



Commencement Speech: UMass Lowell Graduation May 18, 2019
Jack M. Wilson, President Emeritus and Distinguished Professor

Thank you Chancellor Moloney and distinguished guests.

Good afternoon everyone! I offer my heartiest congratulations to all of you who are graduating today. It took a lot of work to get to this point. It took work in high school to qualify for UMass Lowell, and it took more work to get to the point that you can sit here today and look back with satisfaction at what you have accomplished. We are also looking forward to all that you WILL accomplish in the future. All of us up here are counting on it!

Knowing how hard you all had to work to get to where you are, I was dismayed to read about all of those wealthy celebrities who bought their way into Universities that they thought probably conveyed status upon them and their children. They were not looking for an education, they were looking for status.

You, on the other hand, had to work hard because you wanted to have an education. I am guessing that none of your families here had to pay anyone a bribe to get you into the university. You earned it yourself.

Sitting up there in the stands, we see many of your friends and families. They have been there to support you in both the good times and the tough times. Thank you to all of them. As the father of four children, all of whom have now graduated from college and graduate school, I can feel your pride and know how much you have stretched to help these graduates.

When UMass Lowell graduates like Rob Manning, John Pulichino, Marty Meehan, Jacquie Maloney, Roy Zuckerman, Charlie Hoff, Mark Saab, Brian Rist, Allan Solomont, Joyce and Jerry Colella, and others rose to the top of their professions, they ended up hiring rather than working for some of the graduates of these elite universities. None of them had an easy path to the top. Rob Manning even had to work as a student “go-for” for the administrative assistant in the Manning School of Business. He proudly showed us his “office” in Pasteur Hall. It was actually a closet. Now they all have buildings, scholarships, and programs named for them.

So, we are counting on you to keep on working hard, keep on overcoming obstacles, and keep on fighting to change the world. And I assure you, you will have to fight to overcome obstacles. They did, I did, and you will. But then again, most of you already have learned how to do that.

If you are anything like me, there might be a few folks from your past who would say something like “*You mean Wilson actually made it to graduation?*” I was the only kid in my elementary school who did not get the coveted “Peterson Writing Certificate.” I never did learn how to write in cursive. I still cannot tell a capital letter from a small letter. At the time, I simply thought it was because I was either dumb or lazy. Many teachers told me that I needed to “buckle down, and stop being so lazy,” rather than calling me stupid.

None of them would have guessed that I would become a professor, lead several international science societies, smuggle computer equipment in to Gorbachev advisors in the Soviet Union, become an IBM consulting scholar, found [ILinc Corporation](#) as a NASDAQ 500-million-dollar computer software company, hang out with [Nelson Mandela](#), become a provost at two major research universities, and then a university President. I then helped to found and build the [Edward M. Kennedy](#) Institute for the United States Senate as both a Board Member and interim President. President’s [George W. Bush](#) and Bill Clinton both gave me awards. I was invited to [President Obama’s](#) inauguration and his State of the Union Address. [Donald Trump](#) gave a speech with me at Mar-a-Lago calling me a “great President.” (I will say no more about that!) I even got an [award from Robert Mueller](#), yes that Robert Mueller, for working as an adviser to the FBI and the CIA in counter espionage. All crazy and unbelievable, but all [true](#).

There was no clue in my early years.

I will never forget the shock in my high school when I became a National Merit Semi-finalist –one of only two in our large high school, and then a National Merit Finalist. That left many scratching their head in complete surprise.

I did not know then that I was a severe **dyslexic**. I don't think they even had a name for it then.

You know how I found out? When one of my daughters was in third grade, I got called into the school and told that my daughter was a severe dyslexic. As they described her situation, it finally dawned on me that they were describing me too.

To this day, I will try to avoid printing a sentence in front of anyone else. One day, I was dropping another daughter off at school when she informed me that she needed a note to be excused early to go to the doctor. I began to sweat, but there was no choice –I had to write that note! I took my time and printed each letter -with great difficulty. Later I was at the university when the school called me to say: *“Dr Wilson, we are so sorry to bother you, but your daughter brought a very suspicious note to school. It looks like a ransom note written by a five-year-old.”* *“Oh, yes, that would be me,”* I replied in shame.

I am honored today to share the stage, with Jack and Terry O'Connor, who have endowed programs in our community, many of which help students with learning disabilities. You are giving them the kind of help that someone gave me so long ago.

As an undergraduate, I had to work to pay for my room and board. I served breakfast, lunch, and dinner in the dining hall. I also got to eat very well! In the summers I worked for H J Heinz as a ketchup chemist in 12-hour night shifts seven days a week.

