



# Patrick F. Leahy

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Fall Convocation | August 26, 2015

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“We know what we are, but know not what we may be.”

Good morning. Welcome to Fall Convocation 2015, an opportunity for the entire Wilkes community to come together prior to the beginning of the traditional academic year. By my calculation this will be our 83rd fall start as an institution of higher learning. I want to thank both Jon Ference, Chair of the Faculty Affairs Council, and Jamie Miller, Chair of the University Staff Advisory Council, for participating in today’s convocation and, more importantly, for providing such strong leadership on behalf of our faculty and staff members. Join me in thanking Jon and Jamie for their service to Wilkes. I’d also like to welcome in a special way the Chair of our Board of Trustees, Dan Cardell, Class of 1979, who joins us this morning. Few alums care more about Wilkes than Dan. Please join me in welcoming him to campus this morning. Before we proceed, I’d like to remember members of our Wilkes family whom we have lost recently. Many of them have been celebrated at various events on campus over the past several months, and I’d like to remember them again today. In particular, I’d like to remember Robert Capin, the third president of Wilkes University, who passed away on June 22. Since this is the first gathering of our community since then, please join me in remembering Bob this morning. At one point in his career President Capin said: “In pursuing our goals we have established for ourselves, each of us has the obligation to apply our talents to the best of our ability. There is no substitute for excellence.” These are meaningful thoughts as we gather at Fall Convocation this year.

In just the past couple weeks one of our undergraduate students, Matthew Kachurak, passed away in an automobile accident. He was a very popular member of the Wilkes community, as evidenced by the Wilkes turnout at his funeral service, and he will be missed greatly. Also, let’s remember the legacy of Arnold Rifkin, Trustee Emeritus here at Wilkes, who also passed away earlier this summer. The thoughts and prayers of the entire Wilkes community go out to Mrs. Rifkin and the family. Please join me in a moment of silence for Matthew, Arnold, Bob, and everyone else that we have lost in the past year. It’s also a custom during convocation to recognize new employees. I’d like to ask anyone who has joined us since January 1 of this year to please stand so that we might welcome you formally to Wilkes. Finally, I have one more special acknowledgment. Earlier this summer on the corner of South Franklin and Northampton Streets just outside of the YMCA there was a car accident, which did not involve any Wilkes constituents. The first responder to this incident was our public safety officer, Lt. Don Noble. When Lt. Noble arrived at the scene, he noticed smoke coming out of the hood of a mini-van. He quickly removed two kids who were in car seats in the back of the van. Then he had to force open the front passenger door to extricate a man and an elderly woman from the front seats. Just moments after safely removing them from the van, it went up in flames. It is unimaginable what could’ve happened had Lt. Noble not been on patrol and not been properly trained to handle such a

situation. This is just one of many examples of our revamped Public Safety Office's commitment to our campus community and to our local neighborhood. Lt. Noble joins us this morning. Please join me in recognizing him for his heroic effort.

If there's a theme for this year's convocation, it is this: we have a rich history here at Wilkes, but the times will demand that we continue to evolve as an institution. In a year when we will be celebrating William Shakespeare, culminating in a celebration of the 400th anniversary of his death in 1616, I should call on him to put it more succinctly. Shakespeare said: "We know what we are, but know not what we may be." We know what we are, but we need to continue to imagine what it is we might become in the decade to come. At past convocations, I have taken the opportunity to review the progress of our institution during the past academic year. There is much positive progress to report. Instead of recounting it now, I will direct your attention to the President's Annual Letter, which was composed earlier this summer and has just landed in your mailbox. We had another very good year at Wilkes in 2014/2015. I could spend time talking about the implementation of the Gateway to the Future Strategic Plan; the submission of our Periodic Review Report to Middles States; the increase in faculty scholarship and research, including the awarding of six sabbaticals; the tenure and promotion of our first-class faculty members; the expansion of high-impact co-curricular activities for students; the continued enhancement of our campus; the progress of our strategic initiatives; all the ways we continue to be a force for positive economic, cultural, and social development in our community; and many other advancements. I could talk about all of this progress, but I won't. It's all in the letter. I hope you will take a few minutes to peruse it and take some measure of satisfaction at the accomplishments of our community in the past year.

