



Patrick F. Leahy

Fall Convocation | August 21, 2013

“A SPLENDID UNIVERSITY”

Good morning, everyone, and welcome back. Whether you traveled to the Jersey Shore or the Ivory Coast this summer, we are glad to have you back on campus for the start of another academic year – our 81st as an institution of higher learning.

I am sorry that Amy and the kids couldn't be here. The girls have sports practices this morning. And the boys frankly didn't want to “waste” one of their final days of summer vacation listening to their father. I asked my son Jack, who is 8 years old, if he wanted to come this morning to hear his dad speak. “Why would I want to do that?” he asked.

Let me thank both Marcia Farrell and Joe Kultys for their leadership here at Wilkes. Marcia and Joe, I want you to know how much I look forward to collaborating with you throughout the coming year. Please join me in wishing Marcia and Joe good luck in their new roles. I also want to recognize the immediate past chairs of the FAC and the USAC respectively, Justin Matus and Mike Fox, for the good work they did in advancing Wilkes during the past year. Join me in thanking Justin and Mike for their service to Wilkes.

As we begin our 81st academic year together, I'd like to take a moment and remember former professor of English Al Groh, who, after graduating from Bucknell University Junior College, started his service to Wilkes in 1947. This will be the first academic year in a long time without him. In fact, his funeral service was held here last year in the very theater that he was so instrumental in creating. Please join me in a moment of silence to remember Professor Groh's lifetime of contributions to Wilkes. Thank you. Before we get into the convocation address, I would like to make a special announcement. Dr. Harold Cox, would you please join me on stage? It is quite fitting, having just completed our 80th year, that we recognize someone who has been with Wilkes for 50 of those 80 years. This year he celebrates his golden anniversary here at Wilkes, having joined the history department faculty in 1963. He has held numerous positions here at Wilkes, including: coordinator of graduate education, chair of the history department, faculty advisor to the president, and still today a member of the creative writing graduate program faculty. In addition, he has worked hard to preserve our rich history, a history he would tell you that is unlike any other in American higher education. It is not hyperbole to say that this University would not have an archives were it not for his tireless efforts. So today I'd like to announce that the archives in the Eugene S. Farley Library will be forever known as the Harold E. Cox Archives. The Harold E. Cox Archives will be formally dedicated at a small ceremony at 3 p.m. today. “There are few earthly things more splendid than a university,” said John Masefield, poet laureate of England, in 1946 on the occasion of receiving an honorary degree from the University of Sheffield. That is as

true here at Wilkes as any university in the world. From the campus itself, to the people that make up Wilkes, to the activities all around us, there is splendor everywhere at Wilkes. Take, for example, Mike Steele, who spent the past year conducting research at Harvard. Or take Adam Welch, who was named the pharmacist of the year in the state of Pennsylvania this past year. Or take Eric Ruggiero, who was awarded a fellowship at Sony Pictures this summer. Or take Loretta Bilder, who was selected as a prestigious Jonas Scholar in Nursing. Or take the group of seniors from across multiple disciplines who spent time this spring in Bangladesh bringing power to a remote village school. Or take Bethany Sharpless and her team of students who raised over \$40,000 to fight cancer in this year's Relay for Life. Take, for instance, Jordyn Miller, a Wilkes senior who spent the summer with engineers from Purdue and came back feeling better educated than the students at one of the top-rated engineering schools in the country. Or take Phil Ruthkosky and Sharon Castano, who lead our national award-winning e-mentoring program. Or take Chris Leicht, our women's and men's tennis coach, whose teams continue to exemplify excellence year in and year out, on and off the court, winning seven and six titles in a row, respectively. Or take the first graduates of our innovative Doctor of Nursing Practice program, who celebrated at graduation with some 730 other graduates. And I could go on and on. Yes, there are few earthly things more splendid than a university – our university – Wilkes University.

As we embark on our 81st academic year together, let me update you on a number of key initiatives that we are pursuing to make Wilkes even more, shall we say, “splendid.”

