

By Sue Ellen Christian

Gone are the days at most universities when a homegrown speaker – a favorite prof, the college president, a distinguished local alum -- at commencement sufficed. Now, schools jockey for marquee-name speakers and announce them as if they were NBA draft picks.

Why the change? Well, household-name speakers generate more interest (and sometimes controversy), and it gets the university national recognition. A speaker with cache doesn't hurt with donors, and, bottom line, students often demand it.

This spring, with past graduation speakers including Bill Cosby, author Kurt Vonnegut and former German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt (who, by the way, spoke on the subject of Europe in the next fifty years during a whopping 183-minute ceremony), the Class of 2005 at Rice University in Houston bemoaned the choice of one of their *own* professors to speak at commencement this month. "If I had wanted to hear her speak, I could have gone to her class," complained one student in print.

As for the speakers themselves, the reasons to accept appear to be many-fold, from receiving an honorary degree to promoting an agenda; their own.

This season's roster of personal agendas includes attempts to test presidential political waters (Rudy Giuliani at Loyola College in Maryland), to boost poll numbers (President Bush at Calvin College in Michigan), to critique the governor (Warren Beatty at University of California-Berkeley), to show the world you're still standing (ousted Hewlett-Packard CEO Carly Fiorina at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University) or, to prove you can baffle an auditorium-full of people, not just the Committee on Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs (Federal Reserve Board Chairman Alan Greenspan at University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School).

Indeed, not all commencement speeches are created equally.

"People do not ask first and foremost, is that celebrity a good speaker? They are more concerned with celebrity name recognition," says Theo Moll, director of the college and university division for the Keppler Speakers Bureau in Arlington, Va. "Most of the time, when someone is in the public eye, they are a good communicator."

There are rumors that Arnold Schwarzenegger will give the commencement speech at his alma mater, Santa Monica College, in June. If Schwarzenegger does speak, it's still unclear whether he'll use his own words and blast back at fellow actor Beatty or simply read from wife Maria Shriver's latest book -- an expanded version of a high school graduation speech Shriver herself delivered.

The admonition that you get what you pay for doesn't really wash, since there appears to be a wide range of asking prices for speakers with magazine-cover credentials. In-office political figures are restricted in what they can take in terms of honorariums, and some

folks come for the honor of it all and mercifully, because they actually have something worthwhile to say.

Universities are coy about hiring and telling. But if the Washington Speakers Bureau website is any indication, \$15,000-\$25,000 lands former Olympian Mary Lou Retton or former Labor Secretary Robert Reich. More than \$40,000 lands humorist Al Franken or actor and economist Ben Stein, who spoke at Ithaca College this month. Others, including Gen. Colin Powell, are available for an undisclosed price.

Said one agent who handles speakers for commencements, among other educational events, who didn't want to be quoted since clients don't like public talk of fees: "It's hard to put a set dollar amount on the benefit to a school. If a donor with deep pockets is in the audience and is impressed, or to get national media attention with a big speaker -- you can't put a price on that."

So which comes first, the honorary degree or the speaker? Northwestern University in Evanston doesn't pay honorariums, only expenses. Yet Bill Cosby came and received his honorary degree, so did Robert Redford -- though his son did attend the school -- and Sen. John McCain is slated to speak next month.

Rice University doesn't award honorary degrees, "so speakers who come are not lured by the promise of an honorary degree," says a spokesman. Maybe that's why they used one of their own for speaker this year.

For a commencement speech this month, it was President Bush who choose the theologically conservative Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, not the other way around. The private college has stuck to a tradition of inviting speakers from within or close to the university and student surveys indicate they want it to stay that way.

As for the Class of 2005 at Rice University, having heard from one of their own -- Psychology Professor Mikki Hebl -- the Rice student newspaper was compelled to retract its criticism of the choice.

Its editorial stated: "Compared to such gems as the canned speech by comedian Bill Cosby and the superficial one by then-White House Counsel Alberto Gonzales...it was certainly the best commencement address in several years, and we are glad she rose above the mini-mutiny over her selection to stun us silent. "

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SIDEBAR

Some snippets from this season's marquee name commencement speakers:

Warren Beatty at University of California-Berkeley on Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger:

“Of course he can joke that I want to defend the nurses because I'm closer to needing one, and the elderly because I'm nearer to being one, and the blind because I can't see past tax-and-spend liberalism. And then I can joke that he should defend the teachers because he has so much to learn, but finally it's not funny.

Government is not a joke, and despite what he's said, it's not a movie...I'm an opponent of his muscle-bound conservatism with a longer experience in politics than he has, and although I don't want to run for governor, I'd do one helluva lot better job than he's done. “

George Bush at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Mich.:

“I was just telling Laura the other night about what fun it would be to come to Calvin College. I said, you know, Laura, I love being around so many young folks. You know, it gives me a chance to re-live my glory days in academia. (Laughter.) She said, George, that's not exactly how I would describe your college experience.” (More laughter.)

“Our government is encouraging all Americans to make a difference through our faith-based and community initiative... As your generation takes its place in the world, all of you must make this decision: Will you be a spectator, or a citizen? To make a difference in this world, you must be involved.”

Stephen King, author, at University of Maine:

“Stay in Maine....That Maine needs you is something you will hear frequently, because with your new skills, your new education, your youth, your energy, and your enthusiasm, you are a valuable and sought-after commodity. You will be wooed enthusiastically. What you will hear less frequently - and need to hear, I think - is that you need it, as well. If you leave Maine, you'll miss it...So why don't you cut to the chase? Just skip the going-away part and stay here from the beginning?”

Carly Fiorina, former CEO of Hewlett-Packard at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University:

“ The worst thing I could have imagined happened. I lost my job in the most public way possible, and the press had a field day with it all over the world. And guess what? I'm still here. I am at peace and my soul is intact. I could have given it away and the story would be different. But I heard the word of Scripture in my head: ‘What benefit will it be to you if you gain the whole world, but lose your soul?’ ”

Alan Greenspan, chairman, Federal Reserve Board, at the Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania:

“Yet, if even a small fraction of legally binding transactions required adjudication, our

court systems would be swamped into immobility, and a rule of law would be unenforceable.”

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