

## *Oral Communications*

Students overwhelmingly report that their public speaking improves over the course of their Hamilton career,<sup>1</sup> and that much of this is due simply to their exposure to it in one or two classes at Hamilton, and their lack of prior exposure to public speaking. From what students report, oral communication skills have a steep learning curve. Students with little or no experience giving presentations reported improving dramatically after only a few experiences of presenting material to an audience.

### A. Students who benefit.

By almost every student account, the one or two classes that they had that required presentations<sup>2</sup> improved their skills greatly, and most notably improved their comfort and confidence in front of a group. “Jack” for example emphasized how he gained confidence at speaking publicly from having to do it in classes.

I: Okay. Do you think that in any way your speaking ability has improved at Hamilton – either in public speaking, talking in classes, handling yourself in interviews such as this, or any other respect? And if so, can you describe in detail how you think that improvement occurred?

S: I would say definitely.

I: Okay.

S: Well I guess I don't know if it's just me getting older and maturing, or I mean I guess like that's one aspect; but it seems like every class I've taken, we had to do some like group project we had to present to the class, which helped me get over nerves. But I mean it seems every class always emphasizes participation of class. As well as my organization, you know, it's just given me an opportunity to talk to large groups of people and present my ideas. So I think I've definitely become more confident in speaking. [Jack 04-05]

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<sup>1</sup> 83% say their speaking improved (typically by either giving presentations or talks, interviewing, or leading class discussions), while 17% say their public speaking has not improved or has become worse.

<sup>2</sup> The majority of students reported only having one or two classes during their Hamilton careers that required presentations.

Repeatedly, students commented on how their “public speaking has improved just from pure exposure to it” [Jade 04-05], and that their improvement was not necessarily intentional, nor were they even always aware of it.

I: Do you think your speaking ability has improved since you’ve been here?

S: I would say so, yeah.

I: How so?

S: I mean I haven’t taken any, you know, like Oral Comm classes or anything; but I think just through, probably through a lot of my classes being really small and being largely discussion-based that I’ve become more comfortable, you know, speaking to other people or in front of other people... I don’t feel like I intentionally did something to specifically improve my, you know, speaking skills. I guess it’s just something that comes with practice and with experience. [Jenny 04-05]

Students’ confidence in their speaking skills, through experience and familiarity, grows over time, and seems to be a large part of how students progress up the learning curve of oral communications. Similar to the development of writing skills, speaking skills initially benefit best from exposure and review, which provides the student with not only a sense of what to expect, but also how to improve on their performance.

A number of students suggested that Hamilton should have some kind of oral communications requirements, because, they felt, many other students were not being exposed to the same benefits from giving presentations and talks that they were.

S: I think they should have a mandatory 100-level public speaking class that all freshman students have to take, or all sophomore students have to take. And maybe, instead of having gym credit, you know; maybe two gym credits in one, a 2.5 credit for rhetoric and communication, maybe having a student take that before, you know, they graduate because I think it’s such an important skill, and I think it’s great that Hamilton emphasizes it, but I really don’t think they do it well. [Jean Claude 04-05]

S: But I really wish there was more opportunity to speak. I think it's funny. I work in the Admissions Office and they always say like how at Hamilton you learn how to write and speak really well. And I wish we had speaking intensive classes like we have writing intensives. And I think that's still like peoples' big fear, like just getting up and speaking in front of people. It's sometimes fun too when you've worked on something really hard in class, like I sometimes wish I could get up and talk about it or give a report on it. [Susan 04-05]

And some students wished they themselves had had more exposure to public speaking while at Hamilton.

S: I don't think that we get enough practice with like public speaking, like we don't really have to do group presentations very much in classes. And so I think that could be improved... I think it's equally important that you be able to like speak in public and express your ideas verbally, which I'm not the best at. I'm much better at writing... Many encourage class participation, but especially if you're in the larger lecture classes, I mean you can definitely get by with not having to ever talk. So I don't think classes really do much for speaking. [Katherine 04-05]

Frequently students identified themselves as "poor public speakers," but unlike many students who self-identify as poor at quantitative skills, those who thought they were poor speakers believed they could get better with practice and training. This point is significant, and we will return to it later.

