



# Patrick F. Leahy

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First Year Foundation Convocation | August 26, 2016

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Good afternoon, everyone. On behalf of our entire Wilkes community – our stellar faculty, our dedicated staff, and our ambitious current students – I’d like to welcome all of you once again to Wilkes University.

It was 30 years ago today — 30 years ago today — that I moved into my freshman dorm room. If you are at all like me, then you have lots of questions on your Move-In Day. Questions like: Whom do I call if I have an IT problem? (Actually, I didn’t have that question, since we didn’t use computers then.) Where do we eat? Who is John Wilkes anyway? Did I make the right decision in coming to Wilkes? How is this all going to turn out?

Since I’ve been here a few years already, perhaps I can help to answer these questions for you.

First, whom do I call if I have an IT problem? Call the Help Desk at 408-HELP. That’s 408-4357. We continue to make investments in our IT infrastructure, so I hope you won’t have too many problems, but our staff is here to help.

Second, where do we eat? The Henry Student Center is your best bet – both day and night. Campus dining also includes outlets like Which Wich, Greens to Go, and Provisions On Demand. We also feature a full-service, totally authentic, first-rate Starbuck’s right on our campus gateway. Off campus, the pizza at Frank’s across from the courthouse on South Main Street is good. My favorite restaurant in town is the Manhattan Bistro, although you may need your parents for that one. There are all kinds of options now, as Wilkes-Barre continues its downtown renaissance.

Third, who is John Wilkes anyway? John Wilkes was a member of British parliament who supported the early colonists. As the statue on the Fenner Quad says, he was “an early defender of political liberty, free speech, and the rights of the people to elect their leaders.” I hope you will become the independent thinker that John Wilkes was. I hope you won’t become the rabble-rouser that he evidently was, at least not while you are here at Wilkes.

Next, did I make the right decision in coming to Wilkes? Of course, I may be partial, but I think you made an outstanding decision. We will offer you all of the programs, activities, and opportunities of a large, research university in the caring, mentoring culture of a liberal arts college. There is no campus in the country that is more committed to student success than Wilkes, no campus anywhere that works harder to help you achieve beyond your own perceived potential. We at Wilkes believe talent is everywhere. And we educators have a responsibility to help you find it, develop it, then unleash it.

Finally, how is this all going to turn out? Well, the answer to this question, of course, lies in your hands. No one can answer this one for you.

Let me reiterate something I said at summer orientation. You have before you a unique opportunity afforded very few people. That is, you have an opportunity to study at a private, four-year American university. There are over 7 billion people on this planet. Roughly 1.2 billion of them are age 15 to 25, or roughly your peer group worldwide. This fall fewer than 5 million people from around the world will be enrolled in a private, four-year American college or university — the best education of its kind anywhere in the world. That's just one of every 240 people more or less your age in the world. Said another way, that's less than one half of one percent! I call that a unique opportunity.

People often say that their four years in college were “the best years of their life.” That's quite a statement. After all, for all of you, exciting careers await you, travel to exotic and interesting places around the world awaits you, falling in love and getting married awaits you (maybe even to someone in this very room), having children and maybe grandchildren awaits you. With all of that ahead of you, I won't say here today that these will be the best four years of your life. But I will say that there will be few times in your life when the possibilities to grow and develop as a person are as great. There will be few times in your life when the chances to try new things are as great. There will be few times in your life when the opportunity to question your assumptions and develop your own worldview is as great. And there will be few times in your life when the opportunity to meet new and interesting people is as great. The best four years of your life? I don't know, but this is a special time in your life for sure. The ancient Greek historian, Plutarch, said: “The whole of life is but a moment of time. It is our duty, therefore, to use it, not to misuse it.” Your moment, as I said at summer orientation, is now. In fact, throughout your life, there will be nothing quite like this moment.

So, my advice to you as you start your college careers is simple: don't waste it. Here's how.

1. Take chances. Ask dumb questions in class. (You can get away with it here.) Take a few classes for no other reason than they interest you. Sign up for one or two of our 88 clubs. Volunteer somewhere around town. Study away or even abroad. Opportunities are everywhere, but you need to pursue them. Get out of your comfort zone.
2. Meet people. Go up to a total stranger on campus and introduce yourself to him or her. Get to know your classmates. Befriend your professors. Seek advice from our staff members. Stop me on the street and say hello. Make friends. One of the benefits of attending a place like Wilkes is the lifelong friendships that will, no doubt, develop. I hear it over and over again whenever I meet with our alumni. Perhaps the best friends you ever make, you will make here at Wilkes during the next four years. Think about that.

3. And last, be open. Dive into your general education requirements, even if you don't quite understand why you need to take them. If you have your life all figured out, be open to new career possibilities. You will be introduced to new ideas that you might not have ever imagined, but you have to be open to them. I would suggest that you even be open to changing your major. Let me give you an example from my own life. When I first arrived at my college, I was enrolled in the business school. I took a required poetry course as a freshman with the president of my university. It opened my eyes to the wonders of literature, the power of words, the importance of imagination. That one, single class had such an impression on me that I transferred from the School of Business to the College of Arts & Sciences and changed my major from marketing to English literature. (You can imagine my parents' reaction when I shared this news with them.) I have never regretted being open to that change. And, that change in major probably led to a career change from business to education, and I have certainly never regretted that turn in my life.

So, again, my advice to you is simple. Don't waste this unbelievable opportunity that has been afforded you. When you graduate in four short years, you don't want to look back and have any regrets. The coming years are yours for the taking. Take it from me: Most of us older folks would trade places with you in a second.

Let me close with this. All of us here at Wilkes can't wait to share in this special moment with you because all of us here at Wilkes – and probably educators elsewhere – believe two things about education. First, education has the power to transform us. And, second, once educated, we then have the power to transform our world. That is the great hope of education. President Kennedy said it this way: "Let us think of education as the means of developing our greatest abilities, because in each of us there is a private hope and dream which, fulfilled, can be translated into benefit for everyone."

What are your private hopes and dreams? Tell us. We need to know because all of us here at Wilkes want to help you fulfill them. And when we do, the greatest abilities in each of you can be translated into benefit for everyone.

Welcome to Wilkes University!