



Patrick F. Leahy

Spring Convocation • Choosing Excellence | January 19, 2017

Good morning, everyone, and welcome. Thank you for taking some time out of a very busy week to come together for our Spring Convocation.

Before we go any further, I'd like to ask that you join me in remembering Brianna Smarkusky this morning. Brianna was a senior here at Wilkes, who died suddenly and unexpectedly last week of a medical condition while participating in one of our field courses. Please join me in a moment of silence to remember Brianna and her family members. I assured Mr. and Mrs. Smarkusky that the entire Wilkes University community stands with them during this difficult time.

I'd like to recognize all of our newest Wilkes community members. If you have joined our community at any point since the Fall Convocation last August, would you please stand so that we might welcome you formally to Wilkes? We are glad to have you here at Wilkes – in the City of Wilkes-Barre, in Luzerne County, in the State of Pennsylvania, in the United States of America – all places that will increasingly benefit from our work here at Wilkes. Thank you all for being here this morning.

As we embark on another traditional semester, we have so much for which to be grateful. We are 2.5 years into our 6-year Gateway to the Future Strategic Plan. (Can you believe how quickly the time passes?) We are making steady progress toward our goal “to become one of the finest small universities in the nation, as evidenced by third party ratings of our performance.” Before I offer my formal convocation address, I'd like to invite our Provost, Dr. Anne Skleder, to the podium to provide some important updates as we begin the Spring semester.

Thank you, Anne, for these positive updates. And, let me take this moment when we are assembled together to publicly thank you, Terri, and all of our deans for supporting our faculty so fully. Join me in thanking all of academic leadership for their dedication to Wilkes. Thanks to all of you, Wilkes is on the move. We could spend our entire time this morning discussing these accomplishments and many others. Instead, I'd rather take this time to look at the University through another prism. That prism is excellence.

Aristotle once famously said: “Excellence is never an accident. It is always the result of high intentions, sincere effort, and intelligent execution. It represents the wisest choice of many alternatives. Choice – not chance – determines your destiny.” What choices are we making here at Wilkes around excellence? It's a key question for us at this point in our current strategic plan, as well as at this point in our 83-year evolution. Why? Because the competition has never been greater, with over 90 private schools in the State of Pennsylvania alone. Why? Because the traditional demographics are going against us, with the number of high school graduates expected to keep declining over the next 10 years. Why? Because, with the price

of college going up, so too do student and family expectations of quality. As I often say, “we are in the fight of our lives here.”

So, I’d like to spend our time discussing today excellence in three parts. First, by describing excellence throughout our history. Second, by highlighting specific initiatives that we are implementing to choose excellence today. And, third, by suggesting what culture changes may be necessary to more fully choose excellence in the years ahead.

First, our history. Our beginnings were humble. We scratched and scraped and clawed for resources to open up a private, independent, non-sectarian higher education institution for this community. From our founding as Bucknell University Junior College in 1933 ... to the establishment of Wilkes College in 1947 ... to the roll-out of masters programs in 1961 ... to the designation as Wilkes University in 1990 ... to our introduction of doctoral programs in 1996 ... to our first-ever fully online programs in 2006, we have always evolved to provide academic opportunity to the citizens of this region and increasingly beyond. Both in the first-generation students that we served and in the programs that we have developed, we have been committed to offering academic opportunities. And, we have always done so with very modest resources. It’s part of our proud heritage. Our founding president, Dr. Eugene Farley, was legendary for his conservation of limited resources. I hear that it grew out of his Quaker roots.

It is a great tribute to our predecessors that – despite operating on a shoe-string budget – they set a standard for excellence. You could say that over the years they “chose excellence.” That is why I have invited them, our emeritus faculty members, to join us this morning. These are the individuals who laid the foundation for our work today – people like Dr. Harold Cox, Dr. Owen Faut, Dr. Ben Fiester, Dr. Wilbur Hayes, Dr. Bob Heaman, Dr. Walter Karpinich, and Dr. Jim Rodechko, all of whom are here today (I think), and so many others, who couldn’t be here. Will all of our emeritus faculty members please stand so that we might recognize your years of dedicated service to Wilkes? These individuals remain partners in our efforts to strengthen our University.

Dr. Cox once told me that we have one of the most amazing stories in American higher education. Indeed, we do! Against all odds, we survived and thrived. We should be rightly proud of this history. And, we should continue to celebrate the men and women who made it possible.

