

There's more than honor in honorary degrees

SOME WHO HAVE AN HONORARY DEGREE

Some are altruistic. But they also help to curry favor, lure speakers.

By Christina Gostomski
Of The Morning Call

Singer Peter Yarrow of Peter, Paul & Mary fame received one this year. So did novelist Judy Blume, author Maya Angelou and former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright.

The University of South Carolina gave one to President Bush, Georgetown University conferred one on his



Arlen Specter
... Muhlenberg



Arthur Taylor
... Fordham



Madeleine Albright
... Smith



President Bush
... S. Carolina



Laura Bush
... Georgetown



Bill Cosby
... Yale

wife, Laura, and Bill Cosby added at least six to his collection, including one from Yale University.

Honorary degrees, college

officials say, are allotted to people — both famous and little-known — who have made significant contributions to the campus or society.

But truth be told, the awards are not altogether altruistic. Over the years, schools have come to use honorary degrees for a num-

ber of purposes — some to curry favor with philanthropists or politicians, some to persuade a speaker to deliver the commencement address for free.

And in the spirit of college competition, others use the degrees as a way to attract big names and grab the publicity and bragging rights that accompany them.

"It says, 'Look at these people who are willing to accept a degree from this institution,'" said Tom Ingram, president of the Association of Governing Boards of

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Honorary degrees can get school noticed

Universities and Colleges, which represents college trustees. Trustees usually participate in selecting honorary degree recipients.

"There are two primary reasons" for giving the degrees, Ingram said. "One, to call attention to the institution and its purposes ... And two, they are philanthropically motivated. They are given in the hope that someone who has done well financially will think of the school as somewhere to invest in the future."

Honorary degrees date to Colonial times, when Harvard University bestowed one on Gen. George Washington after his Continental Army forced the British to evacuate Boston in 1776.

Today, most colleges and universities, including all of the four-year institutions in

this area except Penn State Lehigh Valley, confer at least one honorary degree annually. This spring, Muhlenberg College and Lehigh University handed out the most — four awards apiece.

When it comes to their reasons for giving the degrees, college officials tend to wax poetic.

"Honorary degree recipients — people with vision, imagination, commitment and deep love for their neighbors and fellow citizens — in measures large and small, silent or well known, make our community and our world better places for all of us," Lehigh spokesman Andrew Stanten said.

Jodi Solomon of the Jodi Solomon Speakers Bureau in Boston gives another view. She said many colleges give honorary degrees to speakers in lieu of speaking fees, which can cost up to tens of thousands of dollars.

Speakers usually like some sort of payment, Solomon said, but an honorary degree "allows them to have some flexibility" in their charges.

Although the piece of paper isn't a resume-maker and is good for little more than an ego boost, even celebrities

like the recognition.

"Can you take it out and get a job? No," said Michael Baer, senior vice president of the American Council on Education. "But the people who receive them feel very honored."

That's good for colleges, because one of their top priorities for commencement speakers is name recognition, Solomon said.

One reason for that is students want a speaker to whom they can relate. Another is schools can channel star power into publicity.

When columnist George Will spoke at Lafayette College in 2000 and PBS news anchor Jim Lehrer spoke there in 2002, The Associated Press covered their remarks.

Video clips of Cosby's 1996 commencement speech at Lafayette and 1995 speech at Muhlenberg were picked up by television stations across the country.

And after Lafayette's 2000 commencement, Will mentioned the Easton college in his syndicated column.

"There was tremendous exposure through that," spokesman Roger Clow said.

Besides celebrities, local leaders and philanthropists

are constant targets for honorary degrees.

In 1998, Lafayette scored a coup when it landed former President George Bush as a commencement speaker and honorary degree recipient, thanks to connections of college President Arthur Rothkopf, who was deputy secretary of the Department of Transportation under Bush.

This year, Muhlenberg's commencement speaker, U.S. Sen. Arlen Specter, R-Pa., received an honorary degree. Kutztown University gave one to Albert Boscov, chief executive officer of Boscov's Department Store.

Two of Lehigh's honorary degrees went to philanthropists of area nonprofits: Linn Fowler, whose donations include the Fowler Education Center at Lehigh and the Fowler Family Medical Museum at St. Luke's Hospital.

Also, Priscilla Payne Hurd, chairwoman of Moravian College's board of trustees and a patron of area colleges. Buildings at Moravian in Bethlehem and DeSales University in Center Valley are named after Hurd.

Other frequent recipients: the pals and peers of college presidents.

In 2002, Muhlenberg's graduation resembled a CBS Homecoming Day when then-president Arthur Taylor, former president of the network bestowed degrees on television news anchor Bob Schieffer and William J. Small, former network vice president.

This year, Taylor, who was fired from Muhlenberg last summer, received an honorary degree from Fordham University in New York City, where he was a dean for eight years before coming to Allentown.

Also this year, the DeSales president, the Rev. Bernard O'Connor, conferred an honorary degree on Northampton Community College President Robert Kopecek, following a tradition of awarding degrees to fellow presidents.

Ervin J. Rokke, president of Moravian College and Theological Seminary, received an honorary degree from Muhlenberg in 2002, and Rothkopf, Lafayette's president, received one from Lehigh in 2000.

"We wanted to thank a friend who has been a good partner," O'Connor said of Kopecek's award. He said DeSales tries to avoid joining the college rivalry for celebri-

ties, because the school doesn't want the speaker to upstage graduates.

"We don't have speakers who are just hired guns who swoop in, say a few words and get paid," he said.

In addition to financial donations and publicity, honorary degree recipients might aid colleges in other ways. Recipients have helped Muhlenberg students land internships at hospitals and theaters, spokesman Michael Bruckner said. Others have come back to guest-lecture for free.

Ingram said that giving honorary degrees to benefactors and educators is a "way to say thank you and acknowledge a person's contributions" and "encourage others to do so as well."

But not everyone who's offered an honorary degree wants one.

Some years, potential candidates have turned DeSales down, O'Connor said.

"Often times, we're just grateful that someone is willing to put their time aside and come and be honored," he said.

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