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Chapter 10

Repositioning Power
An Alternate Approach to Podium Design

Kathryn H. Anthony

Introduction

The podium plays a subtle but significant role whenever someone speaks in a public forum. It establishes distance between the speaker and the audience, conveys a position of power, and acts as a support for the presenter. This chapter examines the podium and its history, concentrating on how podium design empowers or disempowers the speaker. It analyzes how a presenter is perceived when a mismatch occurs between the podium design and the size of the speaker, and how certain body types are advantaged over others. The case study features a women-led design team at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign that developed, constructed, and installed a set of innovative, gender-friendly, universal design podiums to help remedy this design bias.

In large lecture halls, students are more likely to be found in the audience rather than on the stage or at the podium. Have you ever thought about what it feels like to be standing behind that podium? Perched behind the podium, professors have a panoramic vantage point from which they can see their audience. For most male speakers of average size, podia work well. Male presenters can be seen from about the waist up, refer to their laptop computer, maintain eye contact with the audience, gesture with their hands, and brace themselves with both arms against the podium. When the podium design fits well with the presenter’s body, and the proportional relationship between the two is correct, the audience may not even notice either at all; they blend together as one. In situations like these, the podium recedes into the background. Yet when a mismatch occurs between the podium design and the speaker’s size, serious problems ensue.

A wide variety of podia can be found at colleges and universities, convention centers, city halls, houses of worship, and elsewhere—anywhere one gives a public address before an audience.

Some definitions are in order. A podium (podia for plural) is the raised platform, pedestal, or rostrum where speakers deliver presentations, while the
A lectern is a raised, slightly slanted stand where speakers rest their notes or laptop computer. Speakers stand on a podium and stand behind or at a lectern. These terms are often used interchangeably, and their meaning has become synonymous. In this chapter, the term podium refers both to podium and lectern.

Pulpits serve as podia in houses of worship, raising ministers above the congregation to highlight their leadership role. They appear almost hanging in midair, putting them in a position of otherworldliness. Musical conductors stand on podia so that all members of their orchestra can see them. Recipients of prizes and awards are invited to podia to be acknowledged for their accomplishments.

In modern sport, media use the expression "to podium" as a verb, signifying the chances of particular athletes to win in their respective sports disciplines. Winners of Olympic competitions are called to three different types of victory podia for the gold, silver, and bronze medals. Each Winter and Summer host of the Olympic Games produces its own stylized version of the Olympic podium: round, square, rectangular, or octagonal with a color and design concept from its Organizing Committee of the Olympic Games.

But that was not always the case. Starting with the 1896 Athens Olympics, where the King of Greece presented awards to Olympic winners at the closing ceremonies of the Games, to Amsterdam in 1928, where Queen Wilhelmina did
the same, Olympic athletes received their awards in a physical setting located below their dignitary and heads-of-state presenters.

That process was reversed in the 1932 Lake Placid Olympic Winter Games and the Los Angeles Summer Games, such that winning athletes ascended before dignitary presenters. Synchronous with this shift in physical location was a shift in who presented the awards to athletes. No longer did kings, queens, crown princes, and prince consorts present the medals. Instead, Olympic officials had this special honor. Then-International Olympic Committee President Count Henri de Baillet-Latour first ordered organizers to create a raised platform where medals could be awarded to athletes. In 1930, Baillet-Latour had a seat in the first row of the first British Empire Games, now Commonwealth Games, held in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada. There he saw the podium used for a medal protocol that gave him the idea for the Olympics.¹

Podium design in political debates can prove to be highly controversial. For the U.S. presidential debates, televised before a live audience, political staffers spar over space to cast their candidates in the most favorable light. Presidential candidates have alternated among different formats: standing behind a podium, seated at the same table facing the moderator, or a more informal town-hall or talk-show style, where each moves across the stage. Candidates of shorter stature often stand on hidden step stools or phone books to match the height of their opponents. The perceived height of candidates is an important factor in how viewers perceive them, as evidence shows that voters prefer their leaders to be tall. In about two-thirds of all U.S. presidential elections, the taller candidate wins the popular vote.² And after the election, winners are perceived as taller than before, while losers are perceived as shorter.³
Theoretical Perspectives on Podium Design

From a purely utilitarian perspective, the podium serves as a support space, providing speakers with a place upon which to rest their hands. For those who fear public speaking, a common scenario, the podium gives them something to hang onto. It is a place to store water, cough drops, and other emergency supplies for speakers who may lose their voice, feel faint, or start running out of steam. At times like these, the podium and its hidden storage compartments come to the rescue. It serves as both a physical and a psychological aid, a type of security blanket.