Instead, I'd like to use our time today to talk about even more recent progress over the summer and plans we have to continue to consider "what we may be" in the years ahead. In preparing my address this year, I sought the counsel of FAC members, the USAC Chair, and Cabinet members regarding topics of interest. They offered me many, so please bear with me as I share with you numerous important updates. Let me begin with this summer. Recall that Wilkes University aims to become a 12-month university. That is, we want to look, feel, and act like a university all year long to serve our mission. That was on display these last few months. During this past summer, we offered 102 undergraduate courses, enrolling 945 students. This allows these students to catch up or to get ahead. We know that undergraduate students want these academic opportunities in the summer. And, if we don't offer them, they will seek the credits elsewhere. Summer activity generated a positive surplus to budget, which helps to strengthen our financial position going into the traditional year. Many faculty members spent the summer involved in research and other scholarly activities, often with our current students by their sides. I am thrilled to see that our summer activity is so high and expanding, thanks in part to the funds allocated last year to research and scholarship. In the years ahead we will continue to support these summer activities in our effort to become even more of a 12-month university.

In addition, this summer was a very busy time on campus to work on capital projects and other campus enhancements. Here are updates on our more substantial projects: The Gateway Project is nearing completion. This project, which connects the growing southeast part of campus with the Fenner Quadrangle, has transformed the look and feel of Wilkes University, aiding our efforts to create a traditional residential campus in our urban environment. I am pleased to announce that Clayton and Therese Karambelas, long-time supporters of Wilkes, have committed a half-million dollar cash gift to support the project. This gift, coupled with the \$600,000 state grant, enables this project to be funded almost entirely with external resources. I hope you all will join us on October 2, the Friday

of Homecoming, for the official grand opening of the Gateway. The renovation of Barre Hall is complete. According to the contractors, this building was “very nearly a tear down,” but a \$3 million investment, paid for by a third party from whom we will lease back the property, allows us to preserve this historic building for future generations. I am pleased to announce this morning that this historic building, which will house our new honors program students, will be renamed in honor of Dr. Francis J. Michelini, the second president of Wilkes University. This is a fitting tribute for a man who spent so many years in service to Wilkes, including leading us through our darkest days following the Agnes Flood of 1972. A ceremony in honor of Dr. Mike will be held later this fall. A major investment in our IT infrastructure has also been completed this summer. This \$1 million investment, which includes an additional 250 wireless nodes around the campus, will result in significant improvement to service levels for students, faculty, and staff. This investment also protects us against future network maintenance issues. I want to thank Dean John Stachacz and his staff for their diligence during this effort. Finally, our new food service partner, Aramark, has been busy investing in our campus dining outlets, expanding food options and improving food quality and value for our campus constituents. Throughout this year, Aramark will invest nearly \$3 million in upgrades to our facilities in Henry, Stark, and UCOM, all in an effort to serve students better. All together, we invested nearly \$10 million just this summer in our campus infrastructure, a key component of our Gateway to the Future Strategic Plan. I want to thank our new Executive Director of Facilities, Charlie Cary, and his entire team for their excellent work. To all of you who have been inconvenienced during this busy construction period, I extend to you my deep appreciation. Thank you for your understanding and flexibility as we work through these main campus improvements.

