

## The Power of Cool: Celebrity Influence in the Ivory Tower

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### **ABSTRACT**

Since the earliest of times, student orations and student debates served as the main attractions at college and university commencement ceremonies. However, these elements faded over time, and commencement speakers, specifically politicians or academics, eventually replaced student performances. Often, the commencement speaker emphasized the students' rite of passage into adulthood as well as the development of their moral character. During the 1800s, celebrities began to receive invitations to serve as commencement speakers, and since then, celebrity influence has increased greatly in higher education as celebrities now teach classes at colleges and universities. The use of celebrities allows colleges and universities to command the public's attention as members of the public feel as if they have a relationship with these individuals. Using the theoretical framework of parasocial interaction theory, the researcher examines the role of celebrities in higher education, specifically those delivering the keynote commencement addresses and discusses related issues emanating from this seemingly commonplace practice.

**Keywords:** popular culture, celebrity, commencement speakers, graduation

## **DEFINITION OF CELEBRITY**

Hershey Friedman & Linda Friedman (1979) define a celebrity as a person who is different from yet recognizable by the public as a result of that individual's accomplishments. The public's acknowledgement and recognition of the celebrity's achievements and skills set them apart from the regular population. Friedman and Friedman (1979) note that celebrities may include athletes and entertainers, including actors and actresses. Thirty years later, Frank Furedi (2010) suggested that the term "celebrity" had taken a different meaning and had thus evolved over the years. He explained that the concept of celebrity "has become transformed through technological innovations, such as the cinema, popular press, and television. These technologies have turned celebrities into object of mass consumption" (p. 493). He contended that the notion of what makes up a celebrity has evolved through mainstream culture, particularly through popular culture and the media. Further elaborating on his ideas regarding how this term has evolved, Furedi (2010) explains:

The term celebrity is not simply a noun but an adjective that signifies that someone possesses the quality of attracting attention. So we have celebrity chefs, celebrity authors, celebrity fiction, celebrity diets, celebrity workouts, celebrity psychiatrists, celebrity therapists and celebrity doctors. Success in virtually every profession is associated with a celebrity status. Those who command the largest fees in the legal profession are described as celebrity lawyers. (p. 493)

Furedi (2010) maintained that as a result of media coverage and mass consumption, the term celebrity is used to describe any person who is accessible to the public. Hence, those who are in the media are famous, if for no other reason than that they are the product of television and movies. He contended that though these individuals often lack significant accomplishments, they have been manufactured for public consumption via television networks and motion pictures and appear to the public as such.

Although celebrities are famous because they are in the media, Christina Schlecht (2003) maintains that the notion of being a celebrity encompasses other aspects as well. She noted that the title celebrity implies personal characteristics and/or material possessions:

Celebrities are people who enjoy public recognition by a large share of a certain group of people whereas attributes like attractiveness, extraordinary lifestyle are just examples, and specific common characteristics cannot be observed, though it can be said that within a corresponding social group celebrities generally differ from the social norm and enjoy a high degree of public awareness (p. 3)

As Schlecht (2003) explained, people admire celebrities for their attractive appearance, and as Americans value such virtues, these celebrities are highly regarded. Moreover, the public expects these individuals to step out of their lavish residences with every strand of hair in its proper place. Not only are these celebrities self-conscious and hyper-aware of their appearance, American society expects such individuals to live their lives as under a microscope to be observed and analyzed by all. One commonality of the term celebrity, whether used as a noun or an adjective, is that it invariably commands attention. In recent decades, the meaning of celebrity has become more expansive and now is often applied to those who are famous, merely for being so. Furedi wrote, "The ascendancy of the celebrity has been fuelled [fueled] by society's uneasy relationship with the question of authority. Often celebrity provides an alternative source of validation" (p. 493). Most recently in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, the American citizens elected Donald Trump, a reality-television celebrity to serve as president, as opposed to Hillary Clinton, a figure of authority, who had previously served as Secretary of State, a U.S. Senator, and First Lady. Although she had been involved in a Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) investigation concerning her questionable use of a private email server to retain classified documents, she had served as a public servant with a long storied history in state, national,

and international politics. Her previous political positions alone sufficiently qualified her for the position of the presidency. On the other hand, Trump was the antithesis of Clinton as he had previously worked as a businessman and a reality-television star, who thus provided a different authenticity or image from that of the experienced politician to the American people.

