

Politics

At time of austerity, 8 universities spent top dollar on Hillary Rodham Clinton speeches



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Hillary Rodham Clinton holds up UConn Huskies outfits given to her by university President Susan Herbst for Clinton's future grandchild at the end of a speaking appearance at the University of Connecticut in Storrs on April 23. (Jessica Hill/AP)

By **Philip Rucker** and **Rosalind S. Helderman** July 2

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At least eight universities, including four public institutions, have paid hundreds of thousands of dollars for Hillary Rodham Clinton to speak on their campuses over the past year, sparking a backlash from some student groups and teachers at a time of austerity in higher education.

In one previously undisclosed transaction, the University of Connecticut — which just [raised tuition by 6.5 percent](#) — paid \$251,250 from a donor fund for Clinton to speak on campus in April. Other examples include [\\$300,000 to speak at the University of California at Los Angeles](#) in March and \$225,000 for a

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speech scheduled for October at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas.

The potential 2016 Democratic presidential candidate also has been paid for speeches at the University at Buffalo, Colgate University and Hamilton College in New York, as well as Simmons College in Boston and the University of Miami in Florida.

Officials at those five schools refused to say what they paid Clinton. But if she earned her standard fee of \$200,000 or more, that would mean she took in at least \$1.8 million in speaking income from universities in the past nine months.

Since stepping down as secretary of state in early 2013, Clinton has given dozens of paid speeches to industry conventions and Wall Street banks. But Clinton's acceptance of high fees for university visits has drawn particularly sharp criticism, with some students and academic officials saying the expenditures are a poor use of funds at a time of steep tuition hikes and budget cuts across higher education.

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Hillary Clinton speaks to UCLA students (0:26)

Former secretary of state Hillary Rodham Clinton was paid \$300,000 to speak to UCLA students and faculty in March. (UCLA)

At UNLV, where officials have agreed to raise tuition by 17 percent over the next four years, student government leaders wrote a letter to Clinton last week asking her to return the planned \$225,000 fee to the university. If she does not, they say, they intend to protest her visit.

“The students are outraged about this,” said Elias Benjelloun, UNLV’s student body president. “When you see reckless spending, it just belittles the sacrifices students are consistently asked to make. I’m not an accountant or economist, so I can’t put a price tag on how much we should be paying her, but I think she should come for free.”

Clinton’s spokesman, Nick Merrill, declined to comment on the UNLV students’ request.

At seven of the eight universities listed, officials said her fee was paid through a lecture series endowment or private donations and not by tapping tuition, student

fees or public dollars. A spokeswoman for Simmons declined to discuss the school's arrangement with Clinton.

Merrill said the UCLA and UNLV fees are dedicated to go to the Bill, Hillary & Chelsea Clinton Foundation, the family's nonprofit group. Merrill said he did not know whether the other six payments went to the foundation. He also could not say whether the Harry Walker Agency, the speaker's bureau that manages Clinton's appearances, received a portion of the fees. Don Walker, the agency's president, did not respond to a request for comment.

Clinton's six-figure campus speaking fees could become a political liability for her in the 2016 campaign given that President Obama and other Democrats have made college affordability a central plank of the party's agenda. Student debt is a signature issue for Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.), whom some liberals would like to see challenge Clinton in a primary. It is also something Clinton has talked about.

"I worry that we're closing the doors to higher education in our own country," Clinton [said in March at a higher-education conference in Texas](#). "This great model that we've had that's meant so much to so many is becoming further and further away from too many."

Clinton will headline the [UNLV Foundation's fundraising gala](#) on Oct. 13 at Bellagio, a luxury hotel and casino, where seats cost \$200 each and tables of 10

sell for between \$3,000 and \$20,000.

Brian Greenspun, a Las Vegas media baron and UNLV trustee, strongly defended Clinton's fee, which he said is expected to be fully covered by proceeds from the dinner. He said her star power will boost foundation donations.

"If you bring the right speakers in, people will come listen to them," Greenspun said. "If you bring the wrong speakers in, no one will show up. The right speakers, in today's capitalistic world, cost more money."

Greenspun, who was Bill Clinton's roommate at Georgetown University, added: "All Hillary's doing is getting paid what she normally gets paid for giving speeches — not much more, not much less — and she does honor to the university by coming."

UNLV and several other schools also hosted the former president for paid speeches in recent years. UCLA paid him \$250,000 in 2012.

Devin Murphy, UCLA's undergraduate student body president, said: "You can't deny that Hillary Clinton has had vast experience in public service to our nation. But I am a bit concerned that \$300,000 was spent for her to come. I am personally a low-income student of color at our university, and I recognize the importance of being fiscally responsible."

In some instances, Clinton's collegiate visits were part of

annual lecture programs endowed by wealthy donors to lure prominent speakers to campus. At Colgate, for instance, the lecture series is funded by Edward Kerschner, who has worked as a [senior executive at financial firms](#) such as UBS, Citigroup and Morgan Stanley Smith Barney.

Kerschner declined to comment but said through spokeswoman Michaela Kron that he plays no role in selecting the speakers or arranging their visits.

The practice is common at many institutions, especially those looking to raise their national prestige, but has drawn criticism in academia.

Harry R. Lewis, a professor and former undergraduate dean at Harvard University who has written critically about priorities in higher-education spending, said speaking fees at Clinton's level amount to "an extravagant form of advertising" for colleges that should focus instead on more scholastic initiatives.

"What makes fees at this level outrageous . . . is that one speaker's fee becomes comparable to what it costs to educate a student for several years," Lewis said. "At the same time you're putting your students into serious debt, as most institutions do; it's an allocation of resources that's very suspect."

One ostensible benefit for students is exposure to a major global figure such as Clinton they might not otherwise get. But Lewis questioned that rationale,

asking, “Isn’t she on TV all the time?”

Anne D. Neal, president of the [American Council of Trustees and Alumni](#), which highlights waste in higher education, said Clinton’s speaking fees raise “real questions about priorities of universities at a time when many of them are crying poor.”

Clinton has spoken on a few campuses for free, including the University of St. Andrews in Scotland, where she [was awarded an honorary degree](#) at a celebration last fall marking the school’s 600th anniversary. Clinton also visited Yale Law School, her alma mater, celebrating her 40th-year reunion and [receiving the prestigious “Award of Merit.”](#)

At the University of Connecticut — a public university about 70 miles northeast of Yale — Clinton’s quarter-million-dollar fee was [underwritten entirely by Edmund Fusco](#), a New Haven-based developer, and his family, said Deb Cunningham, interim vice president for communications at the University of Connecticut Foundation.

“No taxpayer dollars went to support this,” Cunningham said. “The purpose of this fund is really to bring engaging speakers to campus.”

In her speech there, Clinton urged students to be tolerant and open-minded. “Let’s make the millennial generation the participation generation for all of us,” she said. UConn President Susan Herbst gave Clinton,

an expectant grandmother, a pair of onesies modeled after the basketball uniforms of the school's NCAA champion Huskies.

Mark Sargent, student body president at Connecticut, said he believed [Clinton's visit](#) was worth the money.

“Having a political figure with the prestige of Hillary Clinton I think is a positive thing,” Sargent said. But he added, “I can see how some people might be upset with her pricing.”

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