This rich history motivates us today, which leads to the second idea I’d like to underscore today. Right now we are recommitting ourselves to choosing excellence at Wilkes. Said another way, we are more fully choosing excellence – not just as much excellence as we can afford, but true excellence, almost irrespective of the price. At this point in our history, with 3.5 years left in our bold strategic plan, in the early stages of a major capital campaign, there are signs all around Wilkes of “high intention, sincere effort, and intelligent execution.” Let me illustrate a number of areas.

Enrollment. Choosing excellence in enrollment, first and foremost, means more aggressively recruiting better prepared undergraduate students, whose parents are used to paying for their kids’ educations. Under the leadership of our new VP for Enrollment, Brian Dalton, we are putting strategies in place to recruit from a wider geographic area, from many more high schools, and from more private (read: college preparatory) high schools. Our current freshman class counts just 5% or so from private high schools, and we need to grow that number. Perhaps we weren’t ready to recruit up market 15 or 10 or even 5 years ago, but we are ready now! Our campus has never looked better. Our curricular and co-curricular offerings have never been more robust. And, our faculty and staff members have never been more eager. Now is the time to reposition Wilkes University in a hyper-competitive market. That’s why we have hired Creative Communication Associates (CCA), experts in higher education branding and marketing, to help rebrand Wilkes in 2017.

And, while doing so, we will remain committed to serving our founding mission of providing academic opportunity. You see, we continue to believe that talent is everywhere, and it is our duty as educators to find it in our students and help them unleash it. Very few, if any, of the institutions – public or private – ranked higher than Wilkes in the U.S. News & World Report ranking enroll: 50% first-generation, 43% Pell Grant eligible, and 26% diverse students at the undergraduate level. I often say that we out-access even the public institutions, and we sometimes out-mission even the faith-based institutions. This is something for which we should be very proud. But, if we are going to continue to serve first-generation, high financial need, and highly diverse students, then we need to keep creating ways to improve our outcomes with these students. That's why I am so pleased to announce the development of the WilkesPlus program, which we continue to discuss with various groups around campus. This innovative program provides an alternative pathway for these underprepared students, who nonetheless demonstrate academic potential. This enhanced first-year experience will aid these students' transition, improving their retention and graduation rates. And, if we do this well, we can lead American higher education in this area. This is what choosing excellence in serving first-generation students looks like! Details on this program will be forthcoming.

Teaching & learning. Choosing excellence in teaching and learning means, as stated in our strategic plan, to obtain and maintain the highest levels of accreditation in our respective fields. That is why ACPE for pharmacy, CCNE for nursing, ABET for engineering, and AACSB for business are so important. We must differentiate ourselves from the masses with excellent programs. These additional accreditations are important in doing so.

Choosing excellence has also lead us to develop a national partnership with HotChalk. This partnership, begun two years ago with the Passan School of Nursing, will expand in 2017 with the School of Education. While this partnership has enabled us to grow our online graduate programming, it is not just a growth initiative; it is a quality initiative. Online learning is here to stay, and delivering it with excellence will become an increasingly important component for all of us educators.

And, choosing excellence in teaching and learning will require us to take a hard look at off-site locations. As I mentioned last year at this time, we announced plans to close our nascent Poconos location since it offered no real strategic opportunity for Wilkes. All of the students enrolled at that location have either transferred to main campus or engaged online to finish their degrees. A similar phenomenon is happening at our Mesa site. When we closed the Poconos location, we started promoting the ABBA online in Arizona. The students that we are attracting in Arizona are more interested in our online offerings than in our on-ground site. It appears that we can extend our mission and serve new students in Arizona, but we may not need a physical infrastructure to do so. As a result, we may be able to close our struggling Mesa location, thus saving the overhead costs. A decision on Mesa's future will be forthcoming, once appropriate conversations take place with various stakeholders.

Scholarship & research. Choosing excellence in scholarship and research means making more resources available for these important efforts, first through the allocation of our own resources and then through the support of private donors and government agencies. We must continue to build out the facilities to enhance research, including new labs in bioengineering, nanotechnology, and additive manufacturing.

Perhaps most important of all, we must provide faculty members with the time necessary to make original contributions to knowledge. Wilkes is unique because scholarship and research here typically involves undergraduate students. At bigger research universities these opportunities are reserved for masters and doctoral students, as you know. Not surprisingly, it takes longer to mentor undergraduates in research.

