



Patrick F. Leahy

Spring Convocation | January 17, 2013

Good morning, everyone, and welcome. It's good to see everyone again.

Before I proceed, please join me in recognizing someone in a special way, our newest emeritus member of the faculty, Dr. Brad Kinney. Brad, would you please stand and be recognized? I had the great fortune of attending Brad's final class as a full-time professor. In fact, I took his final quiz on the U.S. presidents. Fortunately, I didn't have to hand mine in to be graded. This brings the number of emeritus faculty members to 55. Would any emeritus faculty members who are here please stand and be recognized? Thank you for all the ways you have served and continue to serve Wilkes University. Thank you all for taking time to be here for the first annual Spring Convocation. This is a new tradition that I'd like to create at Wilkes. Like the Fall Convocation, it is intended to provide an opportunity for me to talk with a gathering of the full faculty and full staff at the beginning of the semester in an effort to improve communication across campus. What I'd like to do today is give you a sense for what I've learned over my first six months and provide a series of updates on important current initiatives.

Today, "We will open the book. Its pages are blank. We are going to put words on them ourselves. The book is called Opportunity and its first chapter is New Years Day." That's the quote from Edith Lovejoy Pierce that adorned our University greeting card this year. It summarizes where we are as a community as we begin another semester – by my calculations the 158th time that we have kicked off a semester here at Wilkes. I'd like to thank Lisa Reynolds from our Marketing Communications Department for designing this year's card and Camille Daniels from our Student Services Center for loaning us her beautiful picture of Wilkes University from the River Common. Thank you both. I have been on the job now for six months. What I said at the Fall Convocation remains true: the more I discover about Wilkes, the more impressed I am, the more enthusiastic I am, the more grateful I am to be its president.

My on-boarding process is nearly complete. At last count I have had over 100 meetings with most academic units, with most administrative units, with most board members, as well as with numerous individual faculty members, staff members, alumni, and community members. My on-boarding is nearly complete. Some would say the honeymoon is now over. Whatever the case, I have learned a great deal about what makes Wilkes unique. Much of my conversation with people has centered around things we need to do as a community to improve; that is, to make sure our next 80 years are even better than our last 80. Here are five themes that have emerged from my conversations.

1. Generate more resources. We must generate more resources for Wilkes University. We simply cannot cut our way to distinction. We need to find ways to grow our budget to give us room to invest in the University and its most valuable resource – its people. We cannot generate these resources through tui-

tion increases. We cannot do it through more borrowing. So we will have to find other ways to generate incremental resources in the years ahead.

2. Invest in academic quality. With more resources, we can do the single most important thing any college or university can do: invest in academic quality. Academics is what we do here. That is the heart of the matter. If you are not – and are not perceived – as high-quality, then nothing else matters. We must continue to resource our faculty members, our student development professionals, our coaches, all of the individuals who interact regularly with our students. Whatever we do here, we want to do it well, or we shouldn't do it. We need to continually push to be better academically. In the end, it's the only way to ensure that we will continue to thrive in the future as an educational institution.

3. Continue to innovate. We also need to constantly push the boundaries of innovation – enhancing the student experience in the classroom, developing new programs and new delivery methods, serving students in new and productive ways. It is one of our core values. I asked one of the most innovative leaders in higher education how he builds a culture of innovation on his campus. He said: “We don't focus on it. We just set such bold goals that the only way to reach them is to innovate.” This is innovation not as a goal in and of itself, but innovation as a means to serve more students ... better.

4. Rebuild our culture. The hallmark of Wilkes University over the years has been its family feeling. We need to get back to that. That doesn't mean that we won't occasionally argue among ourselves. What family doesn't? But we must remember that open, honest, collaborative communication is better than the alternatives. Relationships, based on mutual trust and respect, stand the test of time. As the author Denis Waitley said: “There are two primary choices in life: to accept conditions as they exist, or to accept the responsibility for changing them.”