From a communications perspective, podia make symbolic social statements, placing the speaker in a dominant position. They convey the message: "Stop, look, listen. I have something important to say."

A complex interaction occurs between the style of the podium and the substance of the speaker’s content. The podium design may enable or interfere with communications. At worst, poor podium design may prove so distracting that it can undermine the speaker’s message altogether.

Consider the format used in popular “TED Talks, Ideas Worth Spreading,” where talks are limited to 18 minutes or less and podia are prohibited. This informal talk-show atmosphere allows a speaker’s expertise to stand on its own. Their bodies are visible from head to toe. Absent is the hierarchical nature of the podium that places speakers in a privileged position. Not all speakers are comfortable with this format, but for those who are, it can be a highly effective means of communication.

From an environment-behavior perspective, the podium can be viewed as a type of public territory, much like a seat on a bus or airplane. During the time that you use it, you appropriate the space as your own. You delineate the space with your belongings, be it laptop, notes, or bag. You are highly aware of any territorial invasion that may occur. For instance, it would be taboo if, during the middle of class, a student places his or her backpack atop the professor’s podium or a small child runs up to the podium and starts tugging at the professor’s leg. Once you depart, you surrender your territory and it reverts to the public; the next speaker, whoever that may be.

The podium can be viewed as a temporary symbol of self. Much like the clothes he or she wears and the bag he or she carries, podia are part of a package that defines the speaker—albeit for a short period of time—when all eyes are focused on her or him as the center of attention.

Many podia are specially engraved with presidential seals, university seals, or other emblems that represent that institution. By standing behind that symbol, speakers are perceived as officials who represent that institution.

Visiting dignitaries, commencement speakers, and award recipients are photographed or recorded on video at the podium. Commemorative photos appear in print and digital media, far outlasting the presentations themselves.

The podium provides distance between the speaker and the audience, what Edward Hall, in his classic work The Hidden Dimension, referred to as "public-interpersonal distance." Compared to the "intimate" (less than 18 inches), "personal" (18 inches—four feet), and "social distances" (four feet—12 feet), the "public distance" (12 feet or more) is the farthest.4
How well does the typical podium work from the point of view of diversity—specifically gender, body type, or age? For a vast array of individuals, the podium serves as a highly visible example of an inadequate product design, one that is widely used but that works poorly. While we select the watch we wear, the cell phone we use, or the car we drive that makes us feel most comfortable, we rarely have a choice over which podium to use. And yet, we are bonded and branded with that podium whenever we speak before an audience.

From a gender perspective, the podium is a socially constructed, gendered space. Although an unintended consequence, its design accentuates the speaker’s gender and body size, often leading to disparate perceptions of men and women, with women being viewed in a less favorable light. It calls attention to a speaker’s gender in a way that would not occur had it been properly designed to match her or his proportions. Compared to tall or average-sized men, many women behind the podium may both feel and be perceived as marginalized.

From an accessibility perspective, podia are dysfunctional. Speakers who use wheelchairs can neither see nor be seen from behind the podium. The same is true for young children. The typical podium is not friendly to underrepresented persons, hence a poor example of designing for diversity.

A large body of studies has demonstrated that students tend to be harsher in their evaluations of women professors compared to those of their male counterparts. In many academic disciplines, women are subjected to inhospitable situations, what researchers Bernice Sandler and Roberta Hall first coined as the term, a “chilly climate.” Podia designs that cast women speakers in a negative light create an even chillier climate.

**Empowerment and Disempowerment at the Podium**

No matter what their design, podia convey a position of power. Much of that sensation is from the speaker being situated in an elevated position, with height being a symbol of power, authority, and control.

Public venues feature a variety of podium styles. The podium may be mounted on wheels, making it easy to move around horizontally. Yet the typical podium is a fixed height.

Many podia that house complex audio-video systems are mammoth in size and scale, almost like motherboards on ships. Such behemoth multimedia consoles appear best when accompanied by an oversized body type; behind these, a thin, average-sized male may appear diminished. Technology has driven the size and shape of these podia, rather than body-conscious design.

