

Kevin Bacon Earns \$70,000 as Schools Pay Stars to Talk

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Hundreds of University of South Florida screaming students rose as the 56-year-old actor took the stage to discuss philanthropy, social engagement and the pastime he inspired: “Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon.”

“It’s 1994 and I’m just out there minding my own business, making movies and trying to support my family and all of a sudden people start talking to me about this game,” said Bacon, best known for his role as a dancing rebel in the 1984 film “Footloose.”

“It had taken off as this drinking game spreading across campuses, and I thought I was going to be responsible for all this young alcoholism.”

The crowd laughed as Bacon paced in black jeans and a black leather jacket, telling jokes and doing impressions.

Bacon collected \$70,000 for the April lecture at the Tampa campus.

From California to New York, public universities routinely pay fees that exceed four years of tuition for speeches that last little more than an hour. The practice drew scrutiny after University of Nevada at Las Vegas students protested Hillary Clinton’s \$225,000 honorarium in June. A Bloomberg News review of public records at state universities in California, New York and Florida shows a rich market for those with something to say, regardless of traditional academic accomplishment.

“It’s a pretty sad state of affairs when we can’t give scholarships to needy students but we can throw all this money at a celebrity speaker,” said Pablo Eisenberg, a senior fellow at Georgetown University’s McCourt School of Public Policy.

Kirk Out

California’s universities have paid more than \$7.5 million for speeches and performances since 2012, including \$110,000 for singer Tony Bennett and \$75,000 for actor William Shatner.

Florida schools paid more than \$2 million, including \$65,000 for former U.S. Representative Ron Paul, \$63,200 for television interviewer Larry King and \$50,000 for comedian Sarah Silverman.

In the State University of New York system, where only four of the 10 largest schools provided data, speakers took in more than \$182,000 since 2012, including \$55,000 for Olympic speedskater Apolo Ohno.

Such fees “highlight the misdirection that besets our universities,” said David Neidorf, president of Deep Springs College, in Big Pine, California. The school’s 26 students do manual labor on a cattle ranch in the desert, while reading the likes of Shakespeare and Karl Marx.

“Five-figure speaking fees for anyone, let alone celebrities, are an embarrassment to anyone who cares about the moral and intellectual life of universities,” he said in an e-mail.

Pricey Cameo

For all their costs, the speeches are often light on substance.

In 2006, filmmaker Spike Lee collected \$25,000 for a 10-minute commencement talk at Kean University in Union, New Jersey. This year, comedian Darrell Hammond told graduates there about his booze-filled college days in a speech that earned him a similar amount.

In Florida, where the student-activity fees have risen as much as four-fold since 1994, famous speakers have found some of their most lucrative payouts.

Four years of in-state tuition at the University of Florida in Gainesville cost about \$25,000. BuzzFeed founder Jonah Peretti and television personality Bill Nye each earned more than that in \$40,000 speeches to students whose activity fees, charged on top of their tuition, paid the bill.

Business Rookies

Students are often in charge of recruiting speakers and approving compensation. Since most have little experience negotiating contracts, talent agencies that collect a percentage of speaking fees play an outsized role, said Eisenberg.

Schools, agencies and some students say the speakers are a key part of learning.

“It does change lives to see real people on a stage,” said Theo Moll, vice president of the college and university division at Keppler Speakers Bureau in Arlington, Virginia. “There’s also a lot of value in bringing prestige to the university.”

Woodra Keane, a student who runs the University of South Florida’s lecture series, said they are “powerful, inspirational.”

Purchasing Power

Keppler Speakers’ website lists basketball coach Phil Jackson of the New York Knicks, primatologist Jane Goodall and Apple Inc. co-founder Steve Wozniak among college speakers with fees above \$50,000. Goodall earned \$60,000 for her Sept. 9 speech at South Florida.

Meanwhile, the cost of college is rising rapidly.

The price of attending a public university has increased 163 percent since 1994 to an average of about \$15,000 annually, according to federal data. U.S. student-loan debt has tripled in the past decade to more than \$1.1 trillion.

In Florida and elsewhere, student-activity fees -- which cover things like athletics, clubs and speakers -- help drive the increase.

“We have a pretty large budget, so money is rarely a problem,” said Corey Flayman, chairman of the University of Florida’s Accent Speaker’s Bureau, which calls itself the largest student-run speakers group in the U.S.

Activity fees at the school have increased more than 450 percent since 1994, outpacing the 175 percent rise in tuition. For Florida residents, tuition costs about \$3,152 per year. Fees cost \$3,160.

Princeton’s Prestige

The school shelled out \$43,000 for a speech by billionaire Mark Cuban, who owns professional basketball’s Dallas Mavericks, and \$60,000 for Vince Gilligan, who created the television show “Breaking Bad.” The Accent group has also hosted former presidents, U.S. attorneys general and foreign heads of state.

Flayman, a 21-year-old marketing major, said few students complain about cost.

Harvard University, Princeton University and other top-ranking schools rarely charge students or tap endowments to attract speakers. At Oxford University in England, former presidents and foreign leaders accept invitations without compensation.

“We’ve never paid a speaking fee,” said Mayank Banerjee, president of the Oxford Union, the school’s debating society. “We rely on the prestige of the institution.”

U.S. schools that pay are following the model of the corporate world, said Eisenberg. Banks and trade groups pay <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2014-09-16/talk-isn-t-cheap-as-paid-speakers-make-millions-on-mouths> fees as high as \$1.5 million to bring top talent to meetings and conferences.

Mouthing Words

On campus, many speakers reflect on their own time in college and road to success. The speeches can range from comedy routines to serious discussions of current events and often include question-and-answer sessions. John Legend does some singing.

At South Florida, Bacon talked about his charity, sixdegrees.org, which seeks to connect celebrities with other small charities to spread awareness of social issues. Speaking without prepared remarks, he covered topics including his wedding anniversary, the birth of his children, the power of social media and his movie career.

Marie Sheehy, a publicist for the talent agency that represents Bacon, declined to comment.

The actor opened by downplaying his oratorical skills.

“I’m much better with other people’s questions,” he said. “And better when I’m not the one writing the lines.”

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