Let me begin with last year's financial picture. The fieldwork for the 2013 fiscal year audit is complete. While the final audit is not yet in, it looks like 2013 was an excellent year financially. Thanks in large part to Melanie Wade and her team for the strength of our undergraduate enrollment, as well as to all of you for your careful management of our expenses, we are projecting an operating surplus of over \$4 million. This is excellent news, as it will enable us to strengthen our financial position in the years to come. In the future, we will need to continue to generate these excess revenues over expenses in order to reinvest in our people, our students, and our campus. As Jeff Alves, dean of the Sidhu School and current president of the International Council for Small Business, has said recently: “Think of surpluses as resources for the future.” But we can only accomplish this by: 1) budgeting conservatively, 2) over-achieving on our revenue targets, and 3) carefully managing our budget throughout the year. Each spending decision should be considered for its positive or negative variance to the budgeted amount. This is how we will create “resources for the future” each year. So much of this positive financial performance, of course, is possible through solid enrollment. Enrollments across the board look strong for this coming academic year. Our summer numbers held up against budget, despite the fact that summer activity was down, mostly due to the move to the new science center. At present, we are projecting a fall class of 610 or so freshmen, pulled from the largest applicant pool in history. This represents only the third class in University history over 600. If this holds up, this will again result in a positive variance on our conservative budget numbers. These students come from 285 different high schools in 14 states and six foreign countries. A full 25 percent of our incoming class now comes from outside the state of Pennsylvania. Given the declining number of students in Pennsylvania, this is very good news. The incoming average GPA is 3.5, which is even with last year, and the average SAT is 1535, which is just slightly below last year. The freshmen discount rate is holding at 46.5 percent, well within our budgeted amount. In addition, the mix of residential students is higher in this year than in past years, which means more housing and meal contracts than were budgeted. Our transfer number so far is 154, which is well above our budget number for the year of 115. Most of these transfers are international students and students from other four-year schools. We continue to underperform in attracting high-quality transfers from area community colleges. I believe we must establish articulation agreements with area

community colleges -- articulation agreements that ensure academic quality and aid our ability to grow enrollments with talented students. I will ask our interim provost, Terri Wignot, to focus on establishing these agreements in the coming year. Similarly, graduate enrollments look strong. For the first time in three years our graduate enrollment starts are up this year over last year. This too is promising news. Our challenge this year, as in most years, will be to retain our graduate students year over year. I have said many times that one of my two main concerns as the president is strengthening enrollments. After all, we find ourselves in the single most competitive market for higher education in the nation at a time when the traditional student demographics are moving against us. We simply must continue to find ways to increase demand in our seats at Wilkes and, if possible, grow the number of seats in a responsible way. In order to do so, in the coming year, we hope to: 1) roll out a new honors program to help us attract even brighter, higher-performing students, 2) add music programs, such as a marching band, 3) expand athletic programs, like women's swimming and women's golf, 4) continue to look for ways to expand high-quality graduate programs on-ground and online, and 5) increase the amount of money dedicated to the marketing and enrollment functions.

I also believe that we must continue to make investments in our unique campus to make teaching, researching and learning at Wilkes even more attractive. I am pleased to share with each of you that the Cohen Science Center is complete – on time and a full \$2 million under budget. This \$33 million capital project, which was completed in just 18 short months, will continue our position as a leader in the sciences throughout the region. I'd like to thank Chip Prescott, John Pesta, Justin Kraynack and Janet Kobylski, among many others, for their roles in making this such a positive outcome. And let me thank all of you for your patience during the inconvenience of construction. I hope you will all join us later today at 4 p.m. for our first social event of the year, which will be held on the rooftop of the new Cohen Science Center. And if that's not enough, don't forget the other smaller, but no less meaningful, investments that we have made around campus: the creation of a new simulation lab for the School of Nursing, the renovation of Bedford Hall for the art department, the renovation of Fortinsky Hall to house 40 more students, and the expansion of the Munson Field House for the benefit of all of our student-athletes. Each of these projects is worthy of celebration, though they are at risk of being overshadowed by the opening of the science facility. Also, let me take a moment to thank all of the members of our facilities staff, who show such care in maintaining our campus. Please join me in thanking the facilities staff. In the coming years, in consultation with the Campus Master Planning Committee, we will make investments in engineering, communications and business, which will create additional teaching space commensurate with the quality of a Wilkes education. We will also invest in additional student housing and further campus beautification. All of these improvements – and others – will help make our campus shine to current and prospective students.

