



Patrick F. Leahy

Panamanian Assembly | February 12, 2012

Gracias, Anne. Buenos dias. Gracias por estar aqui hoy. What I am trying to say is: Good morning. Thank you all for being here today. Anyway, welcome to the Dorothy Dickson Darte Center at Wilkes University. I am so pleased so have such a great turnout for this special assembly.

I'd like to start by thanking the other individuals who are participating in today's assembly: the Vice Chair of our Board here at Wilkes, Chris Hackett; the mayor of the City of Wilkes-Barre, Tony George; our State Senator and SHINE partner, John Yudichak; and the Deputy Secretary for the Pennsylvania Department of Education, Wil Del Pilar. Join me in thanking all of these individuals for their kind words this morning.

It seems over the past couple days that all of Wilkes-Barre and much of Pennsylvania has turned out to meet Minister Paredes. She met with members of the press yesterday morning; Senator Yudichak and advisors to Congressman Barletta at SHINE yesterday afternoon; Lieutenant Governor Stack and State Representatives Pashinski, Boback, and Kaufer last night at dinner; and U.S. Senator Casey this morning just prior to this event. I want to publicly thank all of these individuals – and so many more – for taking time out of their very busy schedules to welcome Minister Paredes so warmly and to understand better our collaboration with the Republic of Panama.

This is an historic day in the 83-year history of Wilkes University as we welcome dignitaries from our Central American neighbors from the south, Panama. And, it is fitting that we should hold this event on February 12th. After all, it is the birthdate of our 16th president, Abraham Lincoln. President Lincoln once said: "I can only say that I view education as the most important subject which we as a people can be engaged in." That most important subject is what we are engaged in today: education, in particular, education for the Panamanian people and how Wilkes might play a significant role in it.

Panama is a country on the move. It now has the second largest economy in Central America. It has the fastest growing economy in all of Latin America and the Caribbean. According to the World Economic Forum, it is the now the second most competitive economy in Latin America. It, of course, hosts one of the most important international trade assets in the world in the Panama Canal, which, as you may know, is expanding. In fact, many of us here in Northeastern Pennsylvania are watching the Canal expansion. Since the New York ports are the only ones on the East Coast that can now handle the deep-hulled Pacific vessels, we hope the Canal will foster growth opportunities for our local and regional economy. And, Panama is committed to education. Under President Varela and his cabinet the country has launched a national education initiative, and he has entrusted Minister Paredes to execute the plan.

Minister Paredes has said: “We must reflect, on our starting points, on where we stand, on where we want to go, and how to better invest our resources in order to adapt them to the needs of our children’s education.” As a plan was developed to better invest resources for the needs of its children, Panama decided that it needed university partners in the U.S. and Great Britain in order to aid its efforts. These university partners host their citizens in various educational programs. Some of the American university partners are: the University of Pennsylvania, Georgetown University, Georgia Tech, Northwestern University, American University, and now Wilkes University.

Our Wilkes University is the right place with which to partner for so many reasons. We are a small university. That is, we are a full-scale university that can offer all of the programs and opportunities that Panamanian students need across bachelors, masters, and doctoral programs. We offer 6 schools of study (arts & humanities, science & engineering, business, education, nursing, and pharmacy); an Intensive English Language Program with 10-year accreditation; a fully-developed Center for Global Education & Diversity that offers numerous support services for foreign students; even a President who is working hard to remember his Spanish training from years ago. Yet, we offer all of this in a relatively small, caring, mentoring environment that larger universities cannot offer. You see, Wilkes University is a place that cares – I mean really cares – about individual relationships with students. We often think of ourselves as a family.

We at Wilkes focus on outcomes. That is, we focus on how all of our students fair, not just at graduation, but throughout their careers. Our Secretary of State, John Kerry, spoke last year at the Summit of the Americas in Panama and said this to a group of assembled university presidents and rectors. “Another major task that we face in education today is to strengthen the connection between report cards that we give to kids and the paychecks that they’re able to earn afterwards. There is a troubling gap between the skills that schools teach and the expertise that the job market demands. And, this gap is as frustrating to our students as it is to potential employers,” he said. We at Wilkes care about that, too. In addition to educating students to become engaged and productive citizens, we also aim to make them well-suited for today’s jobs and hopefully get them well-paid for their expertise. This past fall The Economist released its first-ever rankings of American colleges and universities. It measured the economic return that individual institutions offer their students. We were pleased that out of 1,275 schools nationwide Wilkes University ranked 25th in the country, just behind Rhode Island School of Design and just before MIT. So, we too are working to bridge whatever gaps exist between employers and their potential employees.

And, perhaps most important of all, we share the same values. The Country of Panama and Wilkes University both believe that the path to prosperity winds through education. Even today 50% of our undergraduate students here at Wilkes are the first in their families to pursue a 4-year college degree. They understand that a higher education leads to more earning potential, but also to more happiness and ultimately to more meaningful lives. We both believe that in an increasingly global community we are all interconnected. It’s why our strategic plan calls for providing more international opportunities for our faculty and students. And, finally, we both believe in the power of relationships.

So, what are we doing to strengthen relationships with Panama?

First, we established a partnership with Minister Paredes and her agency, MEDUCA. MEDUCA is committed to sending 1,000 teachers per year to the U.S. and Great Britain to help teachers both improve

their English language skills and exchange best practices around K-12 education. Our first MEDUCA cohort arrived in January. What a group they are! I'd like to ask them to stand so that we might recognize them this morning. We have a chant. What is it? Viva Panama! Go Wilkes! I had dinner recently with the cohort. After dinner, one of my colleagues sent me the following text: "Teachers from Panama leave their homes, in some cases leaving young families, for two months in the hopes of bettering themselves, in the hopes of becoming better educators and providers for their families. And, they entrust Wilkes to do this for them. That's a great responsibility for us." And, it is a responsibility that we take quite seriously. I am so proud of our Intensive English Program, our School of Education, and our Center for Global Education & Diversity for their enthusiasm around this initiative.

Second, Anne, Rosi, and I traveled to Atlanta a couple weeks ago to meet Isabel Saint Malo, the Vice President of Panama, who also serves as its Foreign Minister. (Incidentally, I discovered that she was educated at a university here in Pennsylvania.) We signed a memorandum of understanding that will allow Wilkes to educate members of the Panamanian diplomatic corps. They will come here to Wilkes both to improve English and to study international relations. Once again, our stellar faculty members are answering the call to design a custom program that meets the needs of the Panamanian diplomatic corps. I want to thank Dr. Andy Miller for his early energy and enthusiasm around this initiative.

And third, we welcome today Ariel Ruiz Valdez of IFARHU, which is the Panamanian organization that funds undergraduate students to study abroad. We welcome you, Ariel, and look forward to showing you the distinctive opportunities that Wilkes University - which is on a mission to create one of the finest small universities in the country - can offer to your students.

And, there are other ways that we are developing meaningful, enduring relationships with Panama. I guess what I'm saying Minister Paredes is: Estamos comprometidos! That is, we are committed!

As I said earlier, this is, indeed, an historic day for Wilkes University. Thank you all for being a part of it.