



Patrick F. Leahy

Scholarship Brunch | March 27, 2014

Good morning and welcome. It is great to have so many people from all of our important constituencies here this morning to celebrate scholarship philanthropy at Wilkes University. I have the great privilege of attending so many interesting events as the president of Wilkes. But this may be my favorite each year. I know that I am not alone in thinking this. It is a rare privilege to bring donors and students together in the same room, at the same table, to talk with each other. On occasions such as this, I can't help but think about my Grandfather Leahy. If you will permit me a sentimental moment, I'd like to tell you why. You see, my Grandfather Leahy cared deeply about education. In fact, I'm told I get my passion for education from him. He cared so deeply about education, in large part because he never had the chance to obtain one. Formally obtain one, that is. He was a self-educated man, a traveling salesman who spent his free time reading the classics. It helped, but it was never as good as obtaining a formal education. He committed that each of his kids, and their kids, and their kids – all of the Leahys thereafter – would obtain a college degree. Yes, a college degree would open up economic opportunities; but perhaps even more important than that, a college degree was the surest way to a meaningful life. And there was a practical element to obtaining a college degree. He used to tell my father: "If you have an education, no one can push you around." I can imagine years and years, generations and generations, of frustration pouring forth on behalf of Leahys who did manual labor, perhaps under less than compassionate managers. According to my father, one of the biggest fights my dad – the oldest and a twin in the family – ever had with his father was the day my father suggested that he might not go to college. "Over my dead body," my Grandfather Leahy evidently protested. "If you get an education, you get a chance." All of the Leahys subsequently obtained college degrees, some graduate degrees, and became lawyers, doctors, business leaders, FBI agents, teachers, judges, even a university president ... all because Grandfather Leahy believed in education. And the chain has been broken, hopefully and probably forever. One of the greatest regrets of my life is that I never met my Grandfather Leahy. He passed away before I was born.

Why do I feel compelled to tell you such a personal story today? Because this type of transformation happens countless times at Wilkes each and every year. It's why I love Wilkes University so much. All of us engaged in our work here – faculty, staff, alumni, donors, members of the Wilkes-Barre community – work on the front lines of education. Let me share with you some numbers to support this: 95 percent, \$20 million, \$74,000, 41 percent, and 54 percent.

Ninety-five percent of our students receive financial aid of some kind, either through merit- or need-based aid. \$20 million are contributed to students each year to make a first-class, private education accessible to students. \$74,000 is the annual median salary of our students' families. Forty-one percent of the members of this year's freshman class are eligible for Pell grants, the federal aid program that

supports the most needy students from an economic standpoint. And 54 percent of the members of this year's freshman class – today in 2014 – are the first in their families to seek a four-year college degree. Every other student at our university is pursuing this kind of education for the first time in the history of their families. Our students here at Wilkes University are decidedly middle class, working class. And we say to these students: **YOU ARE WELCOME HERE!** We welcome these students because we believe talent is everywhere. SAT scores may be highly correlated to socioeconomic status, but talent is not. As educators, we feel it is our responsibility to find it in our students — and unleash it. We take good students and, as the saying goes, make them great, by providing to them a first-class, private, Wilkes education.

So why do I say all of this? It is simply not possible without you donors. Your generosity makes all of this magic happen here at Wilkes. So on behalf of all of us here at Wilkes, let me say as simply and as sincerely as I can: **THANK YOU.** To the students gathered here today, get to know your donors. Thank them for their commitment to education. Ask them about their careers and their lives. Pledge to them your willingness to earn it. I think donors really don't want to be recognized; they just want to be appreciated. Show them your appreciation. To the donors gathered here today, get to know your students. Ask them about their dreams. Encourage them, even push them, to dream bigger dreams. Implore them as they climb the ladder of opportunity to reach back and pull others up too. As I said, this is one of my favorite events in our academic year. It reminds me of the very essence of our work here at Wilkes. Perhaps President Kennedy said it best: "Let us think of education as a means of developing our greatest abilities, because in each of us there is a private hope and dream which – fulfilled – can be translated into benefit for all of us."

Thank you for helping to fulfill the private hopes and dreams of our students. My Grandfather Leahy would be very pleased. Thank you very much.