### **Celebrity and Higher Education**

Just as American politics have become influenced by celebrities, so have many other aspects of American culture, including that of higher education. In this respect, Furedi (2010) contended that colleges and universities are part of this celebrity culture as well:

And even the ivory tower of higher education has been brought into the frame. Universities are encouraged to embrace this culture and the shameless self-promoter has been rebranded as a celebrity academic. It is evident that celebrity status is in some sense a marker of authority and that its influence transcends the world of day-time cable television and at least indirectly influences all sections of society. (p. 493)

One way in which higher education embraces the concept of celebrity is in its use of celebrities as lecturers. Chris Webber, Kanye West, James Franco, Kal Penn, Spike Lee, Amal Clooney, Oprah Winfrey, Kevin Spacey, Alex Baldwin, Tyra Banks, Angelina Jolie, Matthew McConaughey, and Questlove have all taught classes ranging from sports storytelling to leadership and film subjects, at colleges or universities worldwide (Abell, 2017; Burt, 2015).

Not only do celebrities teach classes, but they are becoming progressively involved in higher educational institutions. Matt Young (2019) has noted that the University of Texas (UT) has taken the use of celebrities a step further, as the university recently named Matthew McConaughey as the Minister of Culture for its new 10,000 seat basketball arena set to open in 2021. Describing the use of celebrities in higher education, Woohyun Yoo (2016) wrote:

Celebrities generate a higher level of awareness and retention because they stimulate people's collective or cultural consciousness. This heightened awareness of celebrities causes people to exhibit greater interest in a celebrity event. More attention to celebrity events or statements results in more retention. (p. 49)

Clearly, UT is striving to garner the public's attention to its status as an institution that has associated itself with a high-profile celebrity. McConaughey's role is to appeal to his fans and create an unforgettable UT atmosphere at the arena (University of Texas, 2018). Spring Sault (2018) explained how this celebrity is experienced in this capacity as "His whole career is based around developing characters that lend their essence to a film, and it's believed that the school is interested in making use of that same concept for their on-campus arena" (para. 2). In establishing a relationship with McConaughey, UT is using the recognition of his name as well as his high energy personality to create an atmosphere that will encourage fans to attend and participate in games played at the new venue. The university is aiming to create a culture in which members of the community attend games frequently at the arena. One way to accomplish this is to increase fan interest, which McConaughey enables UT to do by attracting the attention of a celebrity-obsessed and media-hungry populace. After all, his well-known face and persona appeal to potential attendees, making them curious about his connection with the institution.

However, McConaughey's role is slightly unconventional, even for a celebrity; in higher education, a more traditional role for celebrities is to serve as commencement speakers. In 2018 alone, high school and college graduates listened to the advice of celebrities such as Mindy Kaling, Amal Clooney, Oprah Winfrey, Sterling Brown, and Chadwick Boseman. Other celebrities who have delivered graduation speeches include Jim Cramer, Queen Latifah, Tim Cook, Cynthia Nixon, Jimmy Fallon, Lea Michele, Abby Wombach, Michael Keaton, Chance the Rapper, and Josh Groban (People, 2018; Wolfson, 2018).

## HISTORY OF COMMENCEMENT SPEECHES

Fabry (2016) wrote that politicians have served as commencement speakers since institutions of higher learning have existed. John Winthrop, then governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, attended Harvard's 1642 commencement ceremony, which was the college's first such ceremony. Fabry (2016) continued to write that having politicians address students was an accepted but not a mainstream practice, as many colleges and universities required that their own students participate in these ceremonies. These students would address the audience, including graduates and guests, as they would engage in debates and perform orations in languages, such as Greek, Latin, and Hebrew, that they had studied at the college or university. Phyllis Vines (1976) reported that by the mid 1700s these graduation commencements had become community events, as audiences gathered to hear the students' orations. As commencement ceremonies became more community-based, their importance as a ritual to present the men who were now prepared to serve the community increased.