5. Develop Wilkes-Barre. Wilkes must play an increasingly important role in our community and in our region. If we don't take the responsibility to help redevelop Wilkes-Barre, then who will? That was part of our founding some 80 years ago, that is, to aid in the development of Wilkes-Barre. Our futures are inextricably linked. We must lead the region in these efforts, both because it is the right thing to do and because it is in our long-term self-interest to do so. Generate more resources to invest in academic quality through innovation in a caring community to the benefit of our students and the region. This, among many other things, is what I heard during my on-boarding. In the coming weeks we will launch a campus-wide effort to codify my findings and your thoughts into a new strategic plan. With the conviction — a fixed and firmly held belief — that the best days of this institution are ahead of us, let me provide for you an update on numerous initiatives.

Budget. I am pleased to announce today that next year's operating budget is balanced, well ahead of last year's pace. Our new process — and our new committee — worked very well together. It is said that if you want to understand an organization's values, then take a look at its budget. Next year's budget is a very responsible one, and I believe it does reflect our values as a University. Here is the philosophy: to budget conservatively enough that we can avoid — if at all possible — mid-year corrections and begin to generate the necessary resources to reinvest in academic quality. Here is what's in the budget: conservative enrollment assumptions at the undergraduate and graduate levels, fully funding all debt obligations and depreciation expense, a very modest tuition increase, a 2% raise for all faculty and staff if we meet enrollment targets, level funding of money for mentoring, \$300K in new funding to support new academic positions and other important priorities, fully funding marketing. Here is what's not in the budget: layoffs of any kind, indiscriminate across-the-board cuts to operating budgets, or other drastic

measures. I, for one, think Washington, D.C., could learn something from us about balancing budgets. Budget forums will be held to share the results with the campus community in the coming weeks. I'd like to thank all of the members of the Budget Committee for your excellent work this fall.

Cohen Science Center. The Cohen Science Center, the newest addition to our campus infrastructure, remains on budget to come in at \$35M or less and on time to open at the start of the next academic year. This new facility will continue to strengthen the sciences here at Wilkes, while serving our general education, nursing, engineering, and pharmacy programs.

Capital Campaign. The capital campaign to fund the building stands at \$14.5M. The campaign is in good shape with the addition of the Cohen family gift and another big gift from trustee Jason Griggs to name the rooftop patio. In addition, there has been substantial unrestricted money raised from donors over the past few years that we as a university have used to help fund the science center, and that philanthropy has not yet been counted. So, thanks to the support of our Board and others who care deeply about Wilkes, the campaign is in a very good place. The plan at this point is to complete the Achieving Our Destiny campaign on October 4th, the day at Homecoming we plan to dedicate the new facility. In doing so, we will finish this campaign considerably earlier than originally planned so that we can begin to raise money for other important University priorities, consistent with a new strategic plan which I will discuss in a moment.

Staff Updates. The search for our next Senior Vice President and Provost continues. The committee has identified seven candidates for initial interviews, which will take place over the next couple days. Following these first interviews, some number of these candidates will be invited to campus for interviews with all of you. We'll need you to sell Wilkes to these candidates. As you vet them, know that they are vetting us, too. Details will be forthcoming. Before I leave this topic, let me once again thank Terri Wignot for so competently answering the call when Wilkes called on her. Please join me in thanking Terri. Also, let me welcome our newest dean and newest member of the President's Cabinet, Rhonda Waskiewicz, who has answered the call to serve as the Interim Dean of the School of Education. Rhonda will serve in this position for the next 18 months or so, while a formal search is conducted during the next academic year. Please join me in congratulating Rhonda on her appointment.