Yet for many speakers, a highly noticeable, uncomfortable mismatch occurs where the relationship between the speaker and podium is out of proportion. For shorter male speakers, for women speakers of average to below-average height, and for speakers with physical disabilities who use wheelchairs or require other assistive devices, this mismatch can be highly problematic. Some speakers may require stepstools. Presenters relying on their laptops may not be able to see much above the top of their screens, forcing
them to crane their necks for an occasional glimpse of the audience. Speakers with wheelchairs often have to dispense with the lectern altogether, either setting up a makeshift presentation area from which they can access their laptop computer, or placing their computer or notes on their lap. For many speakers, mammoth podiums serve as a barrier that gets in their way, and they have given up on them altogether.

Equally important is the audience's view. When a female speaker of small stature is dwarfed behind a tall podium, her credibility is diminished. When speaking behind a laptop or in a dimly lit space, she becomes even less visible, and her appearance much less flattering. With most of her body hidden behind the podium, and when her laptop is opened for her to review the screen, only a tiny portion of her face can be seen. When a disembodied head is all they see, audiences may find it difficult to take her seriously.

With increasing numbers of women in leadership positions, the podium problem is magnified. Imagine how many women schoolteachers, principals, superintendents, city officials, legislators, and experts in their profession are disadvantaged by the design of podiums every day.

During religious services, members of the congregation often participate at the podium for special readings or announcements. This is often the case at special services like weddings, funerals, or coming-of-age ceremonies, such as

![Figure 10.3](image.png)

When a shorter female speaker is hidden behind a tall podium, her credibility is diminished.
bar mitzvahs. Shorter women and children struggle on tiptoe to reach the microphone and, in many cases, they cannot be heard. If they are nervous to begin with, their discomfort at the podium merely makes matters worse.

In situations like these, when a mismatch occurs, the podium design calls attention to itself. It is almost as if the speaker is wearing a set of clothes that do not fit, like a woman with a size-5 shoe wearing a size-12 men’s basketball shoe. The podium distracts from whatever message speakers are trying to convey. Instead, it sends a different message: “You don’t belong here, this wasn’t made to fit you, and we don’t care.”

And even if special secret measures are taken to help shorter speakers feel more comfortable at the podium, sometimes they backfire. Years ago, I was at an international conference where I had requested a stepstool at the podium. It was placed in an inconspicuous location. The speaker who spoke right before me, a good friend and colleague taller than I am, had no need for it. We had each taken months to prepare our presentations and had just traveled halfway around the globe. As my colleague approached the podium, she failed to see the stepstool, tripped right over it, and plunged onto the stage. Although she was not injured, she was shaken and embarrassed. After she finished her talk, she received a special round of applause. Yet after all that preparation, this was not the way she wanted to be remembered: as the speaker who fell onto the stage. And I, too, felt indirectly responsible for her accident. Had it not been for my need for a stepstool, she never would have fallen.
Designing a Gender-Friendly, Universal Design Podium

The case study presented here provides a gender-friendly experience to all campus speakers. A special podium was initiated, designed, developed, and constructed at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. A team of women drove the design.

What sparked this project? In the early 2000s, we observed then-Chancellor of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Nancy Cantor, at numerous speaking engagements. Described in the Chronicle of Higher Education as "a five-foot-tall dynamo with short brown hair and an outsized growl of a laugh" and "a high-energy style," Chancellor Cantor, a distinguished social psychologist, was all too often seen overshadowed by a tall podium. Her relatively short tenure as Chancellor (2001–2004), where she was a steadfast champion of diversity on campus, was rocked by her opposition to Chief Illiniwek, the university's longtime mascot, on the grounds that it was racist and demeaning to Native Americans. The Board of Trustees refused to back her and she soon left to become President of Syracuse University (2004–2013) and, later, Chancellor of Rutgers University (2013–present). During the time that Chancellor Cantor was on our campus, she
had appointed me to serve as Chair of the Chancellor’s Committee on the Status of Women (2002–2004). Later (2009–2011), my colleague, Professor Gale Summerfield, and I served as Co-Chairs of the Provost’s Gender Equity Council. During that time, we initiated the design, development, production, installation, and use of a gender-friendly, universally designed podium.

Many women serving on our Provost’s Gender Equity Council could relate to the uncomfortable situation faced by Chancellor Cantor. Several of us routinely delivered classes and invited lectures from compromised positions behind inappropriately sized podia that were designed for tall men, or behind extremely complex, mammoth podia with dashboards full of controls that seemed to rival those found in a 747 aircraft. As Summerfield put it, “In organizing lectures and symposia on campus, I often had speakers who were too short to be seen over the podium. ... Anyone outside that average range, whether male or female, could benefit from the new podium.”