Explaining the concept of oration, Anthony Grafton (as cited in Fabry, 2016) wrote that this skill was "one of the central skills of the university" (para. 4). In fact, Lord Botetourt, Former Governor of Virginia, encouraged students to graduate by offering them significant monetary awards for orations that they would perform during commencement activities, with the stipulation that only graduating students could compete for these prizes. By offering such rewards, Botetourt hoped to increase the number of graduates, as many students entered college only to withdraw shortly thereafter (Thelin, 2004).

However, Fabry (2016) explained that over time, less emphasis was placed on students learning oratory skills, and as this emphasis faded, so did the role of student orations in the commencement ceremony. He detailed that as an alternative to student orations, institutions would often invite guest speakers, with many of the earliest speakers hailing from the host institution, while many of the other invited speakers were politicians. Rosanna Hertz and Susan Reverby (1995) discussed the fact that there is significant meaning behind an institution's choice of commencement speaker. "The choice of the speaker thus becomes a way an institution signals how it will be sending its graduates into the world and who they should become" (p. 595). In effect, the commencement speaker serves as a role model for its graduating seniors and is generally an individual that graduates hold in esteem and therefore strive to uphold the values emphasized by the commencement speaker. Hertz and Reverby (1995) contended that often members of the clergy were called upon to deliver the commencement speech because they could emphasize morals and impact graduates' ethical and spiritual decisions.

Even as late as the twentieth century, the commencement ceremony was viewed as an occasion that imparted societal expectations to students who had completed all their academic requirements and were graduating from the university. Describing the purpose of a commencement address, Markella Rutherford (2004) explained:

As a central ritual in an institution of key culture importance, the ceremonial discourse of the commencement speech not only calls attention to the occasion itself as a marker of an important life transition—a rite of passage—it also communicates (both explicitly and implicitly) what it means to be a full-fledged and "good" member of adult society. (p. 587)

She went on to explain that the commencement speech includes an "affirmation of values" (p. 587), which serves to influence and shape the values of the graduates of an institution. Rutherford further suggested that part of conveying morals to graduating students consists of commencement speakers explaining that graduates have to make decisions throughout their lives, and this notion of choice became a point of discussion in many commencement speeches that were delivered at the end of the twentieth century. In fact, Rutherford (2004)

performed a content analysis of 171 speeches and found that 112 of these speeches discussed the topic of choice. This trend of including choice in these speeches grew steadily from 11% between 1900 and 1909 to 50% in the 1930-1939 period. Then, after remaining steady for nearly twenty years, the idea of choice became a popular topic once again in many of the speeches delivered from 1960 to 2000. Of the commencement speeches Rutherford (2004) examined, 80% of those delivered in the final decade of the twentieth century incorporated the idea of choice.

As Rutherford (2004) discussed the factors that may account for this increase in the number of speeches concerning choice, she concentrated on the speakers' gender and employment. Her findings suggested that women were twice as likely to include choice in their speeches as their male counterparts. Yet she concluded that employment played little, if any, role in incorporating choice into commencement speeches, although those individuals employed in the legal and business fields were more likely to incorporate the idea of making choices into their speeches. In contrast, academics and celebrities were not the "primary cause" (p. 593) of the increased percentages of incorporating discussions of choice in commencement speeches (Rutherford, 2004).