S: I know that I'm really bad at it, and I needed to do a lot of practice. But I didn't take a lot of courses where I had to do a lot of presentation skills, which I do suggest that they, they actually, that Hamilton should probably change that. I think presentation skills are really essential to like, to you know, like work and just, and handling like the rest of your life. [Li Wei 04-05]

S: I mean I'm not the best public speaker. I know kids who are juniors and sophomores who are taking public speaking courses who could run circles around me in a debate, but I would say that I've improved. [Jonathan 04-05]

Most of the improvements students reported did not come from their taking Oral Communications classes (because most hadn't), but instead come from their experiences leading discussions or giving presentations in class (which most students reported they had had). For most students, these experiences were few in number, but significantly bettered their confidence, comfort, and communication abilities in front of groups. The improvements students noted above came quickly to them, and while they may not have had opportunities to refine their communication skills at a higher level, most students seem to have taken the large first step to becoming better oral communicators, due primarily to those classes where presentations are required.

Part of the reason why students reported such a steep improvement in their speaking skills has to do with the nature of public speaking itself. Students are much more emotionally involved in giving a speech than writing a paper, simply because they are being immediately and visibly evaluated by their peers and their professor(s) while giving it, whereas when handing in a paper, students can detach themselves from it until they receive feedback, and even then they receive feedback just from their professors. The possibility of public embarrassment, especially in front of peers, adds considerable weight to presentations, and puts much more than the student's grade on the line. Some students who are concerned about their presentation put a great deal of work into preparing for it and improve, and some students who are not concerned about it suffer the immediate judgment of their peers and professors, and typically learn a valuable lesson from their experience as well, and subsequently work towards improvement. Hence both students who reported putting in a lot of time into their presentations, *and* students who admitted under-preparing for them reported improving in their public speaking skills. The power of immediate feedback, especially from peers, is evident in the successes of the oral communications program at Hamilton, and suggests that other academic-skill programs at Hamilton might benefit from similar structuring.

B. Students who don't benefit.

While the majority of students reported that their oral communication skills improved, around 20% said they did not, citing one of two reasons. Either 1) they were already strong public speakers upon entering Hamilton (and improvement required more intensive study than for those with no experience speaking to groups), or 2) they were never were required to present in their classes. “Jen” expressed both reasons, saying:

S: I think it’s just, I mean the classes that I’ve taken, for the most part, don’t really require that much speaking. And I did a lot of drama in high school, so I had enough speaking abilities that like unless I was a Communications major or an English major or somewhere where I had to be talking to other students a lot, that I just am not asked to do that. So I’ve pretty much stayed at the same level. [Jen 04-05]

Students also noted how public speaking is greatly underemphasized in comparison to writing:

I: Have you had to take any public speaking courses or had to give any presentations or do interviews that would require you to utilize your speaking skills?

S: Not really. The sophomore seminar we previously mentioned did have a presentation. That was some ridiculous proportion of your grade. But other than that, I’ve not had anything, I mean no real serious presentations. Like I don’t think my skills have improved as greatly as say my writing skills have improved. I mean I don’t think, but I mean I’ve never been required to take those classes, and I never have; so I don’t, whereas, you know, I’ve taken a lot of writing intensive classes. So the skill hasn’t necessarily improved at the same rate. [Jose 04-05]

S: But I don’t think that my speaking ability has significantly improved at all, or become less, after going here because I think that the emphasis has always has been more on writing. Technically my writing has improved, but I can’t say that my speech has. [Jane Smith 04-05]

While it is encouraging to note that 80% of students believe their public speaking skills have improved since coming to Hamilton, that 20% report otherwise is distressing

because it appears to be a relatively simple matter to give all students the initial formative speaking experience that makes such a difference to their abilities.

### C. Further improving oral communications at Hamilton.

If the college wanted to, it could raise the average quality of students' oral communications skills dramatically by, in some way, ensuring that every student took at least one or two classes that required presentations. This might take the form of some kind of speaking-intensive program similar to the writing-intensive program in which students are required to take a set number of the intensive classes in order to fulfill their degree requirements, or it might simply consist of encouraging professors to include presentations in more of their classes. As many students reported that their sophomore seminars provided them with their first exposure to giving presentations, perhaps that program (with some modifications) is best suited as the vehicle for providing that initial skill-building. As the seminar program is already in place, and is struggling to solidify its goals and structure itself in a way that clearly benefits all students, centering the program around a strong public speaking requirement might not only benefit public speaking at Hamilton, but also revitalize the sophomore seminars program in the students' eyes. Regardless of how the college might go about this, it is clear that, in regards to students' oral communication skills, a little experience goes a long way.

Gauging just how much the college should encourage or require oral communications requires a comparative evaluation of oral communications with the other general academic skills the college seeks to instill: namely, quantitative and writing skills. The current weight given to these are clear enough in the curriculum requirements – writing is emphasized more than oral communications, and the average student leaves Hamilton having done far more work improving his/her writing than his/her oral communication skills. Meanwhile, while writing intensives are required for all students, quantitative-oriented classes, like oral communication classes, are not, and many students leave Hamilton having little experience with either.