During the summer, I took time to continue to think through our organizational structure to make sure that it supports the goals so ambitiously outlined in our Gateway to the Future Strategic Plan. After much consultation, I have arrived at a few changes, which were communicated to all of you a few weeks ago. Allow me to reiterate them. I have asked Mike Wood to accept a new role as Assistant to the President for External Relations. In this role, Mike will work closely with me to provide strategic oversight of our community outreach initiatives, many of which report into the President’s Office: the Institute for Public Policy and Economic Development, the Kirby Center for Entrepreneurship and Free Enterprise, the SHINE Program, the Office of Special Events, and others. In addition, I will ask Mike to redouble our efforts at securing government resources to support our many activities, including the expansion of faculty research and scholarship. Mike will also help to co-ordinate our efforts around Theme 6 of our strategic plan, Supporting Efforts at Redeveloping Downtown Wilkes-Barre. This change will require us to conduct a search to fill a vacated Vice President for Development and Alumni Relations position. This position will build out our development unit in anticipation of a major fundraising effort to support the strategic plan. I have commissioned a search committee, headed by Paul Adams and including representatives from FAC, USAC, and the student body, to help find our next Vice President for Development and Alumni Relations. Also, earlier this summer, I sent a communication about changes to our student services area. In it, I mentioned the university decision to consolidate our Communications Department into the newly acquired building at 141 South Main Street – the building formerly known as Bartikowsky Jewelers. This move realizes a long-time goal of bringing all of the curricular and co-curricular activities of our communications discipline into one media center and places it right onto Main Street to more easily engage the community. That decision presented the University with a unique opportunity to reimagine Student Services, which for the past eight years has been integrated first at the UCOM building and now at 141 South Main Street. Here are those changes once again. The Financial Aid Office will move to Capin Hall right in the center of campus with a new, beautiful entrance right off of the Gateway, and it will report directly to Paul

Adams, Vice President for Student Affairs. The Registrar's Office will also be relocated to this prime location, and it will once again report directly to the Provost's Office. The Cashier and Business Operations will be relocated to a newly acquired location at 32 West South Street, while the HR Office will be relocated to another yet-to-be-determined site on campus, and these offices will report to Chip Prescott, Vice President for Financial and Support Operations. Enrollment operations will return to the Admissions Office and will report directly to Melanie Wade, Vice President of Enrollment, in new space in Stark. I have asked Paul Adams to provide administrative leadership over this complex process to ensure a successful transition throughout the fall semester. I strongly believe that these moves, once fully executed, will allow us to improve service levels to our students, aiding our recruitment, retention, and graduation efforts.

Speaking of recruitment, let me spend a few minutes sharing with you our enrollment figures at this point in the various cycles. The incoming first-year class looks strong. At present we are expecting over 600 new first-year students from all across our region. Popular majors include: engineering (120), natural sciences including undeclared science (104), pharmacy (85), business (72), social sciences (66), and nursing (60). We estimate that 170 of these 600 or so are coming as student-athletes, recruited by our coaches who are working diligently to fill their rosters with talented students. In the coming year I am proud to announce that we will continue to grow our athletics program by adding men's volleyball as a varsity sport. This brings our total number of sponsored teams to 21. Thirty-five of these first-year students have been enrolled in our new honors program, with a goal to recruit more academically talented students who might go on to compete for prestigious post-graduate scholarships, for entry into higher quality graduate schools, and for more competitive job placements. The academic credentials of this class are: 1807 SAT, which is 268 points higher than the class average, and 3.81 GPA, which is .26 points higher than the class average. I want to once again thank both the faculty at large for their willingness to develop this new academic program and the faculty on the Advisory Council for their efforts in recruiting these fine students.

