



Patrick F. Leahy

Spring Convocation | January 21, 2014

Thank you, Terri. Good morning, everyone, and welcome back.

I hope all of you had a restful break and are off to a good start in 2014. Hopefully, you found yourself somewhere warmer than Wilkes-Barre over the break. The Polar Vortex sent temperatures plunging to record lows, but the campus survived the cold quite well. And it feels like another one is on its way. I'd like to thank all of the members of our physical plant and public safety teams who continue to maintain and protect our campus so well in the face of these challenges. Please join me in thanking our colleagues from these areas.

This is our second annual spring convocation. I said last year that I wanted to make this a new tradition here at Wilkes, a chance to converse as a University community at the start of a new academic semester and an opportunity to continue to improve communication across campus. Thank you all for taking time away from other important activities to be here.

Let me begin by taking a moment as a community to remember a few important colleagues who are no longer with us today: Richard Fuller, emeritus professor of art; Ted Engel, a long-time faculty member in business; and Debra Searfass, many years a dependable adjunct in biology, all of whom passed away in the fall. In addition, we should lend our collective support to other members of our community who have lost loved ones recently and who are dealing with serious illnesses in their families. This community is at its best when pulling together to support those of us who are hurting. Thank you for supporting each other in this way. Throughout the fall semester the incredible work of our faculty and staff continued in earnest: papers, presentations, publications, community service and more. We should all be particularly proud of Mike Lennon, whose biography of Norman Mailer has received international acclaim; KarenBeth Bohan, who received a Fulbright Specialist Grant to continue her work in Uganda; and Kim Ference, who was selected as the Pharmacist of the Year in Pennsylvania, the second straight year that a Wilkes faculty member earned this recognition. Congratulations to all of these colleagues. And thank you all for the doing the essential work of a university.

Before I get into my address, I'd like to recognize a special guest whom I've invited here today. Robert May is an Academy Award-winning filmmaker who lives in our greater Wilkes-Barre community. He is a member of the Creative Writing Advisory Board and a teacher in that program. I often refer to him as our Oscar Winner-in-Residence. Robert, along with the support of some 40 people from Wilkes who researched, edited, constructed sets, provided advice, and much more, has produced Kids for Cash. This is a riveting documentary that chronicles the scandal of the same name and in doing so shines a spotlight on the abuses within our juvenile justice system. The film has previewed to rave

reviews and will officially premiere on Wednesday, Feb. 5, in Philadelphia and on Thursday, Feb. 6, here in Wilkes-Barre, an event I hope many of you will attend. I am proud that Wilkes collaborated so fully with Robert on this important piece of work. Please join me in recognizing Robert May on the impending release of *Kids for Cash*. In early December the world lost a great leader with the passing of Nelson Mandela. Mandela epitomized grace, reconciliation and hope. Amy and I had the privilege of visiting South Africa in the summer of 2008. We visited the home where Nelson Mandela lived and the museum that told his story. It remains one of the most moving experiences of my life. In a speech at Amherst College in 2005, then-President Mandela said: “All institutions of higher education have the obligation to open the door more widely. Above all, those who educate most rigorously carry the highest obligation. You have the quality, the ability, the standing, and the support to press further. I hope you will show the will,” he said. With this as a backdrop, let me share with you a series of updates that demonstrate our will in pressing further to open the doors to Wilkes more widely.

Enrollment

Let me begin with enrollment. This semester we welcomed 17 new freshmen who are beginning their education here at Wilkes, a strong mid-year start number. And we also welcomed 44 new, mid-year transfers, 12 of whom are international students, to Wilkes last week. While it remains early in the normal undergraduate recruiting cycle, applications and early deposits look strong, running even with last year at this time. We will need everyone on campus to once again join in the effort to enroll next year’s class, beginning with another open house on Saturday, Feb. 1, and a new yield event that we are introducing this year – Wilkes Scholars Day – on Monday, Feb. 17. On this day we will be inviting over 300 of our highest-achieving applicants to campus for a special day of class visits and interaction with faculty members and current students. This is an attempt to yield even higher-performing students to Wilkes. Of course, our more traditional VIP Day will be held later in the semester, as usual. I hope you will join us for these events. We continue to add both curricular and extracurricular programs that students desire to support our undergraduate enrollment effort. This year we are offering a new undergraduate degree program in sports and event management and another in public administration. I encourage our faculty colleagues to continue their work to design an honors program for undergraduates that makes sense for Wilkes. I don’t have specific ideas about it, nor claim to have any particular expertise in the design of an honors program. I simply want a program that will allow us to compete more successfully against other colleges and universities for high-achieving students. I hope the dialogue will continue throughout this semester until we have designed an honors program that a consensus of the faculty can embrace.

