



# Patrick F. Leahy

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Freshman Orientation | July 10, 2016

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What a nice introduction! Thank you, Missy. And, thank you, Emma, for the great work that your entire orientation team is doing to welcome our students.

Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome. Thank you all for being here today and for interrupting your summer. On a summer day like this, I know there are so many things you could be doing. I myself just left the Jersey Shore. A few days ago I announced to my boys – Jack & Brian, ages 11 & 9 – that we were going to spend all day Sunday together, just us guys. They immediately started planning our day: fishing, then breakfast at Uncle Bill’s, then mini-golf, then the beach, and so on. I said: “Actually, I was thinking that we’d get up early, drive back to Wilkes-Barre so I can welcome the incoming students and their parents, then have lunch and drive back to the shore.” As you might imagine, they said: “No way!” Thank you all for being here and taking time out of your summer activities, whatever they may be. I am delighted to be here with you today.

I’ll have an opportunity to address all of you more formally at the First Year Convocation in August, so I’ll be brief today.

It was 30 years ago! It was 30 years ago this summer that I attended my college orientation with my parents. (It just doesn’t seem possible.) I do not remember much what we did that day, but I do remember how we felt that day. In a word: anxious. Of all the things that have changed in 30 years, I bet feeling anxious at orientation is not one of them. If that’s true and there remains some anxiety, I’d like to say a brief word to the students here and then to the families here.

First, the students. I figure that most of you are feeling some anxiety, not only about today, but about this whole college transition. Having been there, I can appreciate that. But, I encourage you to think about these next four years as what it truly is: an unbelievable opportunity! In fact, in a couple months you will have a unique opportunity afforded very few people. That is, you will have an opportunity to study at a private, four-year, American university – the best education of its kind in the world. Let me explain.

There are over seven billion people on this planet. Roughly 1.2 billion of them are age 15-25 – your peers worldwide. This fall, fewer than five million people from around the world will be enrolled in a private, four-year, American college or university. That’s just one of every 250 people more or less your age in the world. Said another way, that’s less than one half of one percent! Your first-year class will number about 650 students. If 650 people were the total population of your peer group around the globe, then only two or three of you would be enrolled in a private, four-year, American university. I call that a unique opportunity!

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 is coming in just a few short weeks. In fact, throughout your life, there will be nothing quite like this moment again. All of us here at Wilkes can’t wait to share in this special moment with you.

My pledge then to you students is this: We at Wilkes will offer you all of the programs, activities and opportunities of a large university in the caring, mentoring culture of a small college. Within this unique and special community, we will do everything we can to help you find your talents and passions – and then to help you unleash them – to the benefit of you and your families and to the benefit of our world.

And, second, to the parents and families, let me offer this. Like your kids, you are probably feeling some anxiety today. But, you may be feeling some melancholy, too. After all, it’s probably hard to imagine that your son or daughter is going off to college. Wasn’t it just yesterday that you were teaching him or her to walk, or to ride a bike, or to swing a bat, or to read? I know. I have four kids of my own who are growing up way too quickly. I have come to learn one of the harsh ironies of life. When raising kids, the days are incredibly long, but somehow the years are incredibly short. How does that happen? You are your children’s first and best teachers and coaches and mentors. We are honored to play a role in the next phase of their development.

While I’m sure there is some anxiety, maybe even some melancholy, among you parents and family members, I hope there is also some degree of comfort, too. You have offered us both a great privilege and a great responsibility – to help advance your children, to educate them, to prepare them for an increasingly complex world. We recognize the privilege and take it very seriously. And, we accept the responsibility and will do everything we can (I mean, everything we can) to make this experience count for your son or daughter.

Thirty years ago I sat where you students are sitting now, not at this place but at another private, four-year, American university. If 30 years went by as quickly as it did for me, you can imagine how quickly the next four years will go for each of you. I know it is hard to fathom, but in just four years we will all be assembled again, right here, to celebrate another transition – your graduation. That day will come quickly. And, when it does, each of you will walk across the stage at commencement a different person, having changed in ways that you cannot now even imagine. Let us begin this transformational journey together.

I am proud to have all of you, students and family members alike, as part of the Wilkes family. My best wishes to each and every one of you for a restful summer. I look forward to seeing you again in August.

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