates are less likely to exist. Instead, current faculty often balance service to the MAA with a variety of other professional expectations. While they are eager to

contribute, they may need a fixed window of commitment as an officer and have less time to learn the ropes. This handbook helps ease that learning process while introducing a diverse and enthusiastic set of new leaders to the Section. While compiling the first draft of the handbook took time, updating it in the future will be much simpler. In short, the new Indiana Section handbook is a great written repository of institutional memory that we expect to serve our Section well for years to come.

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