On Oct. 4 of this year, we will celebrate the dedication of the Cohen Science Center. At that time, we will also celebrate the successful conclusion of the Achieving Our Destiny Campaign, a \$20 million effort to help fund the science center. Thanks to the great work of Mike Wood and his entire advancement staff, as well as many key board members and volunteers, we will be able to close that campaign a full two years ahead of the original plan, aided by the fact that the building is under budget. This past year alone Wilkes raised \$5.7 million in cash from our donors, most likely a record fundraising year in our history. Please join me in thanking Mike and his team for their excellent work. Once this campaign closes, we will immediately begin to lay plans for our next capital campaign effort, which will be designed to raise money specifically in support of our updated strategic plan. In fact, we have already secured the first gift of this next campaign. One of our dedicated alumni, with whom Mike Wood and I visited this spring, has increased his estate commitment to Wilkes from \$100,000 to \$500,000 in just

the past week. Recall that the biggest gifts come at the intersection of donor passion and institutional dreams. We know many people of means who care about Wilkes, and we have no shortage of dreams. It will be our responsibility – my responsibility, in particular – in the coming years to match their passion with our dreams. This president cannot wait to begin that effort.

But first we must complete the strategic planning process. The Strategic Planning Committee has been meeting throughout the summer to advance the work of the strategic plan. So far we have confirmed the university's mission statement, which is "to continue the Wilkes tradition of liberally educating our students for lifelong learning and success in a constantly evolving and multicultural world through a commitment to individualized attention, exceptional teaching, scholarship and academic excellence, while continuing the university's commitment to community engagement." We couldn't argue with that. And we have reconfirmed the University's five core values: mentorship, scholarship, diversity, innovation and community. We felt that these five values still have currency today. We also, with much input from all of you, have updated the University's SWOC analysis, which created a context for our planning over the next five years. As we considered priorities for the next phase of our development, the following six themes have emerged: 1) building high-quality curricular and extracurricular programs, 2) investing in our people, 3) recruiting and retaining students, 4) improving our financial strength, 5) developing our campus infrastructure, and 6) leading efforts to improve downtown Wilkes-Barre.

We would now like to invite the larger Wilkes community into a conversation about these themes. Do they make sense to you? Are we missing anything? Can you get behind them? We will engage this dialogue at meetings that are scheduled throughout the next month. Once we receive input from the University community, we will codify themes into the next plan and will work to articulate the four or five highest-priority strategies to support each of them. Our goal remains to take our updated strategic plan to the board of trustees for its approval at the December meeting. This will afford us the second semester of this academic year to finalize the details and begin the preparation for launch on June 1, 2014. Concurrent with this process, we will be conducting a nationwide search for our next senior vice president/provost. The newly constituted search committee, comprising Larry Kuhar, Janet Starner, Art Kibbe, Ming Lew, Sue Hritzak, Bill Miller, Nimi Patel, Matthew Ruch, and Paul Adams, who is acting once again as the chair, has met to begin its critically important work. This year we will be utilizing the services of Steve Leo and Vicki Henderson of Storbeck/Pimentel to aid our efforts. As I have mentioned, I will be much more directly involved in the search this time around, working with my colleagues to identify the best possible candidates to introduce to you for your consideration. Our goal is to have a SVP/provost named by February of next year.

Earlier I indicated that enrollment was one of my two greatest concerns as president. The other is creating the safest possible environment for our campus constituents: our students, our faculty members, and our staff members. One of my first formal duties as president was to commission a public safety audit to ensure that we are doing everything we can to create a safe environment. The results of that report are in. The bottom line is this: In order to meet the growing safety challenges in our host city, we will need to enhance our public safety operation. This effort will include new personnel, new equipment, and new procedures. Whatever it ultimately costs, we will allocate the money. We will not delay in implementing the recommendations of the audit. Immediately, you will start to see new public safety vehicles, new easier-to-identify uniforms on our officers, and new officer patrol patterns – all designed to maximize public safety visibility on campus. In addition, we have already appointed a search committee to help us identify a new director of public safety, who will report directly to Chip Prescott. The

members of this committee are: Justin Kraynack, Mischelle Anthony, Phil Miller, Gretchen Yeninas, Joe Housenick and Barbara King. If you have suggestions regarding the search, please contact our colleagues on the search committee. We must get out ahead of these challenges. Conversations regarding the proposed public safety changes will take place with the campus community in the weeks ahead. I beg your patience and understanding as we work through these changes to ensure a safe and healthy campus.