Fabry (2016) noted that in the 1800s, there were some intervals from the traditional politician-as-commencement speaker, as Harvard invited Virginia Woolf's father, Leslie Stephens, an English author, to serve as the commencement speaker and address the graduating class of 1890. This practice continued becoming more commonplace in the 1900s, as Hertz and Reverby (1995) explained that celebrities were often selected for "their role by their very being, rather than what they actually say" (p. 596). Fabry (2016) noted that this trend of inviting celebrities to serve as commencement speakers became more conventional around the year 2000, when celebrities began serving as commencement speakers just as frequently as traditional or career politicians or scholars.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Celebrities provide a source of credibility to ordinary individuals, and their influence is prevalent in today's society, appearing in various spheres from advertisements to education, television and politics (Furedi, 493). Fabry (2016) suggested that the frequency of celebrities delivering commencement speeches rivaled that of politicians and scholars around the turn of the twenty-first century, and as a result, there's been more exposure than ever to celebrities during commencement ceremonies in the past twenty years. Considering that celebrities are delivering an increasing number of commencement speeches, it becomes clear that the public pays greater attention to events featuring celebrities; hence, people's recall of the message delivered in these speeches is greater when celebrities are involved (Yoo, 2016). With regard to higher education, the audience, which includes the graduates, will be more likely to remember the keynote address at their graduation ceremony, and the public will remember to attend because of the celebrity addressing those in attendance. With that said, a celebrity delivering a commencement speech solicits higher interest from the public and likely results in increased media coverage for institutions of higher education, thus enhancing the competitiveness of the colleges and universities in question.

Considering the large number of individuals who revere celebrities and since celebrities command attention, it is not surprising that the media, as well as the public, pay a higher degree of attention to events that feature celebrities. This is due in large part to the fact that members of the public feel as if they have a relationship with these individuals. In this respect, Donald Horton and Richard Wohl (1956) defined parasocial interaction theory as the relationship that audience members establish from viewing other individuals in the media. They described this resultant relationship as "one-sided, nondialectical, controlled by the performer, and not susceptible of mutual development" (Horton and Wohl, p. 215). A parasocial relationship is a one-way relationship in which the performer, or the speaker for the purpose of this article, is the one who conveys

and controls the given message. Horton and Wohl (1956) mentioned those individuals who work in broadcast media, such as reporters and anchors whose job it is to convey the news, are often the individuals that television views develop and form a relationship with. However, individuals in the media and or celebrities do not attempt to develop, foster, or nurture a reciprocal relationship by any means, as they are unaware that such a relationship exists. Consequently, the feelings, as well as the subsequent relationship, develop solely within the viewer, i.e. the audience or the public.

Even though parasocial relationships typically originate from seeing people in the media, such relationships are also established in face-to-face communication or when a speaker addresses a group of people. Illustrating the nature of these interactions, Horton and Anselm Strauss (1957) explained the following:

Parasocial interaction is governed also by the convention of non-interference; the performer fully controls the course of action. In face-to-face situations a relationship is likely to become parasocial when an audience is so large that a speaker cannot address its members individually; but parasocial interaction is especially favored by mass media which permits enormous audiences, yet each member is addressed in relative privacy, almost as though the speaker was present.” (p. 580)

Although the focus of parasocial interaction tends to be a relationship developed through the media, it can, as Horton and Anselm have explained, focus on large crowds in which the performer or the speaker is unable to interact on an individual or personal basis with each member of a large audience. Yet, despite the large number of individuals present at an event, some of the audience members may perceive the interaction as “immediate, personal, and reciprocal” but the speaker views the interaction in a much different light (Horton and Strauss, 1957, p. 580). In fact, the speaker sees the speech as one delivered to a group of individuals and is applicable to many of those attending the event. Tilo Hartmann (2016) explained that a parasocial relationship is about the audience’s “illusionary feeling of being in a mutual social interaction with another character while actually being in a one-sided non-reciprocal situation...” (p. 131). The audience has a tendency to believe that a relationship exists, although what the audience members experience is their feelings for the speakers while they perform the role that they were asked to perform.

