NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY CHICAGO CAMPUS

MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. COMMEMORATION 2026

ORATORICAL CONTEST





Essay Prompt: Reflecting on MLK's words in connection with the Poor People's Campaign in which he outlined the rationale and goals of the struggle for economic equality, describe 2-3 specific ways in which the U.S. has either progressed or fallen short of achieving economic equality and eradicating poverty for low wage, under skilled and immobile labor. What change would you want or need to see to feel that we have advanced MLK's dream of achieving economic equality for all?

Eligibility: The competition is open to all students enrolled in a full-time program at Northwestern University (except PhD students and student athletes). All contestants must be available to participate in the Oratorical Competition on Friday, January 23, 2026, from 12:00 - 1:00 p.m. CST via Zoom.

SUBMISSIONS DUE:

Thursday, January 15, 2026, at 12:00 pm CST

All submissions must be sent electronically in PDF format to community@law.northwestern.edu

Essay Topic

MLK and The Poor People's Campaign
Have We Progressed or Fallen Behind in the Fight for Economic Equality?

In 1967, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (MLK) launched the Poor People's Campaign during a meeting of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Having won the right to vote and dismantled government sanctioned segregation, MLK viewed the campaign as the next chapter in the fight for genuine equality, not just for African Americans but for all Americans affected by economic insecurity. At an SCLC meeting in 1968, he described the campaign as the "beginning of a new co-operation, understanding, and a determination by poor people of all colors and backgrounds to assert and win their right to a decent life and respect for their culture and dignity". The campaign, therefore, focused its attention on demanding policies that would end economic inequality and poverty, including policies that would lead to better jobs, unemployment insurance, a fair minimum wage, and education for poor adults and children.

In the lead up to the 1967 launch of the Poor People's Campaign, MLK wrote a 1966 article for *The Nation* in which he outlined the rationale and goals of the struggle for economic equality. Most notably, MLK wrote the following:

> It is easy to conceive of a plan to raise the minimum wage and thus in a single stroke extract millions of people from poverty. But between the conception and the realization there lies a formidable wall. Someone has been

profiting from the low wages of Negroes. Depressed living standards for Negroes are a structural part of the economy. Certain industries are based upon the supply of low wage, under skilled and immobile nonwhite labor. Hand assembly factories, hospitals, service industries, housework, agriculture operations using itinerant labor, would all suffer shock, if not disaster, if the minimum wage were significantly raised. A hardening of opposition to the satisfaction of Negro needs must be anticipated as the movement presses against financial privilege.

Reflecting on the Poor People's Campaign and MLK's words, describe 2-3 specific ways in which the U.S. has either progressed or fallen short of achieving economic equality and eradicating poverty for low wage, under skilled and immobile labor. What change would you want or need to see to feel that we have advanced MLK's dream of achieving economic equality for all?

Essay Format

1. The essay should be no longer than 1,000 words.
2. The type font must be Calibri, 12 point, double-spaced.
3. The margins must be 1" and text must be fully justified.
4. At the top left-hand corner of your submission, please include your full name, Northwestern email address, Northwestern school/unit affiliation, degree program, anticipated year of graduation.

   Example: Jane Smith, jane.smith@northwestern.edu
   Northwestern Pritzker School of Law, JD '26

Evaluation

The Written Essay

The essay must incorporate the topic and/or answer the essay question. Failure to incorporate the topic and/or answer the essay question will result in points being deducted.

Essays will be evaluated according to four categories: (a) quality, (b) content, (c) organization, and (d) creativity. The maximum number of points each contestant may receive per category is five (5) points, for a maximum of twenty (20) points for the written essay.

a. *Quality:* Well-prepared arguments that are clear and make the essay interesting. Directly addresses the topic and/or answers the essay question.
b. *Content:* The body of the essay is complete: it includes all information needed to persuade readers of the validity of the argument. The argument and its claims are well supported by appropriate data.
c. *Organization:* The essay is structured to aid the reader's attention: it provides a brief overview of what will be covered in the introduction; foreshadows what's coming next; uses bridging between sections; uses backtracking to review what has been covered; and closes by summarizing the main points.
d. *Creativity:* The essay uses original phrases, quotes, and/or analogies to make arguments more persuasive. The argument and its supporting details are creative and/or novel.

Oral Presentation

Finalists will have the opportunity to score an additional ten (10) points for the oratorical presentation of their written essay. The presentation can use any mode of expression that is suitable for an online platform.

Judging

Finalists will be selected by a panel of Judges. Judges will render their final decisions independently of one another and without consulting with other individuals.

Eligibility

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Essay Submission

The essay must be sent electronically in PDF format to community@law.northwestern.edu no later than **12:00 p.m. CST on Thursday, January 15, 2026,** and must meet all criteria outlined above. For questions, contact community@law.northwestern.edu.

Prizes

Students who receive the first, second, and third highest scores based upon their essays and oral presentations will be awarded prizes in the form of scholarships in the amounts listed below.

- First-place: $500
- Second-place: $350
- Third place: $200

This scholarship constitutes financial aid and will be subject to federal regulations. For those students who have accepted full aid, the scholarship will reduce loan assistance, and therefore their debt.