Enrollment. Let me provide an update on our enrollment numbers. Our undergraduate applications for this year are running ahead of last year at a time when many institutions are down year-over-year. While this is encouraging news, I caution that this is just a snapshot in time. This could change. As I have said repeatedly, everyone here at Wilkes needs to be involved in enrollment, starting with the Open House scheduled for January 26th. Also, our graduate enrollments for the spring are up over last year, driven by growth in the MBA program, graduate nursing programs, and the Master of Education in Reading Specialist. New mid-year transfers are steady in the mid-50s. Just last week I had a chance to welcome our new, mid-year international cohort of 40, most of whom are new, degree-seeking freshmen. International diversity continues to be a focus of our recruiting efforts, including a recent extended recruiting trip to China and an effort to be identified as a preferred school for government-sponsored Brazilian students. I myself will be spending much more time helping to enroll students. Recall that enrolling enough of the right students and keeping them safe are the two things that keep me awake at night. Well, these are the two professional things that keep me awake at night. Like many of you, I have kids that ensure that I don't get enough sleep either. My time, my schedule, my activities will reflect this commitment. I'm going to think of it this way. If Mike Wood called me and

said a \$100k donor prospect was on campus and wanted to spend a few minutes with me, I would drop everything and meet with that person. Why not spend more time meeting with prospective students and their families? My time and activities must reflect my personal commitment to ensure that this University has robust enrollments into the future. No university president in the country will be more focused on enrollment than I will! One of the ways to ensure robust enrollments includes looking at places where we have existing capacity, both in academic units and in extra-curricular activities. To fill more existing capacity, we will rely on new and more targeted marketing efforts, led by Jack Chielli and his team and Melanie Wade and her team. In addition to our general University marketing, Jack and Melanie will work with individual deans, department chairs, and coaches to expand recruitment efforts targeted to their specific programs. In addition, we will look for ways to open up new capacity by looking at new academic and extra-curricular programs. One area we are considering is the possible introduction of an honors program. This might enable us to make Wilkes even more attractive to high-performing students. I will let the faculty determine if and how to implement an honors program. Another area that we will explore is growing the number of intercollegiate athletic teams that we offer. Right now Wilkes offers just 16 sports in a conference that sponsors 24. Like many other small universities and liberal arts colleges, I see opportunities to expand these programs as yet another way to make Wilkes attractive to prospective students. Athletes typically outperform their peers in the classroom, retain at higher rates, and graduate at higher rates than our other students, especially in a Division III environment that we fully embrace. Given our unique urban location, we can add athletic teams at comparatively low costs. We will be developing a total athletics strategy in the months to come as a way to strengthen enrollment and to enhance the college experience for participating students. If we can selectively grow our student population, my commitment to all of you is this: we will not change the nature of a personalized, mentoring Wilkes education. We simply want to offer our special brand of education to more students as a way to expand our mission and to generate more resources to reinvest in academic quality.

Mesa. Speaking of growing enrollment, let me provide an update on our Mesa initiative. I reported to the campus community recently that our lease is signed in the Mesa Center for Higher Education, and it's a good one, the kind of favorable lease you can only sign with a government entity. We retooled our business plan to be more methodical about our roll-out, focusing first on graduate programs before deciding when to offer undergraduate programs. I believe that what starts out right typically ends up right. So let's take it a bit more slowly. This spring we have enrolled our first five students. These early adopters of a Wilkes education in Mesa will help fund our initial expenses. This is helpful, but this tuition revenue will not cover expenses in the first year. No start-up that I know of has ever covered its expenses in year one. Worthwhile ventures take time. BUJC took time to get established. Our progress continues on track. I will share more details about our first year at the conclusion of the academic year.

Poconos. The Poconos presents a challenge. While we do have enrollments at our Pocono Center, they are not materializing as robustly as we initially anticipated, a reflection of general economic conditions throughout that region. We are committed to the Poconos for the next few years, so we will take a fresh look at the Poconos to determine the best path to profitability.

