Dear Members of the Wilkes University Community:

The most recent academic year was another good one at your university.

The most significant accomplishment during this past year was the launch of the Gateway to the Future Strategic Plan. This plan, which began its six-year implementation phase last year, sets forth the ambitious aspiration to become one of the finest small universities in the nation. With special emphasis on “small” and “university”, we will create an institution with the breadth and diversity of a large research university, while providing the caring, mentoring environment of a small liberal arts college. As one student so succinctly put it to me recently: “Wilkes is the small school with the huge opportunities.” Achieving this combination will make us one of the finest institutions in our sector of American higher education.

In many ways both obvious and subtle the 2014-2015 academic year advanced us toward this ambitious goal. This annual letter, a tradition that I started last year, will provide you with a comprehensive update of the progress of your university during the past twelve months (June 1, 2014 – May 31, 2015).

“To create one of the finest small universities in the country, as evidenced by independent, third party ratings of our performance.”
As an educational enterprise, I’ll start first with academics – the heart of the matter at Wilkes University. During this past year, we advanced our teaching, our research, and our scholarship.

The faculty widely supported the creation of a new honors program, which will make us more competitive in recruiting talented students, faculty and staff. Our first honors class includes 30 students, who, by many accounts, are some of the finest we’ve ever recruited to Wilkes. I am very appreciative of the faculty’s efforts in designing this new program. In addition to the honors program, other new academic programs were created, including sport & event management, neuroscience, and nursing informatics. We continue to search for programs that grow from our strengths as a university and meet the needs and interests of prospective students.

In our continuing efforts to become a comprehensive university, we have made a bold commitment to scholarship and research, committing over $1 million to support faculty over the next few years. As our founding president, Eugene Farley, would say: “This money is designed to expand our faculty members’ horizons so that they might expand their students’ horizons.” In the past year alone Wilkes has applied for two non-provisional patents for two different faculty members who are pursuing research that could become commercial enterprises. No one can remember when we’ve ever submitted two patent applications, reminding us once again of the breadth and caliber of our faculty research. In addition, Professor Ned Fetcher will be taking students to Alaska this summer as part of a National Science Foundation grant to measure the effects of climate change, allowing faculty members and students a unique opportunity to contribute to one of the biggest issues of our day.

At the end of May we submitted our Periodic Review Report to the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE). This comprehensive report is submitted at the midpoint of our decennial accreditation cycle. The process, which is intended to ensure full compliance with accreditation standards, also provided an opportunity for self-reflection, leading toward continuous institutional self-improvement. We will receive a preliminary report from the PRR readers in August and a final evaluation from the Commission in November.

Given the central role that academics play at Wilkes, there are few things more important than recruiting talented faculty, and this past year we welcomed 15 new faculty members. These new faculty members are committed educators who are credentialed at the highest level in their fields from some of the finest institutions across the country.

During the past academic year, we conducted national searches for new deans to lead four of our schools. In
addition to Dr. Deborah Zbegner, who was appointed as the Dean of the School of Nursing in January, we welcome to campus this summer Dr. William Hudson (College of Science and Engineering), Dr. Paul Riggs (College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences), and Dr. Rhonda Rabbitt (School of Education). I am thrilled with the results of these searches and welcome each of these new colleagues to the Wilkes community.

The only way to sustain Wilkes University over the long run is to be – and be recognized as – a high-quality academic institution. We must continue to make this our galvanizing motivation in the years ahead.

In addition to investments in academic programs, we continue to invest in campus life to provide extra- and co-curricular development opportunities for our students. We established the first collegiate marching band in northeastern Pennsylvania. We completed our first year in women’s golf and men’s and women’s swimming, adding some 30 NCAA student-athletes to our growing number, and also hired a full-time head men’s lacrosse coach, Curtis Jaques, who has been working throughout the past year to prepare for our first season of men’s lacrosse since 1981. This brings our varsity, NCAA Division III athletics programs to 20. We will continue to explore other opportunities for our students to compete athletically, since our student-athletes typically perform well in the classroom and represent Wilkes well in competition.

At present there are 88 clubs and activities at Wilkes, burnishing our reputation as a place that offers all of the activities of a large research university.

