

## Speaking at Universities – How to *Connect* with Students

“The Ambassador” is a monthly communiqué designed to provide tips on best practices in effective communications. Next month, look for guidelines on *Educating the Reporter: When the journalist doesn't know the ABCs of Accounting.*

Brought to you by the



and CommCore  
Consulting Group

"How many of you want someone to tell you what to do for the rest of your life?!" This is the compelling start to a speech Steve Milam gives to students at the university level. Steve is on the Board of Directors for the Oklahoma Society of CPAs and he recognizes what's required to grab the attention of young people. Most would agree that this opening line has impact because it's a bit startling. But, a communications counselor will tell you that it does something else, something perhaps more important. It establishes a connection with the students. In one sentence he is telling the students that he knows what it's like to be in their shoes. People have been telling these 19- and 20-year-olds what to do their entire lives and this opener begs a question they ask themselves everyday: "How much longer will this go on?!"

Understanding accounting and the profession of a CPA goes much deeper and has so many more facets than simply the opportunity for the freedom that it allows. But, good presenters know what raises and sustains the interest of a college student. Once you "hook" them, you can deliver the messages you came to deliver. Keep in mind, though, that this attention span is short and you have to revive it from time to time throughout your talk – in fact, prior to each message – in order to keep their attention.

So, how do you prepare for all of the different types of talks you may be asked to give and still make and sustain that connection to students? After all, there are many different speeches and lectures you may be asked to deliver, here are a few:

- Guest lectures to accounting majors
- Speeches to graduate students
- Career days
- Commencement speeches

### The One “Must Have” Ingredient in All Speeches to Students: Inspiration

When preparing for any speech, many professionals make the mistake that their objective is merely to inform the audience. This is classic one-way communications. Whereas, erudite leaders and communicators know that no speech is worth giving if it is not intended to *move* an audience to action. That's two-way communication. Every speech, without exception, should be designed to compel the audience to change their behavior, not just learn something new. You are not just informing small business owners about the latest debt products, you are urging them to adjust investments to be smarter with their balance sheets. You are not just providing tips to young people in a town hall meeting on how to save money for tuition, healthcare and retirement, but persuading them to “Feed

The Pig!”

The very same is true for university students with one very important addition: You also **MUST** provide inspiration. Inspiration is the act or power to effect not just the intellect, but also the emotions. Students are emotional like everyone else. They can sit through a purely intellectual speech, remember some of it and take notes on the rest. But, it is the emotional element of the speech that compels them to change their behavior.

Now, to be clear, what I’m suggesting need not result in a dramatic display on the part of the presenter. It, instead, requires the presenter to simply consider if the content of a speech speaks to the heart and soul as well as the brain. At least a few times during the speech, a good presenter will tap into what students feel about strongly. If prepared well, those times will come about before or during the delivery of a main or key message you want them to remember.

### **Guest Lectures to Accounting Majors**

This can easily be likened to a presentation delivered by a specialist to other - albeit junior - specialists. (Engineers to junior engineers. Physicians to interns. A CIO to information technology managers). And, the same mistake is often made. Since there is an assumed technical threshold, the presenter may head right to the lingo of accounting, i.e. the “inside baseball” understood by these students who concentrate on the subject. Even an audience with a higher sophistication in your technical expertise still requires a context or a larger view. And, that expanded view must be presented early and in laymen’s terms in order for the presenter to be more memorable and effective. Lecturers often think that since these students have already chosen this concentration, they require no inspiration. They do. In order to continue down this path and sustain a thirst for higher knowledge in accounting, these students need to see the “face” of the profession, and that is you. Further, they need to hear from you what keeps you going and what kept your interest when you were their age.

### **Speeches to Graduate Students**

When you speak to graduate students, the above suggestions will work, with one additional proviso: Graduate students may think that they have already chosen their path and that their career will fall in line. They need to know from you that life doesn’t work that way. They need to understand that accounting is not a stagnant discipline. The profession offers diversity and a multitude of concentrations, not just one. Early on in the CPA Ambassador Program we commented to a member that he had his hands in many different aspects of his community’s financial planning and well being. Without missing a beat he explained that this is the lifestyle he required and accounting not only didn’t present an obstacle, but provided the pathways. Regardless of your speech subject matter, this is a critical message you must convey to students seeking advanced degrees.

### **Career Days**

Students hear a lot of noise on Career Day. It is not just a result of the cavernous student center. These young folks are bombarded with information from dozens of professionals in a couple of hours. Five minutes before hearing from you, they may have spoken with a representative of the healthcare profession, an Army sergeant, an advertising executive, a Wall Street broker or a social worker. Beyond pointing out that accounting applies to all these careers, you must be concise and choose high impact words and emotions. The least compelling

question you might ask a prospective accounting major is, "Tell me what you want to know about accounting?" Most don't know what they don't know. Remember that every interaction is a presentation that is worthy of a compelling open and a chance to get to know your audience. Keep their attention and offer a call to action...such as visiting a website or calling you with the answer to a question.

### **Commencement Speeches**

Needless to say, inspiration is perhaps most important here. I have read through some of the best commencement speeches ever delivered and there are a few things that most have in common. First, they begin and end with the students. Why they are here and what they are asked to do from here. Second, most seem to have elements of humor and humility which are critical showcases for young men and women about to enter the "real world." And, lastly, they are all truly and overtly inspirational. A good commencement speech is one that is soul-to-souls.

Here are a couple of recent examples:

Jon Stewart, the popular comedian and host of the immensely successful program "The Daily Show" said in his address to the 2004 graduating class at the College of William & Mary after a brief opener: "But today isn't about how my presence here devalues this fine institution. It is about you, the graduates. I'm honored to be here to congratulate you today." Here, in three brief sentences, Stewart strikes cords of humor, humility and honor. These elements are necessary and it takes smart wordsmithing to deliver it so concisely.

When Steve Jobs, CEO of Apple Computer and of Pixar Animation Studios, addressed the students at Stanford University in June, 2005, he said: "I am honored to be with you today at your commencement from one of the finest universities in the world. I never graduated from college. Truth be told, this is the closest I've ever gotten to a college graduation. Today I want to tell you three stories from my life. That's it. No big deal. Just three stories." Indeed this opening remark has the necessary elements I mentioned before, but it does something else that I believe is important when addressing anxious and excited 22 year olds: It offers a clear glimpse of what they are going to hear and assures them it will be brief. This is critical, as one of the most common arguments from the students is that "I didn't know where he was going with this..."

### **Remember to Woo Them!**

Speaking to students requires a somewhat different approach to preparing. In addition to all that holds true for speech preparation: tailoring your message points, editing down content and repeated rehearsal, you must consider what you can say that will *inspire*. Anthony Storr, a noted biographer of historical figures once said: "Inspiration cannot be willed, though it can be wooed." So, woo them!

---

Have a suggestion on a topic? E-mail Carmen Encarnacion at [cencarnacion@aicpa.org](mailto:cencarnacion@aicpa.org)

***ISO Certified***

0133H-312

© Copyright 2007