Transfer student numbers are approaching 150 right now, consistent both with previous years and budget targets. Graduate enrollments in the summer and fall have been strong, too. In fact, this summer new graduate enrollments grew by 8% over last year, and new graduate enrollments for the fall are running 37% ahead of last year at this time. This is very positive news for Wilkes, and I'd like to thank Melanie Wade and her entire enrollment staff for this great effort. Overall, we head into the traditional academic year with healthier enrollments than last year, which is a positive indication of our attractiveness as an educational option. One of the main objectives of our Gateway to the Future Strategic Plan is to grow our international student population as a way to diversify our campus. In the coming year we will be enlisting the services of a consultant with deep ties to Central and South America, who will aid our efforts in recruiting talented students from that part of the world, largely through governmental contracts and institutional partnerships. This fall represents our first year of educating undergraduate students at our remote location in Mesa, AZ. It looks like we will have a first class of 15 undergraduate business students to go with our 25 MBA students. Our colleagues out in Mesa are working overtime to establish us as an attractive option to these transfer students, and I want them to know of our support back here on main campus. If we are honest with ourselves, I will tell you that we are not making the progress that we had anticipated at this point. The question is then: Did we misread the opportunity? Or, are we not executing on our plans well enough? At this juncture I would say the latter. We have probably not managed well enough our efforts in Mesa, and I take full responsibility for that. However, there remains a lot of potential: to serve new students and extend our mission of serving first-generation students, to diversify our tuition revenue streams across

select undergraduate and graduate programs, and to serve our students at home with unique study-away experiences in Mesa. In the coming year, Anne Skleder, others around campus and I will be redoubling our efforts to test out the opportunities in Arizona. Among the strategic initiatives that has outperformed our early expectations is our partnership with HotChalk. Recall that this partnership allows us to take our online nursing programs to a national audience. Due to the dedication of our nursing faculty and staff, we have already enrolled 300 graduate students, with an 85% retention rate. And this fall, our first online undergraduate program, the RN-BSN program, will launch. This partnership allows us to expand our Wilkes brand nationwide and to generate additional tuition resources, reducing our reliance on traditional revenue streams. I want to thank Dean Deb Zbegner and all of our School of Nursing faculty and staff for their enthusiasm around this strategic initiative. In the past few months, as reported in the President's Annual Letter, we have reached an agreement with Northampton Community College to deliver business and criminology programming on-site at its Monroe campus beginning in the spring semester. This allows us to consolidate our Poconos location, thus saving a significant expenditure in lease payments. Staff will move over to free office space on the Monroe campus, enabling us to move immediately to a more positive contribution to the operating budget. Imbedding ourselves in a transfer partner's community – at no cost to us – is a much better operating model for this remote location. Our new Gateway Scholars Program, an innovative dual enrollment program for high-achieving high school students, will launch this fall. All 10 school districts throughout Luzerne County have signed the Memorandum of Understanding, signaling their interest in providing additional opportunities for their students. This fall we expect a pilot class of 35 students, all of whom are highly talented students that we want to bring here to Wilkes. I want to thank the department chairs and faculty who stepped up to ensure there are sufficient seats at times that work for these students. Finally, the new SHINE program in Luzerne County is poised to launch this fall. With over \$1 million raised to fund it and with a new Executive Director, Mary Kolessar, hired to lead it, SHINE will launch in late September at seven locations throughout the county, with a goal to serve 500 students. Serving as the educational host to this new after-school program is just the latest in a long list of initiatives that demonstrates Wilkes' public purpose.

During the course of the past year, I spent time meeting with campus constituents to discuss compensation, the goal of which was to understand our shared philosophy around compensation matters, consistent with our objectives set forth in our Gateway to the Future Strategic Plan. What emerged from my discussions were seven guiding principles that would influence our compensation decisions over the course of the plan across three categories: salaries, benefits, and recognition. These guiding principles are: 1) a commitment to providing employees with an across-the-board increase annually; 2) a commitment to providing incremental adjustments to base salaries for existing employees that ensure market-based competitive pay for those whose performance meets or exceeds expectations; 3) a commitment to increasing the University portion of healthcare premium payments for those employees on family plans; 4) a commitment to structuring healthcare premium payments to advantage lower wage earning employees; 5) a commitment to providing one-time annual cash awards to those employees whose work performance is exemplary in a given year; 6) a commitment to providing one-time annual cash awards to all employees in years with especially strong budget surpluses, with the flexibility to receive this payment either as salary or as a retirement contribution; and 7) a commitment to re-examining and developing appropriate programs to recognize exemplary performance on an annual basis. Please recognize that these are guiding principles, not definitive plans, since we still cannot make decisions about compensation without understanding the financial dynamics during each decision cycle. I'm afraid that is simply the new normal in American higher education. One compensation item that continues to confuse some constituents is the timing of adjustments. It has been our practice to

