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Schools defend cost, say graduates deserve star presence

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JON CRISPIN/UMASS AMHERST

UMass Amherst paid its commencement speaker for the first time this year, giving \$25,000 to astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson,

along with covering his other expenses.

By Matt Rocheleau

GLOBE STAFF JUNE 04, 2015

College commencement speakers are typically treated as quasi-royalty, the centerpiece of grand graduation gatherings, where they are showered with attention and praise.

But prestige and honorary degrees are not always enough to recruit speakers, prompting some schools to not only cover hotel and travel costs, but to also quietly pay them sizable sums of financial aid.

A Globe survey of more than 60 public and private colleges across the state found that three public campuses — the University of Massachusetts Amherst, the University of Massachusetts Lowell, and Westfield State University — led the way in commencement honorarium spending this spring, as each school forked over between \$25,000 and \$35,000, or amounts totaling more than a year's worth of the tuition and fees they charge students.

Officials at each of the three colleges said the prominent guests helped generate positive publicity and raise money for the schools. The two UMass campuses used privately raised funds to pay speakers' fees; Westfield State spent public dollars.

Many other schools surveyed by the Globe said they typically at least offer to cover hotel and travel costs, but an overwhelming majority said they do not pay commencement speakers, including such elite colleges as Harvard, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Boston College, Tufts, Boston University, Brandeis, and Northeastern.

Suffolk University spokesman John Nucci said the school used to pay for speakers, but stopped the practice years ago. "It's not a prudent use of university resources that are better spent on students," Nucci said.

Spending generously on the speakers, and on other campus events, has sparked criticism at colleges nearby and beyond, amid rising tuition costs, funding cuts, and hefty pay packages for campus executives.

This spring, Westfield State used money it had set aside in its annual budget to pay a \$30,000 fee and to cover the cost of a \$350 hotel room for its speaker, photographer Brandon Stanton.

Stanton has made a name for himself by photographing people walking the streets of New York City and compiling the strangers' portraits and stories in a popular blog and a top-selling book.

During his 14-minute talk May 16, Stanton told Westfield graduates how he stumbled upon his passion for

photography after he lost his job as a bond trader.

“I realized that I had spent the past two years thinking about nothing but money, and at that moment I made a decision that completely transformed my life. . . . ‘I’m going to do something just because I love it,’ ” he recalled.

Reached by e-mail, Stanton said it was his first commencement address, but he speaks at colleges about once a month and charges fees that are determined with the help of a speakers bureau, and in part based on costs he incurs from missing work.

“The fees go toward supporting the blog,” which has no advertisements or sponsors, Stanton wrote. “The blog is entirely funded by books and the few speeches I give.”

Westfield State and its former president Evan Dobbelle recently became embroiled in controversy, investigations, and litigation after it was revealed in a series of Globe stories in 2013 that he had lavishly spent school funds, including more than \$500,000 on two iterations of an annual celebrity speaker series.

The college has discontinued that series, but continues to run a guest lecture series that is budgeted for about \$20,000 annually, campus spokeswoman Molly Watson said.

She said the college believes the price it pays for commencement speakers is worth it.

“Commencement is the final academic ceremony for our undergraduates, many of whom are first-generation college students, and it is a recognition and celebration of their accomplishments,” Watson said.

Still, she said she expects that college leaders will reconsider whether to continue the practice of paying commencement speakers.

UMass Lowell this year paid \$35,000 for three speeches delivered by actor LeVar Burton, who is known for his roles in the television programs “Roots,” “Star Trek: The Next Generation,” and “Reading Rainbow.” The school also paid for Burton’s hotel and travel expenses from California.

Burton spoke at each of the school’s two commencement ceremonies May 16 and gave a talk at the school’s largest annual fund-raising event for student scholarships. The event brought in more than \$500,000 in donations this year, the college said.

“Mr. Burton’s appearance at the event was a key message in its marketing,” said college spokesman Jeffrey Cournoyer. “We also consider commencement — our largest annual event — an affinity event for our newest alumni and their families, so it has ancillary fund-raising benefits.”

During one of his commencement talks, Burton spent 13 minutes invoking advice he said his mother gave him — to “be bold, be fearless in the pursuit of your dreams.”

UMass Amherst paid a commencement speaker for the first time this year, campus officials said. Astrophysicist

Neil deGrasse Tyson received \$25,000 — or nearly \$1,500 per minute — for his 17-minute talk, along with another \$1,235 to cover the projected tax Tyson will owe for that fee and \$1,500 more to cover travel and hotel costs.

“The decision was based on the desire to have a compelling, widely respected public figure address the graduating class at the culminating event of their academic careers at UMass Amherst,” said school spokesman Edward Blaguszewski. “While his speaking engagement was not linked to any campus fund-raising activities . . . [it] resulted in worldwide recognition for UMass Amherst and our graduating class.”

Tyson told graduates on May 8 not to worry any more about their grade point averages and that role models can be overrated.

He concluded, “It is OK to encourage others to pull themselves up by the bootstraps, but if you do, just remember that some people have no boots.”

Officials at Wheelock College said the school pays graduation speakers by donating to a charity of their choice. Emmanuel College said the school sometimes offers an honorarium, typically less than \$5,000.

Some colleges have paid eyebrow-raising amounts.

The University of Houston this year faced a backlash after [the Houston Chronicle](#) revealed the school had agreed to pay actor Matthew McConaughey \$135,000, and cover a private jet and high-end hotel room, for a commencement speech. McConaughey said he will donate the money to his charity.

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