At the national NASPA (Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education) conference representatives from our Student Affairs division, led by Dr. Phil Ruthkosky, won the Grand Gold Award for its first-year student sexual misconduct training program. It was special recognition nationwide of our efforts to curb sexual violence on our campus and throughout our community. We were also pleased to receive the annual award from the NEPA Rainbow Alliance for creating an environment on campus that is inclusive of LGBTQ students, faculty, and staff. This is more evidence of our founding principle to be a place welcoming of all people.
FACILITIES

We continue to work diligently to create a traditional, residential campus in the urban environment of Wilkes-Barre, developing a beautiful and historic collegiate space that will enable us to compete for students across the region and around the country. In the past year alone we have finalized the acquisition of 141 South Main Street (the former Bartikowsky Jewelers) and have converted that location temporarily into administrative office space. We completed the renovation of UCOM into the new home of the Sidhu School of Business and Leadership, creating a 21st century business facility directly on South Main Street. After consolidating the School of Nursing into Stark Learning Center, we converted Pearsall Hall into an undergraduate residence hall, allowing us to continue to build a residential neighborhood for first- and second-year students on the northern part of campus and helping to foster the sense of class cohesion that is a hallmark of a Wilkes education. And, following a generous donation from Dr. Harold Cox, we were able to complete the renovations to the home of the Creative Writing Program at 245 S. River Street, which was named in his honor during a ceremony on June 24th.

This summer we will continue to build a 21st century living and learning environment by completing the Gateway project, connecting the heart of our campus (Fenner Quadrangle) with the heart of downtown (South Main Street). We will complete the renovation of Barre Hall, returning that historic building into a residence hall for our new honors students. Our new food service partner, Aramark, will make close to $3 million of investments in our various food service locations on campus. We will enhance the quality of the experience of the Farley Library by making investments in the HVAC system. We will finish renovations to the Marts Center, including improving the look and feel of the lobby, as well as the functionality of the locker rooms. And, we will spend $1 million on our information technology backbone, preventing future maintenance challenges and enhancing our service to students.

All of this will make way for a major renovation of our largest academic building, Stark Learning Center, in the coming year, expanding our engineering capabilities and upgrading our academic facilities for the next generation of Wilkes students. In addition, we envision consolidating our communications department into one location, enhancing the learning and co-curricular experiences of the students.
In an effort to respond to the challenges facing American higher education in the years ahead, we have continued our investments in various strategic initiatives to grow our scale as a university and to reduce our reliance on traditional, undergraduate, residential students. During the past year, we have continued our investments in our Mesa, AZ location, preparing for the delivery of our first undergraduate programs in business this coming fall. Progress in Arizona has been slower than anticipated, but I am reminded of the old, desert adage: “It is more difficult for things to take root in the desert; but once they do, they will live forever.” We will continue to develop the Mesa location carefully, making strategic investments where it makes sense as a way to diversify our revenue and enhance our nationwide reputation.

We have established a unique program with Northampton Community College, one of the largest community colleges in Pennsylvania, to offer undergraduate degree completion programming in business and criminology on its new Monroe County campus. This arrangement, which is set to start this fall, allows us to consolidate our current Pocono location onto the NCC campus. With existing MBA enrollments and new students from NCC, our Pocono efforts will move toward a more positive financial outcome for our operating budget in the coming year.

In April, we announced an innovative new partnership with local school districts across Luzerne County. The Young Scholars Gateway Program provides talented high school juniors and seniors the opportunity to enroll at Wilkes and take college-level courses, the credits of which will count toward completion of their high school diploma and their college transcript. This allows these students to get a head start on their college careers, potentially allowing them to graduate in three, or possibly even two, years.

The goal is to serve high-achieving students locally, increasing their chances that they might stay in Luzerne County to attend college and join our workforce immediately following graduation.

We hope to serve 35 academically strong students in the coming year as a pilot program before expanding this innovative initiative to students in all school districts across the county.

Finally, our strategic partnership with HotChalk continued in earnest during this past year. HotChalk is an education-enabler, helping colleges and universities like Wilkes take its online graduate programs to a national audience. In our first year together, we had a goal to enroll 50 students in our online graduate nursing programs. By May 31st, we had 220 students enrolled in HotChalk-supported programs, with designs on growing this number in the future.

