Lynn University raised its reputation and enabled $8.1 million in new spending in the community by hosting the last presidential debate in October.

An economic study being released this morning shows that between the money Lynn spent in campus upgrades, temporary amenities and promotion and the money spent by non-local attendees, the new spending was significant, and grew to $13.1 million as it trickled through the community. The study was coordinated by Lynn’s Office of Institutional Research, Planning and Assessment, but the research was done by Canadian firm Enigma Research Corp., which specializes in large events.

For Lynn University President Kevin Ross and his chief of staff, Jason Walton, the payoff was the equivalent of $63 million in ad value the university got with all the media coverage — more than 33,000 stories.

“It was an amazing thing to see the kind of reach you can get with an event like this,” Ross said Wednesday.

The study also showed that nearly 70 million of the 188 million people who followed the debate knew it was held at Lynn and local people who participated in the events were proud that Lynn was hosting. About 2 percent of viewers said they would “absolutely” plan a vacation to Palm Beach County in the next five years.

The numbers astounded Walton. Each presidential debate got more viewership last year than the Summer Olympics opening ceremony and the Grammy awards, falling just behind the Super Bowl broadcasts.

“When it happened here on campus, we didn’t understand what rare air we were breathing in,” he said.

The university did a lot of work to get that reach, said Daniel Martell, president and CEO of the Economic Council of Palm Beach County. University officials really prodded the business
community to understand what the event could mean, propelling themselves and the entire area onto a national stage.

“That tells me that Palm Beach County is being placed on the map in a big way,” he said.

And this time with a presidential election, it was in a good way.

That geographic recognition is important for Palm Beach County, said Peter Ricci, director of the Hospitality Management Program at Florida Atlantic University. People from outside the state may be able to point out Miami and Orlando on a map, but not Boca Raton or Palm Beach County.

“For exposure, this was quite fantastic,” he said.

While few of the people who said they would vacation here are likely to follow through, the event itself gave a bump to the economy, he said. And that was seen in the hospitality industry, with most of the spending by non-locals going to food and drink purchases and lodging rentals.

While no one at Lynn wants to do it again in four years, they would be interested in hosting again.

The technology upgrades alone are enabling Lynn to fast-track a curriculum project for incoming freshmen this fall that will put a mini-iPad in each one’s hands, loaded with textbooks and other resources.

And it raised the university’s stature within the community, building a partnership that will be there for other big projects.

For days before the debate, people were pulling up beside the new gates — the entrance was rebuilt before the debate largely through a donation — to take a picture in front of the sign. That hasn’t happened before, Walton said.

Lynn University Presidential Debate

$8.1 million* total new spending

$4.5 million* spent on facilities and operational needs

$1 million spent by visitors on food and beverage

$655,000 spent on lodging

$651,000 spent by visitors on transportation
$377,000 spent by visitors on entertainment

$258,000 retail purchases by visitors

$1.7 million** spent by locals on food and retail

$63.7 million in ad value for Lynn University

$2.5 million in ad value for Palm Beach County

* Figures include donated items.

** Not included in new spending figure.

Source: Economic study coordinated by Lynn University