Our Gender Equity Council design team was comprised of our two Co-Chairs, our administrative assistant and program coordinator, Anita Kaiser, and our then-graduate student secretary, Kelly Sullivan, from the School of Architecture. Together we worked closely with staff members of the university’s Mill Shop, Mark Bucus, Mill Foreman, and Brad Ward. They were enthusiastic about our proposal and contributed technical ideas about how to realize our goals.

The design of the project took just a few months. The project began in January and was unveiled in March. We began by conducting an Internet-based search for existing adjustable podia or lecterns. What we found appeared more like a simple music stand or was aesthetically unappealing, not the type of design on which we wanted our university funds spent.

Nonetheless, we discovered an existing operating mechanism to enable a podium to be adjusted with the push of a button. We needed a design where that push-button mechanism could be installed. At the same time, we decided that, rather than contract out the work, we preferred to make use of our local, on-campus talent. Kaiser and Sullivan contacted our university’s Mill Shop to see if the staff there could help. They responded by telling us “design it and we can build it for you.” And so we did.

Our design team made several visits to the Mill Shop warehouse in order to oversee the design and construction process. During one of our more entertaining visits, a 6’8” employee from the university Mill Shop and I (5’2”) tested out the podium and were pleased to find that it worked just fine for both of us.

We brought a mockup on-site to one of our Gender Equity Council meetings so that all council members could try it out and provide their feedback. We also transported the mockup to the School of Architecture, where we tested it out with a number of different individuals of diverse shapes and sizes. One of them, our tallest architecture faculty member, stands over 6’6” tall. Another architecture colleague uses a wheelchair. As he put it, “This is certainly something I’d like to see after spending many years presenting with my nose resting on various podia,” and he suggested several refinements. We also had an expert from our university’s Disability Resources and Educational Services test the design. She, too, recommended a number of revisions. Others who were involved in critiquing the preliminary design included an architecture faculty
member with expertise in small-scale architecture and furniture design. In order to determine the ideal size for stowing their bags and purses, several women with varying handbag styles tried the podium.

We also explored different kinds of materials. Many podia are constructed with dark-stained oak and appear very heavy and masculine, as if they belong in an attorney’s office or courtroom, a look we sought to avoid. We chose a lighter wood finish, one that could be easily stained to match the décor of the space in which it would be used.

The final design includes the following features:

- push-button operation allowing speakers to raise and lower the podium using two electronic activators
- a microphone
- a flexible light on each side of the podium
- a slide-out for wheelchair access accommodating both left-handed or right-handed speakers
- a power source provided on each side of the podium
- a slide-out cup holder
- space for bag/purse storage
- heavy-duty wheels
- a hidden stool for extra height
- a modesty panel.

Figure 10.6
The podium’s design incorporates several user-friendly features.
Our intention was to keep the design simple in order to accommodate future change in technology. The push-button mechanism allows the podium to be adjusted in height to accommodate speakers ranging in height from 4′2″ to 7′0″, allowing them to speak comfortably and to be seen by a large audience.

The first podium to be constructed was unveiled at the Krannert Center for the Performing Arts, the university’s major performing arts venue, on March 10, 2011, at the same event where several multi-media projects funded by the council were also on display. The event was held in conjunction with Women’s History Month. Hundreds of visitors—students, faculty, administrators, staff, and community members—saw the podium. People of varying shapes, sizes, and physical abilities tried it out. The podium received an enthusiastic reception from all who tried it, including University of Illinois alumna Jean Driscoll, American wheelchair racer who has won 12 medals at the Paralympic Games and the women’s wheelchair division of the Boston Marathon eight times.
Over the span of just a few months after its unveiling, the Provost’s Gender Equity Council funded the design, production, construction, and installation of ten universal design podiums at major venues and key lecture halls at the University of Illinois campus (one venue has two of these podiums). Recommendations from attendees at the Krannert event, with consultation from location representatives, determined the locations.

**Reflection on the Design Process and its Aftermath**

In addition to the unusual gender composition of the design team, another aspect that set this design process apart was its user-driven, not client-driven, approach. That is, the university did not initiate the project. Instead, our Provost’s Gender Equity Council recognized a glaring deficiency on campus and sought to address it with a design solution.

It was one of the first times that the Gender Equity Council produced a tangible product by working closely with members of the university’s Mill Shop. Typically, the council would be conducting campus climate surveys, sponsoring gender-related research, hosting special events, inviting guest speakers to campus, and recommending new policies and procedures.