Collectively, these strategic initiatives contributed positively to the operating budget. In the years ahead, we will continue to seek new and innovative ways to serve students, both as a way to broaden the reach of our mission and as a way to strengthen our financial position.
Since its inception in 1933, Wilkes has been a private institution with a public purpose. That commitment to our neighboring community continued during the past academic year.

A recent economic impact study conducted by the Institute for Public Policy & Economic Development reported that Wilkes University is responsible for nearly $150 million in total economic output annually and produces directly and indirectly over 2,300 jobs for the area.

This past year, Wilkes University accepted the invitation of Congressman Lou Barletta and State Senator John Yudichak to become the educational host of the new SHINE (Schools and Homes IN Education) program, an innovative after-school program that will be rolled out throughout Luzerne County in the fall. Based on a successful program that has operated in neighboring Carbon County for the past decade, SHINE is a respected academic program for public school children from kindergarten through 8th grade who are deemed to need additional academic support. This public-private partnership hopes to reach 500 students in the first year, tripling in size in the coming years. Wilkes helps to guide the development of the program, offers soft dollar financial and administrative support, and provides faculty, student teachers and mentors for these students. SHINE will be just one more example of the University’s commitment to our surrounding community and support for K-12 education.

Also, the Allan P. Kirby Center for Free Enterprise & Entrepreneurship has undergone a transformation. For years the Kirby Center at Wilkes focused on developing entrepreneurship curriculum for students, becoming the first college or university in the area to offer such a curriculum for budding entrepreneurs. Now, we are developing the infrastructure for students, faculty, staff, and members of the NEPA community to build and launch the businesses of tomorrow. The Kirby Center has created a technology transfer office that provides an Office of Industrial Outreach to marry the assets of Wilkes University with needs in the area business community. And, it has opened a business incubator for new ventures. Housed in the Luzerne Bank building on Public Square, the Wilkes Enterprise Center currently supports 10 businesses. Our goal is simple: to have the same relative impact on our community as the great research universities of the country have on their communities. The “new” Kirby Center, under the direction of Dr. Rodney Ridley, will enable us to accomplish that goal.

Also, the nearly 30,000 hours of community service conducted by our students during the past year – earned us a spot once again on the President’s Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll, which is distinguished recognition for our commitment to volunteering, service-learning, and civic engagement.
DEVELOPMENT & SPONSORED RESEARCH

The past year was one of the finest in Wilkes history related to development and sponsored-research commitments. We secured $7.9 million in commitments to the new Gateway to the Future Campaign. Much of this commitment came from three different government grants that we successfully obtained with the help of our 2014 Business Partner of the Year, Wojdak & Associates: $3 million redevelopment grant to support the Stark Learning Center renovation, a $1 million grant to support streetscape improvements throughout campus, and a $600 thousand grant to aid in the construction of our gateway project. We also acquired a major, multi-year commitment to fund the expansion of the Kirby Center for Entrepreneurship and Free Enterprise, among other major commitments.

Our annual fund activity was significantly higher this year, growing year over year by 46%, bolstered in large part by the new Founders Gala, which has quickly become the marquee event of the Wilkes calendar. Just a few weeks ago 395 alumni, friends, colleagues, and business partners turned out and raised $428 thousand for the First Generation Fund, a new scholarship fund that bridges the tuition gaps for many first-generation students, making a first-class, private education accessible for these achievement-minded students.

Finally, our Office of Sponsored Programs continues its impressive work with 64 submitted proposals for $9.4 million, 11 of which have so far been secured for nearly $800 thousand primarily to support faculty research.

Over the coming years Wilkes University will embark on its largest, most comprehensive capital campaign ever, with an ambitious goal to raise $50 million to support the Gateway to the Future Strategic Plan. This campaign will not only secure significant commitments for components of our plan, but will also lay the foundation for successful fundraising efforts for generations to come.

FINANCIAL & ENDOWMENT

After two straight years of record surpluses, aided in large part by better-than-expected enrollments and careful budget management, the University produced more modest operating results during the most recent fiscal year. Slightly weaker enrollments across multiple categories, coupled with higher expenses from long-term investments, lead to a more challenging year. The University community worked diligently throughout the year to control spending, which allowed us to report an operating surplus again for the fourth consecutive year. Since gift income was strong and our endowment performance was positive, we will be able to report a healthy increase in net assets, which is an important measure of our continuing financial strength.

