

## 90 speeches in eight hours



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**D**uring each of the three separate weeks of the NALC Leadership Academy, the curriculum is built around a specific theme or focus. In Week 1, the focus is on labor history and teaching, while the theme in Week 3 is about planning for the future and “paying it forward.” Both of these weeks present challenges and opportunities for the students to learn new concepts, try new approaches and build new skills. But probably no week proves more daunting, more stressful and more rewarding than Week 2.

The theme for Week 2 is “communication,” which sounds innocent enough, but most of the prior 450 Academy students would likely attest

that it was the week they both loved and feared the most. In addition to attending classes on grammar and writing, the students get to enjoy having their writing assignments individually critiqued for grammatical errors, style and content. Nothing says, “You’ve got some work to do” like a paper covered in red ink. But that’s the easy part of the week. The biggest challenge, and the one that creates the highest levels of anxiety for most students, comes on Thursday afternoon and evening in the form of public speaking.

According to most studies done on the subject, public speaking ranks at the top of things people fear most, affecting approximately 75 percent of adults surveyed. It ranks higher than fear of flying, sickness, financial problems and heights. In fact, for the majority of people, the fear of public speaking is greater than the fear of death, which prompted Jerry Seinfeld to remark: “This means to the average person, if you have to go to a funeral, you’re better off in the casket than doing the eulogy.” And I’m sure that going into Week 2, many Leadership Academy students would agree. However, I must add that watching the students face this fear head-on and triumphing over it is one of my favorite experiences as an instructor at the Academy.

**It is inspiring to watch the growth that occurs in each student over each of the three weeklong sessions, but nothing compares to what happens in Week 2.** While we instructors might like to claim a little credit for this transformation, in reality we know we actually have little to do with it. We give them a brief class about how to organize a speech and a slightly longer class on public-speaking techniques, but that’s about it. The rest of their growth comes from their raw courage in facing this fear and from the support they receive from their classmates.

The students are each tasked to give three two-minute speeches, each one on a different topic. One speech is given to a small group of six, the second to the entire class, and the third following a banquet held that evening attended by the resident national officers. The students aren’t given a lot of time to prepare. Wednesday afternoon they have an hour or two to finishing organizing what they want to say and then they spend the evening practicing, editing and polishing their three speeches in front of a group of their classmates. There is little for us instructors to do at this point, other than stay out of the way. The students take charge of their learning as they encourage, critique and offer suggestions to each other. These sessions often last past midnight as the groups stay until each student feels ready to face the next day.

The fun begins right after lunch on Thursday when the 30 members of the class are divided into five groups and assemble in their breakout rooms for their first speech. Instructors are assigned to each group to keep things moving. Following each speech, the instructors and students provide oral as well as written feedback to the speaker about content and presentation.

As soon as the first speeches are completed, the class reassembles in the large room and the second speeches begin. Again following each student’s talk, the instructors and students provide feedback, pointing out the strong parts of the speech as well as what could be improved. Nearly all students show dramatic improvement over their earlier effort. But that’s nothing compared to what happens next.

After the second speeches are finished, the students have a few minutes to run to their rooms to freshen up and change clothes for the banquet. To create a realistic “after-dinner” atmosphere, the final speeches begin about the time dessert is served. One after another, the speakers bravely approach the podium, knowing that their classmates, the instructors, and their national officers are rooting for their success. Each speech is followed by loud applause, cheers and high-fives. As the Academy students would tell you, each speaker is filled with a well-earned sense of relief and accomplishment. For many, it’s the high point for the week, if not the whole Academy.

There is one other thing that happens that day that is almost magical. As the students are facing their fears with their classmates and forging ahead through 90 speeches in eight hours, they are being bonded to each other and to their union in ways that, for most, will last the rest of their lives. They may not recall what they talked about, they may not remember who their instructors were, but they will be connected to their leadership class forever.

**Applications for the 2014 Leadership Academy will be posted on the NALC website beginning in early June.**