When one applies parasocial interaction theory to a commencement ceremony featuring a celebrity speaker, one sees that the concept is similar. The celebrity speaker, otherwise known as the keynote speaker, is in control of the interaction at a graduation ceremony. As the celebrity addresses a graduating class, congratulating the class and celebrating its accomplishments, members of the audience form a relationship, albeit a superficial one, with the celebrity speaker. The audience members may feel that the speaker is addressing them, almost as in a private setting. In addition, in the case of the speaker being well known, this relationship may already be somewhat developed, as it is likely that the audience has previously seen this individual in the media. Such parasocial interactions serve as the basis of the emerging relationship, and as the audience is exposed to more facets of the celebrity’s character, the relationship develops further. Explaining how parasocial interactions can develop into dominant relationships that affect audiences, William Brown and Benson Fraser (2004) explained that this type of interaction “provides insight into how audience members establish seemingly interpersonal relationships with celebrities and identification explains how these relationships change values, beliefs, and behavior of audience individuals” (p. 105). In other words, parasocial interactions are very influential as those in attendance attempt to identify with the celebrity, acting in similar manners as these celebrities and mimicking their lifestyle.

In assimilating *the* qualities of celebrities, the audience members come to identify with these prominent individuals, hence possibly losing their self-identity and developing qualities that are characteristic of those of the celebrities they are “engaging” with via a parasocial interaction. Brown and Fraser (2004) described the

process of celebrity identification as the means of “adopt[ing] the values, beliefs, or behavior of well-known public figures or popular media characters in order to emulate their perceived image or accentuate their parasocial relations with the celebrity” (p. 105). As these relationships develop, there is a concurrent loss of one’s self-actualization collective consciousness and an assimilation of the celebrity’s self-actualization and collective consciousness, which can be both persuasive and pervasive in today’s society. Yoo (2016) highlighted that the use of celebrities can unify society as they offer a glimpse into one’s collective consciousness. As the celebrity commencement speakers deliver their address, they provide a glimpse into their values, beliefs, and attitudes, thus ultimately exerting an influence on those in attendance who wish to be like that celebrity.

## DISCUSSION

Zachary Michael Jack (2019) asserted that it is somewhat risky for colleges and universities to invite celebrities to deliver commencement addresses because some have a tendency to engage in scandalous behavior. Jack (2019) explained that Bill Cosby, for one, had spoken at a number of commencement ceremonies and received several honorary degrees until his 2018 conviction of sexual assault. Since then, administrators at many colleges and universities have made the decision to rescind his honorary degrees in hopes of distancing their institutions from him. Prior to his conviction, Cosby was the quintessential celebrity to deliver the keynote address at graduation, as many had experienced a parasocial interaction and had subsequently developed a parasocial relationship with him from his days on *The Cosby Show*. People were quite familiar with him as he entered their homes via their television set, and they were accustomed to seeing him interact with his family. When Cosby, known as Cliff Huxtable on his television series, spoke to his children or to his wife, the viewers could relate to him, as it felt as if he was addressing them. Accordingly, a parasocial relationship existed among viewers of *The Cosby Show*, so it was an extremely momentous and personal experience when he addressed those attending a graduation ceremony, further developing and nurturing that parasocial relationship.

Despite the seemingly misguided focus on celebrities who speak at graduation ceremonies, Keith Whittington (2019) explained:

At the end of the day, commencement speakers are not very important. They are not part of the scholarly endeavor. They are not part of the robust exchange of ideas. They are window dressing. They add a patina of seriousness, or maybe simply glitz, to a graduation ceremony. (para. 3)

Consequently, celebrities do not contribute any intrinsic value to the ceremony, except for the fact that their mere presence captures the public’s as well as the media’s attention. Celebrity commencement speakers make the audience feel they have a relationship and a connection with the celebrity thus making the graduates feel good about themselves, the speaker, and their alma mater.

