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# Go Back to School in Style: Presenting Programs on College Campuses!

By Dave Kelly



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Presenting to college and university students is fun. It is also a great way to expand your business into an arena with thousands of speaking opportunities per year. In my 20+ years of training and speaking on campus-

es, here are a few keys I have learned:

**1) Provide information in a fun and interesting way.** College students spend 12 to 20 hours per week in class, mostly being lectured to. The faculty has a lot of material to cover over the course of a quarter or semester, and many times creativity is a victim of expediency. If you present the information with energy and enthusiasm, you will be able to keep the students engaged, focused and involved in your program.

**2) Entertainment value is important.** Use your talents and entertainment abilities to set yourself apart during the students' classroom experience. I make my presentations more captivating by integrating my theater background into my presentation style, and by using humor. I intersperse these techniques throughout my programs to keep the students' attention and make their experience more enjoyable.

**3) Allow the students to share their ideas and thoughts.** The collegiate environment fosters creative thought. Allow the students to share their ideas either to the group as a whole or in smaller interactive settings. Promote active idea-sharing and brainstorming—with no judgments! Students are tested, evaluated, and graded on a constant basis. Make your presentation space an "encouragement zone" where each participant can flourish.

**4) Make your programs interactive.** Get the students up and moving. This will differentiate you from the usual classroom experience and will keep their blood flowing. Even if your presentation, or the space, does not allow for the movement, at least get the students up, stretching, dancing, and/or meeting and talking with other students. Don't worry if you don't know how to dance. Play upbeat music and the students will take it from there!

**5) Get students on stage.** Incorporate role-playing, improvisation, idea-sharing, or some other interactive tool and invite students from the audience to come up on stage with you. You will have many "hams" in the audience who love to get up in front of their friends.

It's fine to let the students get out of their comfort zone. Just make sure you do it in a safe manner. You do not want to open them up to ridicule or ostracism, or do anything that may have a negative psychological affect on them.

If you have the students working on ideas or projects in small groups, then allow enough time to let every group report on the work they have done. Students love to share their ideas, so let them talk (even if they repeat things from other groups)! Make sure that everyone participates in the small group discussions and don't allow a few dominant personalities to control all of the discussion.

**6) Use student facilitators.** If you are leading a retreat or a series of educational sessions, consider appointing student facilitators to lead your small groups. This can promote greater participation by a variety of people in the group activities, help to control the "dominator", and keep the group on task. Ask your host, or the student activities director, to identify some campus leaders who can take on these roles. Request that the student facilitators arrive at your program early so you can outline their responsibilities and brief them on your expectations. Reward them at the end of the session for being such great helpers.

**7) Use stories and examples that connect.** Students enjoy learning from people who have "been there and done that" and can relate those experiences to what they are going through. Family stories, relational situations, and especially your own collegiate career can provide a wealth of material for your presentations. If you are older, share experiences that your children or grandchildren have had on campus—but they must relate to your topic.

**8) Have give-aways.** College students love free stuff! Books, t-shirts, Frisbees, bumper stickers, and more make for great souvenirs of your presentation. It is also a super way to get students out of their seats and shouting, cheering, or volunteering to participate in your program (and a way to highlight products you have for sale).

**9) Be real.** It's OK to be who you are. The students will appreciate that and recognize your unique qualities. It's better to admit that you don't know who Nelly or Snoop Dogg are, how to "krump", or that you have never seen an episode of "The O.C." or "Laguna Beach" than it would be phony when relating to your audience. Use your "geek-ness" to your advantage and let the students tell you about the things they enjoy.

**10) Play.** Make sure you are having fun and that you participate with the students. If you ask them to jump around, then you do it, too. Don't stand off in a corner or act like a wallflower. It's OK to be silly. The students will

respect and enjoy you more if you do.

A few thoughts on what to do when you arrive on campus:

- As soon as you arrive on campus, get in touch with your campus contact. Once they know you have safely arrived, it will ease their mind and allow them to focus on copying the handouts, blowing up balloons, picking up pizzas, or whatever else they need to do to make the event a success.
- Go straight to the venue to check out the logistics and room set-up. You need to make sure you are comfortable in whatever room you have been assigned.
- Check all of the equipment to make sure you can work with the set-up. Many schools use student technicians who might be working as part of a class or their major. Their experience can range from novice to expert. Be patient with the novice and learn from the expert.
- Cordon off the back rows of seats. Many students tend to go straight to these seats because that is what they are used to doing in order to avoid being called on in class. It is much easier to designate up-front seating than to ask students to move once they have settled in.
- Greet the students at the door as they arrive or while they are searching for a seat. This will help warm them up and make you appear friendlier. Engage them in conversation and get to know them by listening to what they have to say.

Some Gentle Reminders:

- Never consume alcohol before your presentation. Even one drink will affect your breath and could turn off your contact or your audience. Furthermore, don't go out for drinks after your presentation with the students.
- Never use sexual innuendo. This can be a very sensitive area. You don't want to make the students uncomfortable.
- Never, never, ever refer to the human beings who occupy college campuses as "kids". They are students. They are nearly all of legal age and should be treated as adults. If you show the students respect, they will return the favor.

Presenting at colleges and universities is rewarding. If you are a veteran speaker, the students will help to keep you young. If you are new to the speaking industry, campuses are a great place to get started. Have fun!

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