I just returned last week from Mesa, Ariz., where we officially opened the Mesa Center for Higher Education. What a great event! Wilkes University and Westminster College of Fulton, Mo., occupy space in the center. The possibilities for Wilkes to establish itself in the southwest part of our country are enormous, but we will take it very slowly. No matter what the original thinking, Mesa now represents a remote location for the delivery of select graduate programs. This fall we are offering the MBA program only, with a full cohort of 18 students set to enroll. In addition, I will be asking the faculty and staff involved in Mesa to develop a semester-in-Mesa experience for our Pennsylvania-based students in both business and engineering. The greater Phoenix area offers internship opportunities at companies like Boeing and Intel and educational opportunities at institutions like Arizona State University -- opportunities that are not available to students back here in northeast PA. A modern, 21st century university needs reach, and Mesa offers opportunities to extend our mission, broaden our reach, and serve more students better.

I am also pleased with our recent progress in the Poconos. Under the new leadership of Chris Flynn, the Poconos site will offer convenience that students, especially adult degree-completion students, mandate. At present, we are offering the Adult Bachelors of Business Administration and the MBA degree only. Our goal is for the Poconos similarly to expand our mission of serving students, while creating positive contributions to the overall budget in the coming year.

Last academic year questions arose around campus as to our compensation philosophy for faculty and staff. My answer was simple: pay people more, if possible. This reflects my firm belief that great people make great universities. We must recognize, compensate and otherwise value the people who deliver a first-class education to our students. This summer I have begun to understand the compensation philosophy as it currently exists at Wilkes. Over the next few weeks I have commissioned Joe Housenick, our chief HR officer, to conduct research on the current state of our compensation philosophy and to suggest some options for meeting more fully the spirit of our current policy. I will be bringing this information both to FAC and to USAC for some dialogue in the coming weeks.

And, of course, in the coming year we will continue to build a culture of collaboration among all of our Wilkes' constituents. The president's cabinet, including the academic deans, the budget committee, the strategic planning committee, the campus master planning committee, the Innovation Council, and select ad hoc committees, like the provost search committee, will continue to be important parts of our collective decision-making process. At a recent retreat of the president's cabinet we outlined all of the positive outcomes of the past year. The lesson, which cut across all of these outcomes, was collaboration. Said another way: teamwork. We will continue to value this concept -- whatever you want to call it -- highly in the coming years.

As you can see, there is much happening at your university at this time in our history. John Masefield was right. "There are, indeed, few earthly things more splendid than a university." He went on to say:

“In these days of broken frontiers and collapsing values, when the dams are down and the floods are making misery, when every ancient foothold has become something of a quagmire, wherever a university stands, it stands and shines; wherever it exists, the free minds of men, urged on to full and fair enquiry, may still bring wisdom into human affairs. There are few earthly things more beautiful than a university. It is a place where those who hate ignorance may strive to know, where those who perceive truth may strive to make others see; where seekers and learners alike, banded together in the search for knowledge, will honour thought in all its finer ways, will welcome thinkers in distress or in exile, will uphold ever the dignity of thought and learning and will exact standards in these things. They give to the young in their impressionable years, the bond of a lofty purpose shared, of a great corporate life whose links will not be loosed until they die. They give young people that close companionship for which youth longs, and that chance of the endless discussion of the themes which are endless, without which youth would seem a waste of time. There are few things more enduring than a university. Religions may split into sect or heresy; dynasties may perish or be supplanted, but for century after century the university will continue, and the stream of life will pass through it, and the thinker and the seeker will be bound together in the undying cause of bringing thought into the world. To be a member of one of these great societies must ever be a glad distinction.”

Thank you for all you do to make Wilkes University one of these great societies. Thank you very much. Now I am happy to take your questions or comments.