Enrollments for the coming academic year across all categories (i.e. undergraduate, graduate, summer) look strong at this point, so we anticipate returning to more robust surpluses in the future, providing necessary resources for further investment.

The permanent endowment at Wilkes now stands at $45 million, a modest increase over last year. While the endowment has grown over the past few years, it remains considerably smaller than many of our peer institutions, not to mention aspirant schools. We must make a concerted effort during the course of this upcoming campaign to grow our endowment through investment performance, new gifts, and operating surpluses.
Perhaps the best measure of any educational institution is the outcomes of its students. During the past year at four different ceremonies 1,300 total graduates, both at the undergraduate and graduate level, joined the 25,000 or so people who call Wilkes “alma mater.” Graduates this year are headed to work at PWC, SEI Investments, Target, AllState, and the National Park Service. Others are headed to graduate school at NYU, Wake Forest, Penn State, and Tulane.

And, our current students continue to do amazing things. Freshman Matthew Grossmann won a national championship in wrestling, the first Wilkes wrestler to achieve that distinction in 40 years. Nicholas Stauffer received the U.S. Public Health Service Excellence in Public Health Pharmacy Practice Award for his efforts to create a smoke-free campus at Wilkes. Our men’s and women’s tennis teams won their 8th and 9th consecutive MAC championships. Four students from our engineering program formed Kraken Board Sports and won the regional business plan competition in the wild card category. And, I could go on and on.

All of them, equipped with a Wilkes degree, are ready to make positive change in the world.

I’d like to take this opportunity to thank Dr. Terese Wignot for serving both as Interim Dean of the College of Science and Engineering and as Acting Dean of the School of Education. Terri began her service to Wilkes as Associate Provost on June 1st. Let me also thank Dr. Tom Baldino for serving as Interim Dean of the College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences. Tom returns to his first love – teaching – in the coming semester. Thank you both for serving your University so well.

The following faculty members were tenured or promoted this past year: Dr. Ajay Bommareddy (Pharmaceutical Sciences), Dr. Amjad Nazzal (Physics), Dr. Matthew Sowcik (Leadership Studies), Dr. Henry Castejon (Chemistry), and Dr. Kenneth Pidcock (Biology). The Board of Trustees also bestowed emeritus/a status on Drs. Louise Berard, Dennis Hupchick, Arthur Kibbe, and Umid Nejib (posthumously). I was pleased to be able to recognize these faculty achievements at this year’s Founders Gala in May.

And, after 35 years of service to Wilkes, Dean Barbara King retired this spring. Countless students over the years benefited from her wisdom. Thank you, Barbara, for dedicating the one life you have to live to Wilkes.

On June 22nd of this past year, we lost Robert S. Capin, the third president of Wilkes University. In Wilkes’ first 79 years there were only five presidents, so each one left an indelible mark on our development as an institution. Bob’s nine-year tenure from 1975-1984 was no exception. At one point in his career President Capin said: “In pursuing the goals we have established for ourselves, each of us has the obligation to apply our talents to the best of our ability. There is no substitute for excellence.”

During the past year, we also said goodbye to several colleagues: Claud Button, Theresa Rallo, Barbara Garey, Edward Elgonitis, Steven Nastelli, Amy Mbye, Mary Miller, James Merryman, Jack Meyers, Jane Lampe Groh, Rollie Schmidt, Pat Heamen, and Jerry Rebo; and undergraduate student, Jonathan Ratchko. May they rest in peace and may their service to Wilkes inspire our own service in the years to come.
CONCLUSION

I hope you agree that the 2014-2015 academic year was another good one for Wilkes University. Let me thank each and every one of you for your support. Our progress is not possible without your dedication.

We look ahead to the new academic year with great enthusiasm. As Oliver Wendell Holmes said:

“The one and only success which it is his (or hers) to command is to bring to his (or her) work a mighty heart.”

May all of us who care about Wilkes University bring to it a mighty heart in the coming year.

Thank you for reading this year’s annual letter. If you have questions or comments regarding it, please feel free to reach out to me directly via e-mail at patrick.leahy@wilkes.edu or send me a message through Twitter @PatrickFLeahy. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Patrick F. Leahy, Ed.D.
President

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