wait until December 1 to make compensation decisions to allow for certainty around financial results from the previous year and enrollment projections for the current year. Some have suggested that this is at least confusing, at most downright unfair to some employees. In order to remedy any outstanding confusion, the administration has decided to move the decision date around potential adjustments to September 1, consistent with the start of faculty contracts. Making compensation decisions in late August still allows the administration time to check key indicators before making compensation adjustments and will hopefully clear up any lingering misunderstandings. This change will take effect this year. Look for a communication from me regarding potential compensation adjustments in the coming week. I'd like to thank our Provost, Anne Skleder, for her ardent support of this move. Also, the Cabinet has adopted the proposed smoking policy, as presented to us by the Student Life and Media (SLAM) Committee. This policy restricts smoking to designated pavilions on campus and eliminates smoking at or near building entrances. This new policy, which takes effect on Monday, August 31 as the traditional academic year begins, seems like a reasonable compromise to accommodate both the health wishes of the non-smokers and the individual freedom rights of the smokers.

Though our financial reports have not yet been audited, we have a clear enough picture to report our fourth consecutive operating surplus. Despite enrolling a smaller-than-expected first-year class last year, we were able to still generate a \$1 million surplus. I attribute this surplus, however modest, to two factors. First, as a university, we have diversified our revenue streams to reduce our reliance on the first-year residential enrollment number. Graduate programs and strategic initiatives inoculate us somewhat from the challenges posed by the declining high school graduation demographics in the northeast. We should celebrate this. And second, we implemented more careful budget management tools to monitor the budget throughout the operating year. My thanks go out to each and every one of you for your efforts to steward carefully our resources throughout the past year. It would not have been possible without your support of these measures. Given the challenges of the past year, this is a good outcome. But, we need to do a better job generating our own resources, which we will then reinvest in our university. Recall that one of our six themes in the Gateway to the Future Strategic Plan is to Improve Our Financial Strength, and one key way to do that will be through consistently generating more robust operating surpluses. Another way to improve our financial strength is through fundraising. The President's Annual Letter outlined our success in that area during the past year, so I will not repeat those successes here. I am pleased to report that since that letter was created we received news of a \$2 million gift from the estate of George Bierly, Class of 1940. This gift, which represents the largest estate gift ever realized at Wilkes, will be designated to scholarship endowment. I know you will join me in keeping Mr. Bierly and his commitment to Wilkes in your thoughts. Fundraising at Wilkes continues in earnest. Be on the lookout for additional positive announcements to come in the weeks ahead.

In the coming academic year, in addition to all the regular University activities that will rightly occupy our time, I'd like to suggest that we as a community focus on the following initiatives. Just last week I sent out a communication about the revitalization of the Sordoni Art Gallery. Prompted by Andrew Sordoni, III, I commissioned a small task force to reimagine ways to strengthen the Gallery, including everything from shutting down the Gallery and redeploying resources elsewhere to investing in the Gallery and restoring it to its past prominence. The only option that wasn't acceptable to Mr. Sordoni or to me was to do nothing. I am pleased to report that the overwhelming sentiment was to make significant investments in the Gallery and use it as way to burnish the reputation of the University. The 3-part plan includes the following: 1) Build a dedicated, permanent endowment for the Sordoni. This would happen through the de-accessioning of some of the permanent pieces and converting the proceeds into endowment, as well as through additional fundraising. This provides the flexibility to