We must continue to find ways to support faculty members who are committing to scholarship and research, enhancing our reputation as a discovery enterprise. And, a commitment to research also demands supporting a tech transfer office and an entrepreneurial center, like the Kirby Center for Free Enterprise & Entrepreneurship, to support ideas that could become commercialized into products and services that can actually improve people's lives.

Campus infrastructure. Choosing excellence in campus infrastructure means investing over \$50 million in our campus since 2012: 1) constructing the Cohen Science Center; 2) developing the new home for the Sidhu School of Business and Leadership; 3) consolidating and upgrading space for the Passan School of Nursing; 4) renovating 3 different historic residence halls at Fortinsky, Pearsall, and Michellini Halls; 5) designing the Karambelas East Campus Gateway; and 6) strengthening our campus network to support our insatiable appetite for more bandwidth; among others. It includes investing another \$40 million in the campus over the next few years: 1) a big investment in the arts with the redevelopment of 141 S. Main Street, 2) a significant investment in engineering and pharmacy with the renovation of Stark Learning Center, 3) an investment in campus appeal and functionality with the construction of the South Campus Gateway Project, 4) a major overhaul of the Ralston Athletic Complex, and 5) perhaps other projects, as needs arise.

In addition, we administrators must support more fully our first-rate colleagues in physical plant in their efforts to maintain the campus. We cannot be satisfied with good campus maintenance, if the goal is excellence. I have seen lots of campuses in the past year, as I take my oldest daughter, Grace, on campus tours. I treated each visit basically as a clandestine fact-finding mission. You can imagine the questions I had for these unsuspecting tour guides: What campus projects do you have in the coming years? How much will they cost and how are you paying for them? How much deferred maintenance do you have? I was a tour guide's worst nightmare! Our campus can be one of the most unique, first-class campuses anywhere, which will be necessary to recruit and retain more talented students. Countless people throughout 2016 told me that the campus has never looked better. To which I continually said: "Thank you. I am very proud of our progress. But, if you think the campus looks good now, just wait a few years."

Fundraising. Choosing excellence in fundraising means executing on the most significant, most comprehensive, hopefully most successful campaign in our history. The Gateway to the Future Campaign, aimed at supporting the excellence initiatives throughout our strategic plan, continues in earnest. We have already secured some of the largest gifts in our history, including a major grant for our engineering expansion at Stark, a naming gift for the Passan School of Nursing, a naming gift for the Karambelas Communication & Media Center, and others.

I am pleased to announce today our most recent major gift. The estate of George Bierly – a graduate of Bucknell University Junior College who left here in 1940 to complete his bachelor's degree at MIT – has donated a \$1.7 million cash gift, which will be used to establish an endowment in support of experiential learning for students. Per our spending policy, that's nearly \$80 thousand more dollars per year to support study abroad, non-paid internships, undergraduate research, and the like. Please join me in thanking George Bierly and his family for this incredible support.

Excellence in this area will entail not only raising unprecedented amounts of money, but also engaging legions of alumni and supporters who are fired up about our prospects for the future. In the coming weeks, Tom MacKinnon, Vice President for Advancement, and I will offer opportunities for the campus community to hear the campaign overview. As the president, I can assure you that I will be dedicating a huge amount of my time in the coming 3 years to ensuring excellence in this critically important area.

Student service. Choosing excellence in student service means disassembling the OneStop program and rebuilding our Financial Aid Office and Bursar's Office with a renewed emphasis on student and family service. At an open staff meeting last spring I was discussing this concept of service excellence. One of our staff members said: "All I do is answer the phones around here. How can I improve?" I said: "In my opinion every job around here, including the president's, can be improved. Answer the phone with more enthusiasm, with more courtesy, with more commitment to helping the person on the other end of the line. You are our constituents' first impression of Wilkes. It's a critical job, and it needs to be done excellently," I explained. Throughout the semester we will make student service training opportunities available for all of us here at Wilkes.

