



# Patrick F. Leahy

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The State Of The University Address Fall Convocation | August 24, 2016

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Thank you, Jamie and Andy, for your thoughtful comments. More importantly, thank you for your leadership here at Wilkes. Please join me in recognizing Jamie and Andy for their service to Wilkes.

Also, before I begin, I'd like to take a moment to welcome in a special way those of you who are new colleagues here at Wilkes. If you have joined the University community at any time since the Spring Convocation – that is, anytime since January of this year – would you please stand so that we might welcome you here to Wilkes?

The poet, Mary Oliver, asked: “What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” Each of these individuals – indeed all of us gathered here today – have dedicated our wild and precious lives to our students here at Wilkes. Thank you!

Convocation is a semi-annual event here at Wilkes, an attempt among others to improve communication and collaboration here on campus. The term is derived from the Latin word “convocare” – “to call together” – to come together as in an assembly, a confab, or a conference. I am reminded, however, of the comedian, Fred Allen, who said: “A conference is a gathering of people who individually can do nothing, but together (ahh together) they can decide that nothing can be done.”

As we try to prove Fred Allen wrong, I'd like to provide you with some thoughts, as we make final preparations for the start of the traditional fall semester. Specifically, I'd like to provide an assessment of our university using three different lenses, three different “states” of our university, if you will: 1) the state of our university by today's current condition, 2) the state of our university from a historical viewpoint, and 3) the state of our university from various student perspectives.

The first lens into the “state” of the university is an update on the current condition of the university at this point in time, meaning right now, in advance of the coming semester. Let me share with you some important updates.

First, enrollment. Fall undergraduate enrollment looks very strong. In fact, if all holds up over the next few weeks, we will enroll our largest first-year class in our history. Traditional graduate enrollments also seem strong at this point. Transfer numbers are down a bit, but nonetheless solid. We have more students engaged with Wilkes University than perhaps ever before.

And, we continue to look for ways to build demand for a Wilkes education in a hyper-competitive environment. For example, this coming year will see the introduction of new academic programs, including a bachelor's degree in hospitality management and a Ph.D. degree (the University's first ever) in nursing, both of which are winding their way through the appropriate channels.

I am also pleased to announce that our NCAA athletics offerings for our undergraduate students will continue to expand. We will be announcing to the media in the coming days the introduction of men's and women's ice hockey to Wilkes in a unique partnership with the Wilkes-Barre/Scranton Penguins (yes, the Stanley Cup-winning Penguins). This is another program that meets our goal of recruiting students from national, indeed international, markets, aiding our efforts to recruit highly motivated students and to further diversify the campus.

With enrollments strong across the board, we need to continue to focus on retaining and graduating these students on time. Our Retention & Graduation Taskforce has completed its work. Now, it's up to all of us to mount a university-wide effort to improve these rates. First and foremost, it is our duty as educators. These rates will increasingly be seen as a measure of academic quality. And, of course, better rates mean a better bottom line. Additional information on our retention efforts will be announced this fall.

Second, budget. As we prepare our financial audit for last year, we are once again reporting a modest operating surplus of \$2 million. This marks the fifth consecutive year that we've been able to generate a surplus from operations. As you know, it's imperative for us to continue to generate our own resources for the future, which we can invest back into the University or leave on our balance sheet to strengthen our financial position. Our long-term health requires it, and bond rating agencies demand it.

Next, fundraising. In June, we announced the naming gift for the Karambelas Media Center on South Main Street. When this gift is fully realized, it could be the largest gift in our history. I'd like to ask you to join me in publicly thanking Clayton and Theresa Karambelas for their incredible support.

Since that time, fundraising has continued in earnest. This summer we have obtained the following gift commitments:

- an \$800,000 cash gift from an alumnus to support the Media Center project,
- a \$50,000 per year commitment (essentially a \$1.1 million endowment) from an alumni couple to support our international student recruitment and study abroad efforts,
- a \$650,000 grant from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to support our companion gateway project across South Street,
- an \$850,000 grant from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to support the SHINE after-school program,
- a \$100,000 gift from the estate of Rollie and Marge Schmidt to support the Ralston Athletics Complex, and
- a \$100,000 gift from an alumnus to establish an executive-style boardroom in the Sidhu School of Business and Leadership.

These gifts, among others, amount to nearly \$4 million in support of our Gateway to the Future Strategic Plan. They bode very well for the upcoming fundraising campaign, details of which will be forthcoming this fall. I'd like to publicly thank these donors for supporting Wilkes so fully. And, I'd like to thank all of you for inspiring them to do so with your work.