bring better-known and higher-quality shows to campus numerous times per year. 2) Hire an academic director for the Gallery, who would recruit and curate traveling shows, develop related educational programming, and integrate the Gallery more fully into the campus and into the community. 3) Move the Gallery to a premiere location on campus, which will be the west side of 141 S. Main Street. This new location, along our newest academic corridor on campus, will make the Gallery more accessible, more visible and more functional as an educational resource for the campus and for the community. The goal is simple: you cannot in my opinion be a premiere university without a strong and enduring commitment to the arts. This bold new plan for the Sordoni Art Gallery has been enthusiastically supported by the Sordoni family, as evidenced by a significant, multi-year follow-on gift in support of this plan. Other donors to the Gallery, our Board of Trustees, and other arts organizations in the Wyoming Valley are also excited by this vision. Throughout the coming year the administration, along with the arts faculty, will be focused on executing on this three-part plan. During the coming academic year, we will be working extensively on the final design of the Stark Learning Center project in anticipation of construction in the late spring. This renovation, supported in large part through a \$3 million state grant, will accommodate the expansion of the engineering program and provide additional teaching space for our growing science programs. Finally, as I have said many times before, we need to take a closer look at retention and graduation rates for all of our students, in particular our undergraduate students. Retention and six-year graduation rates are increasingly becoming the measures of institutional quality. Parents look at them. Rating agencies look at them. The federal government looks at them. And, ours, at least compared to many of our peer institutions, need improvement. Our first-year retention rate is 80%, and our six-year graduation rate is just 58%. These measures are hurting us in various third-party rankings. We must improve these measures. Improving these measures would project the quality that we know we offer here at Wilkes. Improving these measures would provide a very welcome boost to our financial position. And, improving these measures is the right thing to do for parents and students who borrow money to attend Wilkes. Retaining and graduating students, as you know, is a complex mix of factors, but we cannot let the complexity of it scare us. As outlined in our Gateway to the Future Strategic Plan, we have designs on raising our first-year retention rate to 82% and our six-year graduation rate to 65%. This will require all of us. To lead these efforts, I am appointing a Retention Task force to take a deep dive on this issue, identifying the reasons for our relatively low rates and proposing actionable solutions. Given the high-stakes nature of this effort, I have asked Anne Skleder, the Chief Academic Officer, and Paul Adams, the Chief Student Affairs Officer, to co-chair this task force. I will ask Anne and Paul, working with FAC, USAC, and Student Government, to assemble a task force of individuals from all across the life cycle of a student – from the recruiting of students all the way through to the placement of them upon graduation. Anne and Paul will be communicating with the campus community soon, since I will ask this task force for recommendations by January 1. And, as good ideas emerge in the coming year, we will move on them. We simply cannot wait.

“We know what we are, but know not what we may be.”

What may we be? We can be a university, with a broad program mix across bachelors, masters, and doctoral programs that allows us to diversify our resources and reduce our reliance on undergraduate tuition at a time when that revenue stream is under siege. We can be a university, with professional programs that match student interests and societal needs and with arts and humanities programs that educate the whole person. We can be a university, with a commitment to both teaching and research, expanding, as President Farley said, our faculty members’ horizons so that they might expand their students’ horizons. We can be a university, with a willingness to engage new technologies to deliver

programming all across the nation and engage students who would never otherwise access a Wilkes education. We can be a university, with an enduring commitment to our urban community so that we might continue to be a force for good in the communities in which we are located. We are not Sweet Briar College. That is, we are not a small, single gender, liberal arts college in a rural environment. We can be a university, with all the programs, activities and opportunities of a large, research university – all of it offered in the small, caring, mentoring environment of a liberal arts college. We are continuing to evolve as a higher education institution. The Bard also said: “It is not in the stars to hold our destiny, but in ourselves.” We must not just let it happen, as though it is somehow out of our control. We must make it happen, by acting strategically and deliberately and intentionally. That is what we are doing. We have the potential in each one of us. I hope this coming year this important work at Wilkes will call out the best in each of us.

Thank you for all the ways you support Wilkes University.