Campus community. And, finally, in light of activities happening on campuses throughout the country in the aftermath of last November's election, choosing excellence in campus community means recommitting ourselves to two – sometimes conflicting – ideas. First, we are a community that not only respects our differences, but celebrates them. And, second, we will, as an academic community, support, even exalt, the free and open expression of ideas. These two values may – at times – create tension, but, as educators, we must be comfortable in this tension. And, excellence in campus community also involves continually finding ways to take care of one another. An idea came up at a recent open staff meeting about the possibility of donating unused sick time to each other when one of us runs out of sick time. It's a good idea and worthy of discussion, which will take place with USAC shortly. This kind of innovative thinking will help us all achieve excellence in building community.

All of these initiatives – in enrollment, teaching & learning, scholarship & research, campus infrastructure, fundraising, student service, and campus community – taken together – represent a university that is not only striving for excellence, but also investing in it. In short, these initiatives represent a university that is choosing excellence.

This leads to my third and final point. Choosing excellence is not the sum total of a number of initiatives, however important they may be. Instead, choosing excellence is about culture. It is, as the professor and public servant, John W. Gardner, said: "Doing the ordinary things extraordinarily well." And, there are ordinary things being done extraordinarily well all over campus. Take, for instance, Marianne Rexer, a professor who put a student's final course online so that her student could accept a good job when that job was available. Or, take Chris Zarpentine, a professor who developed an online course in ethics to meet the needs of our online nursing students. Or, take Andy Miller, a professor who just recently published his third book (justifying all of those boondoggles to Central America). Or, take Chris Leiht, a coach whose men's and women's tennis teams have won 9 and 10 straight conference titles respectively. Or, take Paul Kaspriskie, a facilities manager who told me that in his 30 years here he's never been more enthusiastic about Wilkes than right now. Or, take Karim Letwinsky, the director of our EdD program in the School of Education who mentored her Omani students to a 100% completion rate and who is recruiting the next cohort in Dubai. Or, take any of our colleagues who have received the inaugural President's Awards for Excellence – Mike Steele, Addy Malatesta, John Carlin, Helen Davis, and Mark Kaster – or our colleagues who have been recognized with Caught Being Colonel Awards over the past few months. These individuals' dedication to doing "ordinary things extraordinarily well" is clear. And, I could go on and on.

A true commitment to excellence – choosing to be excellent – will require more from all of us. It means that "good enough" cannot now be good enough. "Incremental improvement" cannot now be satisfactory improvement. "It certainly is better than it was" cannot now be as good as it could – or should

– be. “Good enough” or “incremental improvement” or “better than it was” can’t compete in today’s higher education environment. Only excellence can compete.

Excellence is a culture developed by an entire organization that does ordinary things extraordinarily well ... each and every day. What we need is to continue to develop an attitude that is not comfortable with good, even very good, but one that is yearning for great. What we need is a culture that pursues excellence in an unyielding fashion in every aspect of University life. To remind me of this, I need only to look at our seal.

To me, our seal represents the restless pursuit of excellence, motivated by our mission. Restless means never settling. Pursuit means not just wanting excellence, but having the courage to chase it. Excellence means that highest ideal of performance. The restless pursuit of excellence. But, let’s face it, lots of organizations – including other universities – pursue excellence. But, what makes it uniquely Wilkes is what motivates this effort. This effort is not motivated by rankings, or by greed, or by prestige. What motivates excellence here at Wilkes should be our unique mission – a mission to be a private institution with a public purpose, to offer academic opportunity to students who need it and deserve it, and – in the process – to be a force for positive economic, cultural, and social development in this city, in this state, and in this country.

Whenever I see the seal – on my letterhead, in a publication, in the Fenner Garden, on banners at Commencement – I’m reminded of our University’s history. We have pursued excellence since our founding, and we must continue to do so to remain competitive today. In the days and weeks ahead I hope that seeing our seal displayed around campus will re-energize you, as it does me.

So, in summary, we have a rich history of beating the odds with very limited resources, and we should celebrate that. We have put strategies in place today to choose excellence across so many different aspects of our university. And, perhaps most important of all, we are evolving our culture toward a deeper commitment to quality and excellence. Let me conclude where I began, with Aristotle’s quote. “Excellence is never an accident. It is always the result of high intentions, sincere effort, and intelligent execution. It represents the wisest choice of many alternatives. Choice – not chance – determines your destiny.” Excellence happens by choice, not by chance. In 2017 and beyond, please join me in recommitting ourselves to choosing excellence at Wilkes University. Thank you.

Now, as time permits, I am happy to take your questions and/or comments.