Fourth, capital projects. Construction activity has been high this summer as we continue to craft a first-class residential campus in our urban environment of Wilkes-Barre. Nearly \$1 million has been invested to refresh classroom space, and another \$1 million to renovate select residence halls. New bleachers at Ralston begin our multi-year Ralston renewal project, which will ultimately create one of the top Division III athletic complexes in the region. Our signage program, which will more attractively and clearly identify all Wilkes buildings, has begun. And this project is not a moment too soon. Recently, I was walking down South Franklin Street when I was stopped by a woman looking for Hessel Hall. Hessel Hall? I was embarrassed to tell her that I was the president, yet I didn't know where Hessel Hall was. "This is King's College, isn't it?" she asked. "No, this is Wilkes University, the only university in downtown Wilkes-Barre," I said. So, I think you would all agree that we need more clear and more attractive signage around campus.

All of this happened while work continued on our major upcoming projects. We have finalized plans for the renovation of 141 South Main Street into the consolidated Karambelas Media Center and the expanded and improved Sordoni Art Gallery, a \$6 million investment in our College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences. Construction on this exciting project has begun. This fall, final plans will be developed to renovate Stark Learning Center to accommodate the expansion of engineering labs for the College of Science and Engineering and to improve space for both the Nesbitt School of Pharmacy and the Passan School of Nursing. I cannot wait to show you these plans, which will not only enhance the academic space, but also improve the look and feel of our first-class campus.

Next, strategic initiatives. We continue to manage the development of our strategic initiatives portfolio, which includes: 1) our Arizona location, 2) our online graduate programs, and 3) our Latin American and Caribbean initiative. Let me touch on each briefly.

- Undergraduate enrollments in Arizona this fall are modest, but acceptable. We anticipate serving 50 undergraduate students and another 15 graduate students. With careful expense management, this should allow us to just about break even this year, affording us the continuing opportunity to assess the long-term value of this initiative without the pressure of funding operating losses.
- Our graduate online nursing program, made possible with our partners at HotChalk, continues to grow. We now have over 700 students enrolled in eight different programs. Conversations continue with HotChalk over the prospects of expanding services with other academic disciplines here at Wilkes.
- I just returned from Panama, where Wilkes University was invited by the U.S. Embassy to serve as the only university to co-sponsor the Feria Internacional del Libro, the largest education gathering in Latin America. Our relationship with Panama continues to expand, as we signed a memorandum of understanding with the country's largest funding agency, IFARHU, which will aid our efforts in bringing high-achieving international students to campus. In fact, today, we welcome another Panama Bilingual cohort to campus for a 16-week intensive English immersion program.

In the years to come we will continue to assess each of these initiatives for its strategic value to Wilkes in serving our mission.

Finally, I was also pleased to announce earlier this summer a change to our academic calendar for the coming year. After consulting with the FAC and the USAC, we have decided to close the University in observance of our national holiday to remember the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. As I'm sure you'd agree, we felt that this will be the most appropriate way to honor his legacy.

All of these developments – and others not mentioned – represent good progress on our Gateway to the Future Strategic Plan. As our students would say: “It’s all good!” I am happy to discuss any of these developments in greater detail during the upcoming question and answer period. I also encourage each of you to read the President’s Annual Report, which will be available in the next few weeks.

Thus far, I’ve touched on enrollment, budgets, fundraising, and other factors to describe the current “state” of the University. Let me move on to the second important way to understand the “state” of our university today. That is, let’s pull back from these immediate considerations and look at Wilkes with a broader, historic lens. That is an altogether different discussion in light of our evolution as an institution of higher learning over the past 83 years.

- In 1933, we were founded as Bucknell University Junior College as a two-year school to prepare local students for transfer to Bucknell. Today, still 76% of our students across the University come from Pennsylvania. 19% come from 40 other states in the U.S., and 5% come from 15 different countries.
- In 1947, we became an independent Wilkes College, a traditional four-year college that from its very beginning offered professional degrees in business, engineering, and nursing. Today, as you well know, we feature two colleges and four schools as part of our University, together offering 70 degree programs: 41 bachelor’s, 25 master’s, and four doctoral (or terminal) degrees.
- In the early 1960s, Wilkes College started offering graduate degree programs to serve an even wider cross-section of students. Today, we serve nearly as many graduate students as we do undergraduate students, and each year we confer nearly twice as many graduate degrees as we do undergraduate degrees at our various commencement exercises.
- In 1990, Wilkes College became Wilkes University, recognizing the expansion of professional and graduate programming to complement our strength in undergraduate liberal arts education. Today, we are classified by the Carnegie Foundation as a “large master’s level university.”
- In 1996, Wilkes founded the Nesbitt School of Pharmacy, introducing the University’s first doctoral program. Today, our four doctoral (or terminal) degree programs enroll 469 students.
- In 2006, Wilkes University offered its first online program, signaling early adoption of a new educational technology. Today, 35% of all of our students university-wide are enrolled in exclusively online programs.