In graduate school, I managed to get a research assistantship and suddenly I felt rich. I had an income to pay for a place to live and something to eat. It was wonderful. However, it is hard to adjust to the change and I still lived on Chicken Pot Pies and Mac and Cheese. By the time I graduated, I had even saved some money.

I learned later that it was common to have that experience. UML graduate Charlie Hoff, a multimillion-dollar donor to scholarships, and I were discussing his potential donation when his wife chipped in: *“Jack, Charlie does not know he is rich yet. Once you have been poor you always think you are poor!”* Thankfully he got past that, made a generous donation, and some of you in this graduating class are Hoff Scholars supported by his donations.

So, you have each had to overcome some obstacles to get here. I wish I could tell you that it gets easier from here on out -but that would not be honest.

When I became President sixteen years ago, the Governor at that time, Mitt Romney, invited me over to his office for a visit and a discussion of each of our visions for the future of the University. The conversation went very well, and we found we had a lot in common. That was a very good thing because the University had been through a very difficult time when the Governor and previous President were engaged in a daily battle in the news.

At that time, I had only been appointed as an “Interim President” as an emergency measure when my predecessor resigned. The Governor asked me *“Can you do anything as an interim president?”* I replied: *“Governor, **we are all “interim”** at everything that we do.”* (I did not say what I was thinking -that Governors are interim too!) Instead, I pointed out that life is like running a relay race. When it is your turn to run, you grab the baton and run as hard as you can - and then hand it off.

It did not help much that I took the job at the same time that the dot com bust nearly bankrupted the state. *“Welcome to the job,”* they said, *“we are cutting your budget by \$150 million.”* What a way to start a job.

It was not the first obstacle UMass had to overcome, and it would not be the last. We were not content with the status quo, the University had aspirations for leadership -and that meant taking on the establishment again and again to allow UMass to grow into the great research university that it has become. Whether it was creating [UMassOnline](#), appointing new leaders for the campuses, allowing Lowell to grow to better serve the region, or founding the Law School that the

University had been trying to start for over 160 years, we had to overcome entrenched opposition.

Founding the UMass Law School was one of the toughest fights that the University had ever seen. Just as when we founded the first public medical school in Massachusetts decades earlier, we knew that we would face withering opposition from the private competitors that would do almost anything to avoid allowing UMass to compete with them.

Opponents claimed that it would cost the state \$300 million, that we would never get it accredited, and that the bar pass rates of our students would be terrible. The Boston Herald called me "*Clueless Jack*" almost every day on their editorial page! The Globe was not much better.

We lost the first round when the opponents got to the Governor and asked him to kill the plan. He called me and asked me to withdraw the plan to avoid the embarrassment of the public defeat. I told him that I thought that it would be much more embarrassing to the Board members who would have to stand up and vote publicly against the public law school. That was exactly what happened.

Immediately after that defeat, a group of students filed a lawsuit against the Board, its Chair, and the members individually. The Board and its members had to sign a consent decree agreeing never again to do all the things they were charged with.

With a supportive new Governor, Deval Patrick, and the court's consent decree in hand, we filed the request for reconsideration by the Board of Higher Education, and they voted **unanimously** to approve the Law School

Did the Law School lose \$300 million? No, Instead, we paid about a million dollars a year BACK to the state. Did it get accredited? Yes, we got accredited on the first try. This past year our bar pass rates were only beaten by Harvard and barely exceeded by Boston University. What happened to all those other big-name schools? That is right, they are looking up at us.

Yes, and the Boston Herald went bankrupt in 2017 and **the person they called clueless is** standing up here giving the graduation speech.

The list of UMass Alumni who have overcome adversity and gone on to change the world is long and distinguished. I mentioned many of them earlier and there are so many more that I could mention if I had time. Of course, the last two Chancellors, Jacquie Moloney and Marty Meehan head the list.

President Meehan claims that when I appointed him as the UMass Lowell Chancellor, it was the best decision that I ever made. (Some others probably think it was the ONLY good decision I ever made.)

They ALL, like you, had to overcome some tough obstacles on the way to a life in which they tried to change the world.

For many of our students now and in the past, UMass Lowell, was their path to creating a future for themselves, their families, and their communities. They have done that incredibly well. We are counting on you to do that too. You don't have to get rich and get your name on a building. You just have to "make a difference." It would also be great if you could help future students to follow the same path that you are now on.

If I can do it -you can do it. If they can do it -you can do it.

Thank you all and congratulations.

[\[VIDEO\]](#) - My speech begins at the one hour mark 1:00:00]