Next year, under the direction of Phil Simon, we are rolling out a marching band, making us the only college or university in all of northeast Pennsylvania – and one of only a handful of Division III institutions across the entire state – to feature such a music program. In addition, next year we will be offering men’s and women’s swimming, as well as women’s golf, to attract more high-performing student-athletes to Wilkes. Let me give you one quick example of student-athlete success here at Wilkes: last fall 57 student-athletes from the fall sports earned MAC academic honor roll. Fifty-seven! As we know, actively engaged students typically retain at higher rates and graduate on time more frequently than their peers, so we’ll keep looking for new ways to attract and engage undergraduate students, inside and outside of the classroom. New graduate enrollment starts for the spring have already exceeded our budget goal by 35 students. Returning graduate student registrations are down a bit as we enter the spring semester, but we will be working hard over the next few weeks to close this gap as much as possible. During this coming semester, we will continue the search for partners who can help us take our graduate programs, in particular our online ones, to a more regional, even national, audience.

We will continue to add undergraduate and graduate academic programs in the years ahead as a way to make coming to Wilkes as attractive as possible. I have asked Terri Wignot, our interim provost, to review our new program process to ensure that it meets the dual demands of high academic quality and speed to market. A professor of mine from Penn would call this “market-smart and mission-centered.” In addition to looking at new programs, we will, of course, continue to promote the value of our existing programs. This semester we will be working on the development of a new website, perhaps the most important source of information for prospective students and their parents. A new content management system, which will support our new website, will be light-years ahead of the current one. All of you will be asked to provide feedback on the system throughout the semester. The new website will be accompanied by a new ad campaign intended to refresh our brand and to help generate strong enrollments into the future. I think you all know how important robust enrollments are to Wilkes. We must continue to build a culture of enrollment across the entire campus. Thank you all for your support of this critically important function.

Campus Improvements

Since we last gathered for the fall convocation, we have successfully dedicated the Lawrence and Sally Cohen Science Center. For those of you who were able to join us on Oct. 4, it was a great day for Wilkes. Many of the alumni who returned for Homecoming that weekend commented that the energy on campus had never been higher. Fueled by this excitement, our work on improving our campus continues. In the coming year we will be completing the consolidation of the nursing program in Stark Learning Center, fulfilling a long-time goal to unite that academic discipline and to locate it near our new, state-of-the-art nursing simulation lab. Pearsall Hall in turn will be converted into student housing, complementing our student housing block in that part of campus. We will be renovating Barre Hall, bringing this historic building back to life as a residence hall and aiding in the redevelopment of the residential neighborhood south of campus. We will also be making improvements to our athletic facilities at Artillery Park.

And I am pleased to announce officially that the University Center on Main will be transformed this summer into the new home of the Sidhu School of Business and Leadership. This project also allows us to realize our dream of having a self-contained business school building to showcase our top-notch business programs, enabling us to compete more successfully against other business schools. We are presently finalizing details around moving the individuals who currently occupy UCOM to appropriate space. Those details will be forthcoming shortly. At the same time, we are developing plans to build state-of-the-art engineering labs in a newly renovated Stark Learning Center. We hope to raise the money and begin this project next academic year. Finally, related to campus improvements, we have enlisted the services of the architectural firm Derck & Edson to develop a campus enhancement plan for Wilkes, which we hope to share with the campus at large this spring. These architects look at our existing campus footprint and suggest relatively low-cost ways to enhance the living and learning environment of our unique and historic campus. The Campus Master Planning Committee has been – and will continue to be – involved in these decisions affecting our campus.

MESA & THE POCONOS

I just returned last Friday morning from Mesa, Ariz., where I visited with 10 of our Wilkes-Barre-based students who are spending this semester in Arizona, taking courses and working internships that are not available to them here in Pennsylvania. You should hear the enthusiasm of these students, many of whom have never been outside of Pennsylvania. This pilot program will test student interest in a new Semester-in-Mesa program, an initiative that could enrich our students’ educational experience

and provide an enhancement to student recruiting. A new cohort of MBA students started in Mesa this spring, bringing our current total up to 23, with a projected goal of 50 by next year at this time. New graduate programs in education are slated to begin in March. The University is contemplating the roll-out of undergraduate programs in business and engineering in the coming year, testing the market for undergraduate degree-completion students. Mesa continues to offer great possibility for Wilkes. It is a chance to expand our reach across the nation at a time that demands it; a chance to serve more first-generation students, consistent with our founding mission; a chance to collaborate with high-tech companies and innovative higher education institutions; a chance to gain a presence in one of the hottest – literally and figuratively – regions of the country. We are watching the budget closely to ensure the careful and deliberate roll-out of programs that make sense for Mesa and for Wilkes-Barre. At the same time we are working diligently with our partners in Mesa to obtain a major philanthropic gift to support our efforts there. Stay tuned. Enrollments at our Pocono Center are on target for the spring. We will be taking a hard look at the Pocono Center in the coming semester to see what strategic benefit it offers to Wilkes.