- And, in 2019, we are very likely going to take the next step in our evolution, when the Carnegie Foundation will formally classify us as a doctoral research institution, based on the diversity and number of our degree conferrals. When that happens, we'll go on a list with the greatest universities in the country.

Three years from now, we will have evolved from a junior college to a doctoral research university over the course of nine decades. How did this happen? It happened because Wilkes as an institution of higher learning has always grown to meet the needs of students. Adapting to changing circumstances has been a part of our past and must continue to be a part of our future.

Now that we have discussed both the current state and the historic state of the university, I'd like to conclude with a brief look at the "state" of our university from today's students' perspectives. After all, they probably aren't that focused on budgets or enrollments or how we have evolved as an institution. They want a university that will serve their current educational needs.

- Take Dillon, for example. Dillon is a sophomore honors student from Curwensville, Pa., who is studying biology. Over this past summer he worked as an intern at the Smithsonian Institution of Natural History, learning the process of DNA Barcoding. Later in the summer, he joined three other Wilkes students on a trip to the University Scholars Leadership Symposium in Hanoi, Vietnam, where he joined 700 other scholars from 69 countries. They discussed global humanitarian issues such as poverty, human trafficking, and the worldwide refugee crisis.
- Or, consider Elizabeth, who is a P4 pharmacy student. Elizabeth comes to us from Long Island, NY. During the fall semester in 2012, Hurricane Sandy hit the east coast, and her mother died as a result of the circumstances. The faculty and staff across the University, in particular the School of Pharmacy, rallied around her. With the support of Wilkes, Elizabeth did rally, and she remains on track to graduate with her Pharm.D. in May.
- Or, take Katrina, who is a marketing major at our site in Arizona. She is a 22-year-old single mother, who relies on family to care for her son while she attends school full-time and works part-time. She explained to Marianne Rexer: "My support group doesn't always understand why I need to go to college, especially when I have to return to the building late at night for team meetings. But, I am so appreciative of Wilkes' understanding the needs of us first-generation students. Sometimes, I bring my son by the site just to show everyone why I work so hard."
- Or, take Debra, who is a 100% online graduate nursing student who recently graduated with her DNP degree. She wrote this note of appreciation to Dr. Kathleen Hirthler: "Without your help and encouragement, I really would not be here. I am including a copy of my G.E.D. I was a high school dropout, and the odds were against me. But, I overcame those odds. I want this G.E.D. to be a reminder of the difference you make in the lives of others. You pushed me to do my best and to think big. I will do my best to make you proud."

- Or, finally, consider Juan, who is one of our IEP students from Panama. Prior to his visit to Wilkes, he had never left his country—had never, ever boarded a plane. He is married and has two kids at home. When asked why he wanted to leave his country and his family for the first time for eight weeks of study at Wilkes, he said: “Not only do I want to become a better teacher for my students, but I want to become a better man and a better father. I am incredibly grateful to Wilkes University for this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.”

Five very different students — one comprehensive university. This is the richness and diversity of Wilkes University. We go where students need us. Providing academic opportunity has been our mantra for 83 years, and it must continue in the years to come. Our student demographics have changed through the years — and will continue to change — but our commitment to each and every single student remains steadfast.

Over all these years, as we have grown our programming and become a comprehensive university, we have always — always — pledged the following: your gender, your ethnicity, your religion, your socioeconomic status, your age, and your sexual orientation do not matter. It is only your potential that matters. If you show promise, you are welcome here at this university. This too has been our pledge for 83 years, and it too will remain so in the years to come.

Colleagues, we find ourselves at yet another pivotal moment in the history of Wilkes, as we transition from a large master’s university to a doctoral research university. As we continue to move forward, we will remain: 1) committed to liberal learning, 2) dedicated equally to the sciences and to the arts, 3) focused on teaching and on scholarship, 4) preserving our traditions and developing new innovations, 5) open to all students who show promise.

In sum, whether you look at our current condition, our historical viewpoint, or our students’ perspectives, the state of our university is strong. And, despite the many challenges facing American higher education, it is getting stronger every year.

But, progress like this does not just happen. Dedicated, committed, passionate people make it happen. And, they have been making it happen since the 1930s. All of you are making it happen right now. All of you – no matter what you do around here – are educators, because all of you who work here at Wilkes are creating an environment where students can be successful.

Thanks to all of you, this place matters. And, if you don’t believe me, then ask Dillon, Elizabeth, Katrina, Debra, or Juan. They will tell you.

Ralph Waldo Emerson said: “The purpose of life is not to be happy. It is to be useful, to be honorable, to be compassionate, to have it make some difference that you have lived and lived well.”

On behalf of Dan Cardell and our Board of Trustees, I want to thank each and every one of you for the difference you are making here at Wilkes University. Thank you.