Yet another unique aspect was the highly diverse, multidisciplinary nature of our Gender Equity Council members, who offered feedback at critical stages of the design process. A wide variety of disciplines were represented on the committee, from philosophy to engineering. Our committee members included diversity of genders, ages, and bodies.

Our graduate student assistant from the School of Architecture played a critical role in helping us to usher the project from design concept to design development to construction. It illustrates the value that architecture faculty and students can add to university committees when financial support is available to spark new design ideas and see projects to fruition.

Summerfield reflected on her experience:

> Sometimes teams are enthusiastic for a few weeks, but people get distracted by other projects and leave the main work to one or two members. However, this was a team where enthusiasm grew at each stage of the project and everyone participated throughout. It was a pleasure to work with the group, especially my co-chair, and was one of the highlights of my career.⁹

One of the first events to use the podium was the 2011 Women and Gender in Global Perspective’s Symposium, Gender Equity in Research and Practice, held at the student union building in the center of campus. The podium worked extremely well in this event, where speakers, alumni from several different countries, ranged from 5’2” to over 6 feet tall. Audience members noted that being able to see the speakers’ faces was helpful and promoted discussion. Several speakers had issues with being too short or too tall for the traditional podium and were delighted to use the new podium. Often they could not imagine any
alternatives to the traditional podium and so they were surprised to see the one we had designed. After a few minutes demonstrating how to use the features of the podium, speakers were eager to try it out themselves and relieved to have a closer connection with the audience. Even for those speakers who preferred to walk around during their presentations, the podium served them well.

Since their installation in 2011, faculty members from across campus, guest speakers, and visiting dignitaries from around the world have spoken at these podia. In 2013, these included U.S. civil rights leader Myrlie Evers and Chairman of the Presidency of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina His Excellency Zeljko Komsic.

Here is some feedback received about the podium from Matthew Ando, Professor and Chair of the Department of Mathematics: "The team ... did a remarkable job designing and building the item. In spite of its many features, it is very attractive and compact, and fits very well into our colloquium room, which is heavily used for classes throughout the day. It will be a real help to our faculty and students." A female colleague from the Math Department noted, "The podium is wonderful. Now I just wish I could bring it from classroom to classroom with me."
Here are some additional reflections from Summerfield:

Working on a committee such as the Gender Equity Council takes time and effort. ... With enthusiastic participants and some resources, this committee was able to accomplish projects, such as the podium, that made it a unique experience. I really liked the podium because it was a real-world project that supported our academic goals and helped women, men, and those in wheelchairs in their presentations. While my focus was on the University of Illinois, the project has potential well beyond our campus.12

Recalling the project, Sullivan said, "I absolutely loved working on that project and working for the council. It was one of the major highlights of grad school for me. I can’t thank you enough for giving me the opportunity."13

Finally, a personal note: At our 2014 School of Architecture commencement ceremonies, I had the special honor of announcing the names of all graduate students receiving their masters degrees. Our ceremony was held in the Foellinger Auditorium, one of the largest auditoriums on campus facing the university’s historic quadrangle. Our commencement speaker was one of our
most highly accomplished architects, Cesar Pelli, alumnus of the class of 1954, who had come to Illinois as a graduate student from Argentina.

For the first time, we used the new podium at our architecture commencement ceremony. I am pleased to report that it was a pleasure to do so. At 5'2", I could still be seen and heard by everyone in the crowd. It was a joyous occasion for all, and I didn’t even need a stepstool.

**Discussion Questions and Explorations**

**Descriptive**

1. Describe an event where you have seen a mismatch between the podium and the speaker’s body size.

**Analytical**

1. Find a U.S. presidential debate on YouTube, including debates amongst primary candidates. Examine how each candidate uses the podium.
2. Stand behind the podium in a large classroom and address the audience for at least one minute. Select two classmates, one taller than you, one shorter than you, to do the same. Take turns watching each from the front, middle, and back rows. What does it feel like for each of you? How visible are you to the audience? Analyze the positive and negative attributes of the podium design.

**Speculative**

1. Find examples of 10 different podia. Speculate on the kinds of messages that these podia send.

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Notes


7 Gale Summerfield, e-mail message to author, September 9, 2014.

8 Carl Lewis, e-mail message to author, February 3, 2011.


10 Matthew Ando, e-mail message to author, September 29, 2011.

11 Alison Ahlgren, e-mail message to Barbara Wilson, October 2, 2011.

12 Gale Summerfield, September 9, 2014.

13 Kelly Sullivan, e-mail message to author, September 11, 2014.