While celebrities who are invited to deliver commencement speeches do not make significant contributions to graduation ceremonies, the choice of inviting a celebrity speaker to deliver the commencement address is more about the visibility of the college or university and perhaps the publicity the institution can elicit. However, the choice of speaker, as well as the content and message of the speech, is often critiqued. Cynthia Greenlee (2018) wrote that because commencement speeches “emphasize young people’s civic and professional duties, it’s a highly politicized form of speech that’s subject to scrutiny” (para. 7). For example, Oprah Winfrey addressed the graduating class at Colorado College in May 2019, and the media scrutinized her address but less so as to the reasons why she spoke at a small private college with an enrollment of just over 2,000 students. Vince Bzdek (2019) noted that Winfrey’s speech was one in a series that featured speeches from other distinguished African Americans, including Ta-Nehisi Coates, Shaun King, and Ron Stallworth, during the previous months. Explaining the purpose of the speeches, Bzdek (2019) wrote, “The string of speeches is

no accident. Oprah, Coates, King and Stallworth all came to the campus during a very deliberate anti-racism, pro-inclusivity campaign that was launched by the school last fall” (para. 4). Colorado College launched the initiative in “response to racist emails that were sent out to the student body boasting of the superiority of whites and the economies of majority-white countries” (Bzdek, 2019, para. 5). Colorado College launched a campaign that focused on inclusivity and diversity with the goal of making all students feel comfortable within the college community. At the same time, Colorado College also had to restore its reputation, which had been tarnished because of the email scandal, so to an extent, with its focus on crisis management, the college campaign was somewhat self-serving

As colleges and universities may tend to be self-serving in their choice of graduation speakers, it is their hope that the invited celebrity will either gift the institution with a monetary donation or encourage others to do so, especially after the institution makes the news with its choice of celebrity speaker. The institution also benefits as their graduates may join the alumni association and contribute their time, money, and or talent to improving the college or university. In effect, it becomes a mutually beneficial relationship as the institution worked hard to arrange a celebrity to serve as the commencement speaker, so then, the graduates feel compelled to give back to their institution. Explaining this notion, Jack (2019) noted that, “Stars make headlines, and headlines help bring in the endowment-replenishing donations known as ‘major gifts’” (para. 1). Clearly, graduation is no longer a momentous occasion to celebrate the accomplishments and accolades of the students, but rather an opportunity to put the institution in the local, or even the national spotlight upon the announcement of the college or university’s commencement speaker. In addition, the institution will gain media attention on the day of the graduation ceremony, as the media will be present to cover the celebrity’s speech. As the college or university appears in the headlines, alumni and others will contribute to the institution upon hearing of the “productive” work the university is performing, and the work must be “productive,” as it has attracted a celebrity to deliver the keynote address at its graduation ceremony.

All in all, celebrity speakers provide institutions another - high profile - means that enable them to market themselves and to attract donors. What should have been a celebration of the graduating students’ accomplishments now boils down to an opportunity to solicit monetary gifts. Whittington (2019) best summed up the use of celebrities at commencement ceremonies by writing, “They [Celebrities] are expected to honor the graduates, and be honored by them in turn, and no one is expected to learn anything” (para. 4). The graduates, as well as their family and friends in attendance, honor the celebrity through the parasocial relationship they have developed with these individuals. By doing so, the graduates in particular feel as if the celebrity speaker is personally congratulating them for their success and sacrifice, which is meaningful to those in attendance. In addition, the graduates’ family and friends may feel that the celebrity is congratulating them for their sacrifices, yet this relationship is non-reciprocal, as the speaker does not experience feelings that are similar to those developed by the audience members. Nevertheless, because of the personal relationship with the speaker that the audience feels exists, they honor the speaker and hold them in esteem. Furthermore, as the media cover the celebrities who speak at commencements, they further extend and foster these parasocial relationships.

Instead of using celebrities that the institution may later have to distance itself from, Jack (2019) suggested that colleges and universities consider inviting individuals who are employed at non-profits in the local community. In doing so, he suggested that people will “reject the consumerist idea that bigger is always better, and that what celebrities say is somehow more meaningful” and students would learn that, “Meaningful success can be found far beyond the headlines” (Jack, 2019, para.14). He also contended that having a star-studded commencement ceremony takes away from accomplishments of the students, which is where the focus should be (Jack, 2019).



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Hawk

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