Collaboration. As I have mentioned repeatedly, my style is highly engaged and genuinely collaborative. I hope the success of the expanded cabinet and the new budget committee is evidence of this style. During this semester, I would like to commission three university-wide planning committees to continue to structure effective collaboration among all of our constituencies.

Campus Master Planning Committee. We have a campus master plan, so I don't envision rewriting it, though I'm sure there will be tweaks to it along the way. This group — made up of administrators, faculty, staff, and students — will provide advice on ongoing campus planning projects and space moves as we develop our unique campus into a 21st century living and learning environment. In doing so, we will aid in the continuing redevelopment of downtown Wilkes-Barre. I will ask Chip Prescott, VP for Finance & Chief Legal Counsel, to chair this committee.

Strategic Planning Committee. This committee, similarly made up of administrators, faculty, staff, and students, will help to lead our planning efforts for a new five-year strategic plan. I will ask Paul Adams, VP for Student Affairs, to chair this committee. Here is the idea. Take this semester to do some dreaming. I don't think it is necessary to revisit the good work of the last committee, which developed our mission and vision statements, but we should spend some time dreaming about what Wilkes can become over the next five years. Then, next semester, as our new Provost arrives, we will build a concise five-year plan, complete with a manageable number of goals and specific strategies. In the spring of 2014 we will develop our branding campaign, which we will derive from our new strategic plan. On June 1, 2014 – the beginning of our ninth decade – we will launch our new strategic plan and commence raising money to resource that plan. Dreaming, planning, branding, fundraising, executing – in that order. Details will be quickly forthcoming.

Innovation Council. In order to aid our efforts in building a culture of innovation, creativity, and problem solving in a very competitive environment, I will commission the creation of a new Innovation Council. This is how I envision this working. Ad hoc teams will convene — a mixture of faculty, staff, and students — to tackle specific challenges facing Wilkes. The teams will meet in a concentrated fashion over a few weeks or months to brainstorm ideas. Blue sky, geek out, deep dive — whatever it is they say now — the idea is to come up with new ideas. This team will then be asked to present its ideas to the senior administration and the board for consideration. Then, this team will disband, making the way for another team of collaborators. Some ideas of questions to consider might be: How do we grow enrollments from outside of PA? How do we deploy technology to enhance the residential student experience? What innovative strategies could we deploy to enhance communication around campus? This Innovation Council, which could have multiple teams operating at any given time, has two goals: 1) to generate new, creative, innovative thinking around vexing problems and 2) to build across campus the relationships and experiences that build an innovation culture. I have asked Jack Chielli, our AVP of Marketing Communications to lead this effort. Jack will be in touch with next steps.

Weckesser Hall. The senior administration move to Weckesser Hall will happen shortly. The renovations include new paint, redone floors, some HVAC work, new furniture, and a technologically updated conference room. Wait 'till you see it! It is a building which all of us can be proud of. I am pleased to announce today that our long-time friends, the Davidowitz family, have donated \$50K toward the outfitting of Weckesser Hall. I look forward to welcoming you to the “new” Weckesser Hall at receptions that are planned for later in the semester.

These are just some updates on the many changes that are affecting our campus as we come back from our winter break. During the break, I was able to fit in a bit of reading (just a bit I'm afraid). One of the books was *Essays of an Educator* by our founder, Eugene Farley, given to me by our University historian, Harold Cox. In one of his essays President Farley writes:

“You were born in a time of revolutionary change. You are maturing in a time of accelerating change.

You will live in a world of continuing change.”

He wrote those words to his community in 1966. If that was true then, it’s even more true today. As we start off this calendar year, let’s put our change to work for us. Let me end where I began by quoting Edith Lovejoy Pierce again.

“We will open the book. Its pages are blank. We are going to put words on them ourselves. The book is called Opportunity and its first chapter is New Years Day.”

Well, as an academic institution, our New Year’s Day is today — Spring Convocation. Let us fill up this book. Let us craft our story with care. And let us make this 158th semester in our history one to remember. Thank you.