BUDGET

As I have said many times, we simply must find ways to produce excess revenues over expenses in order to generate resources to plow back into our mission. Our current operating budget looks positive at this point in the cycle. But it is very important that we continue to manage our respective budgets well so that these resources for the future can materialize at the end of the fiscal year. The work of the Budget Committee for next year is complete. Just last week we finalized the operating budget for 2014/2015, once again right on schedule. This is another responsible budget that balances our competing demands of today's spending and tomorrow's investment. Some highlights of next year's budget include: a modest 3 percent increase in tuition, which is consistent with our peer institutions; conservative enrollment numbers for new undergraduates, transfers and graduate students; fully funding depreciation to fill up our capital budget for future campus investment; a 2 percent across-the-board salary increase for faculty and staff, which – like this past year – can grow if we exceed enrollment and budget management goals; a separate pool of money to enhance employee benefit programs and pay disparities, where they are needed; and consistent funding of operating budgets. We will work with FAC and USAC to determine the best ways to share more information with the campus community about next year's budget. I'd like to thank all of the members of the Budget Committee for their hard work throughout the fall semester.

RESEARCH

In order to meet our full ambition as a university, we need to continue to support the research efforts of our faculty – not to distract from our core commitment to teaching, but rather to enhance it by engaging undergraduate and graduate students in research. As soon as possible, we will be hiring a new director of sponsored programs and grant support, which is an important position in securing outside research funding for our faculty. And, as soon as possible, we need to finalize our organizational capacity to protect our faculty members' intellectual property and to support the development of their ideas through technology transfer. A number of faculty members from across our schools have asked for this support, and I am committed to providing it as soon as possible. Given his experience in this area, I have asked Rodney Ridley from our engineering program to work with our chief legal counsel, Chip Prescott, to help us finalize our intellectual property and technology transfer process. We cannot become one of the best small universities in the country if we do not support the research efforts of our faculty in this way.

SVP/PROVOST

You may have noticed a message from me a couple weeks ago announcing my decision to invite Dr.

Anne Skleder to become our first-ever senior vice president/provost. Dr. Skleder brings a wealth of higher education experience with her from Cabrini College, where she currently serves as vice president of academic affairs. She has served as a dean, as a department chair, as the founder of an institute dedicated to civic engagement, and as the director of an honors program. She will come to Wilkes with the title of professor of psychology. In accepting the position, Anne said: “I would like to express my most sincere appreciation for the opportunity to join the Wilkes community. From the moment I met the search committee at the off-site interview, I felt at home. Throughout my visit I met such talented, committed, collegial, and gracious professionals and students. It is truly a gift to be offered the chance to become part of the amazing Wilkes community and work together to advance the University and serve our students well.” I believe Anne brings the experience, the personality and the drive to help lead us to new levels of academic performance. Anne will join our community officially on June 1, but she plans to visit multiple times this semester to begin preparations for her new position. I’d like to thank the members of the Provost Search Committee for their leadership in producing this excellent outcome.

I would also like to take a moment to recognize Terri Wignot, our interim SVP/provost. Terri answered the call a year and a half ago to serve in this important capacity, and she has exceeded my expectations in this role. She will continue to serve as interim provost until June 1, at which time she will rejoin the faculty. Please join me in thanking Terri for her great work as interim provost.

PUBLIC SAFETY

I have said many times that ensuring the health and safety of our community is my single highest priority. Over the past number of months the administration has taken many steps to enhance our public safety operation. I am pleased to share with you that we have taken another significant step in this positive direction. Chip Prescott announced a couple weeks ago that our new director of public safety will be Chris Jagoe. Chris was the overwhelming recommendation of the search committee and others who had a chance to meet him during the search. He will come to us from the University of Maryland where he served as assistant chief of police. Chris will join the Wilkes community on March 1. I would like to thank all of the members of the Public Safety Director Search Committee for their care throughout the hiring process. Since Chris will be responsible for implementing any further changes to our public safety policies and procedures, I will seek his input prior to making any final decisions as we continue our efforts to enhance our public safety efforts for the benefit of our staff, faculty and students. These two hires – both Anne Skleder and Chris Jagoe – demonstrate that it is possible for Wilkes to recruit talented and experienced individuals from a national pool of candidates. I am very pleased with the outcome of these two important searches.

Strategic Planning

Let me say a word or two about our strategic planning process. You will recall that we have focused on six themes, which will guide our efforts over the next six years. They are: 1) Fostering Academic Excellence, 2) Investing in Our People, 3) Recruiting, Retaining, and Graduating Undergraduate and Graduate Students, 4) Improving Our Financial Position, 5) Enhancing Our Campus Infrastructure, and 6) Supporting Efforts to Revitalize Downtown Wilkes-Barre. The Strategic Planning Committee has been working over the past couple months to develop specific, actionable, measurable strategies to support each theme. The latest draft will soon be available for public comment. I will talk with FAC and USAC respectively to determine the best ways to obtain feedback on the plan. Our goal remains to take this new strategic plan to the Board of Trustees for its endorsement at the meeting in late March. This will give us time to prepare for the new plan’s launch on June 1 of this year. As we continue our

planning between now and then, I'd like to encourage us to find a name for our new strategic plan, one that motivates our best collective effort during the course of the plan. If you have any suggestions for a strategic plan name, please feel free to e-mail me or anyone else on the Strategic Planning Committee directly with your ideas. I am a big fan of the singer and songwriter Paul David Hewson, better known of course as Bono from U2. Bono reminds us:

“The future is not fixed; it's fluid. The world is more malleable than you think, and it's waiting for you to hammer it into shape, “

That's the hope of us educators; that is, that the world is not fixed, that things are fluid, that we have the power to affect change, and that we can make things even better. I urge us to remember this as we continue planning for Wilkes' next six years.

DEVELOPMENT

As we finalize our planning for the next six years, we have already begun our efforts to fund this new plan. We have developed our fundraising plan to support the projects that will emerge from the strategic plan. We have enlisted a few key volunteers to aid us in our fundraising efforts. We have thrown our institutional support behind the City of Wilkes-Barre's effort to obtain county funds to revitalize Kirby Park. We have prepared our formal application for \$5 million in state funds to support the renovation of Stark. And we have already received our first all-cash gift of our next campaign when recently Dr. Harold Cox wrote us a check for \$165,000 to support the renovation of the Creative Writing building.

In addition to this major gift effort, we are busy getting ready for our inaugural Founder's Gala, which will be held on Saturday, June 7, at the Westmoreland Club. This new annual event will celebrate Wilkes' rich heritage, will allow us to raise money for the First Generation Fund to support financially needy kids from Pennsylvania who are the first in their families to pursue a college degree, and will allow us to recognize deserving individuals with the President's Medal, a new award granted to me by the Board of Trustees. The first recipient of the President's Medal will be Joe Savitz, a member of the first graduating class of Wilkes College, a long-time member of our Board of Trustees, and a huge supporter of Wilkes in so many ways. I hope all of you will consider joining us on June 7 for the marquee event of our year.

AND, FINALLY,

consistent with this latest announcement, I am proud to announce that your university has answered the call from President Obama to increase opportunities for low-income students. This commitment grows straight from our rich history of educating low-income, first-generation college students. In fact, this freshman class on campus reports over 50 percent are the first in their families to pursue a four-year college degree. And, a full 41 percent of our freshmen are Pell grant eligible. So we are already doing our part. We have pledged to President Obama our willingness as an institution to continue to meet the needs of high-performing, low-income students as we address the myriad challenges confronting higher education.

As you can see, we have much to show to demonstrate our will to open the doors more widely, as President Mandela suggested. In another speech he said: “Sometimes it falls upon a generation to be great. You can be that generation,” he said. Previous generations here at Wilkes answered their calls. Our founders established this institution in the throes of the Great Depression to educate sons and daughters

of immigrants, many of whom worked in the surrounding coal mines. Then a following generation served as a force for economic development by expanding the student body and rolling out professional programs, thus attracting businesses to the area. Then a generation pulled us from the despair wrought by Hurricane Agnes. The most recent generation added graduate programs to serve a wider array of students, paving the way for University status.

Now is our time to meet the challenges before us: granting access, adopting technology and online delivery, rebuilding downtown Wilkes-Barre, expanding our reach in a very competitive world. This is natural evolution of a high-quality educational institution perhaps, but this progress does not come naturally. We must make it happen. Our generation can be great too! I know this year and in the years ahead we will press further. I know that we will show the will. Thank you.