

March 26, 2007

## Inauguration Address, 2007, March 26

Joseph E. Aoun  
*Northeastern University*

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### Recommended Citation

Aoun, Joseph E., "Inauguration Address, 2007, March 26" (2007). *Aoun Inaugural Address*. Paper 1. <http://hdl.handle.net/2047/d10014433>

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## DR. JOSEPH E. AOUN OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT



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## Inauguration Address

**Dr. Joseph E. Aoun**

March 26, 2007

Thank you, Chairman Finnegan.

Thank you to the esteemed platform guests for your warm greetings and remarks. I am very appreciative of your participation in this event.

Thank you to all the members of Northeastern's governing bodies, alumni, students, faculty colleagues, members of our administration and staff, friends of the university, and the many delegates from other institutions that have joined us here today.

I am honored by your presence.

I share this honor – as I have everything in my life for the past 28 years – with my wife and partner, Zeina.

She is tremendously excited about our joining Northeastern, and many of you have already seen evidence of her engagement.

I am also delighted that our sons are with us today. I very rarely get them together in a listening mode and I am going to take advantage of it.

On behalf of my family, I express my sincere thanks to the entire Northeastern community, to the friends who traveled here to be with us, and to the city of Boston.

We have met many of you in our short time here, and the warmth you have shown us has made this transition a wonderful experience.

We've been touched by your kindness.

I stand before you today humbled by the confidence that our Board of Trustees has placed in me ... and thankful for the opportunity to serve an institution that has a unique place in higher education.

A place that this university has carved out for itself not by following others but by charting its own path to excellence.

Northeastern has sprung from modest roots.

The university was founded on the upper floors of a Boston YMCA. It was a school where working men – and they were all men in 1898 – attended classes at night.

Over the generations, Northeastern evolved to a commuter school, drawing primarily day students, most of them from the working class neighborhoods in and around Boston.

The beautiful residential campus that you see today is emblematic of our remarkable transformation. Equally important is the fact that Northeastern has transformed itself into a world-class research university.

It is a university educating accomplished and sought after students...a university engaged in research that addresses societal needs locally, nationally, and internationally.

It is a university that is committed to attracting students from Boston's neighborhoods, and from across the country and around the world.

Earlier in the program, Jean Tempel recognized two men who have played monumental in our roles history: my immediate predecessors, Jack Curry and Richard Freeland.

I owe them – as well as Kenneth Ryder and the other presidents of Northeastern – a tremendous debt of gratitude.

They have made my job easier and more difficult at the same time.

It is not possible to fully capture the essence of an institution as diverse and complex as ours in a single speech. To do so would take a long while, and Mayor Menino offered me some sage advice about keeping my speech under four hours.

With that in mind, I will focus my remarks on four distinctive themes that characterize us.

They are experiential education, translational and interdisciplinary research, humanities and the arts, and our urban engagement.

There is a common thread that runs through these four themes - the importance of building strong partnerships. There may have been a time when universities could survive and thrive in isolation. That is no longer the case.

Throughout my remarks, I will refer to our current and future partnerships, and how they allow us to better serve our students, our city, our nation and the world.

As educators, our mission is to prepare students for a fulfilled life: intellectually, personally, and professionally.

They will know a world characterized by global competition, technological innovation, and ever more rapid transformation. A world in which they will pursue two, three, even four different careers.

We must instill in them a lifelong passion for learning, a commitment to civic engagement, an entrepreneurial spirit and, an ability to adapt and thrive amid constant change.

Our University does this in a unique way – we combine study and practice in the belief that they enlighten one another. We call this experiential education and as you heard Dr. Gregorian say earlier and we are the acknowledged leader.

Experiential education includes cooperative education, a model that provides students with paid internships related to their field of study.

Cooperative education, or co-op, is not easy to replicate. It requires nurturing relationships with thousands of partners. It demands flexibility in scheduling and in the curriculum. It calls for systems and people to support students scattered across the globe.

This program began in 1909 as a necessity to help students pay their tuition and has evolved into a powerful educational philosophy that distinguishes us and informs all that we do.

Our model is a strong statement about learning and cognition: In order to learn we need to integrate study and practice. Our institutional imperative is to continue evolving cooperative education.

Furthering the integration of classroom and real world learning is one of the crucial connections that make co-op a transformational experience. Students tell me that co-op is not about getting jobs while they are in college. It is about gaining knowledge and insight.

Globalization is breaking down the barriers of time and distance. Our students should be as comfortable in Shanghai, Johannesburg or Mexico City as they are here in Boston.

By September of 2007, we will double the number of international co-op opportunities. Going forward, we will continue to expand the reach and scope of international co-op until our students can be found in all corners of the world.

The integration of study and practice makes students active and engaged learners and should lead us to rethink our entire undergraduate curriculum. Whether they engage in co-op or other aspects of experiential learning such as community service, team learning, or undergraduate research, students should take responsibility for their own learning experience. In this enterprise, faculty and students unite as one learning community.

Our new universal core curriculum will establish an experiential learning requirement and will include a comparative understanding of world cultures and religions. It will prepare our students to create their own intellectual adventure, exploring different fields and combining academic majors and minors in new ways.

To guide our progress, a newly formed Center for Experiential Education will provide the higher education community with the theoretical underpinnings of this learning model and will reaffirm it as our standard.

The second theme I will address is translational and interdisciplinary research.

I am astounded by the scholarship that is taking place in my new institution — in nanotechnology and nano-medicine; in drug discovery and drug delivery; in subsurface sensing and imaging; in urban planning and public policy; and in humanities and the arts.

People today have greater expectations for the impact research will have on their lives. We have a tremendous opportunity to achieve greater prominence, by leading the integration of two movements that are reshaping the research enterprise: Translational research and Interdisciplinary scholarship.

The Translational movement is about the integration of basic and applied research.

It shapes how effectively we move new knowledge, ideas, and discoveries to the point where they can impact societal needs. The stakes are high. Translational research will drive how competitive our city, our region, and our nation will be in the decades ahead.

This university's grounding in the real world moved us onto the translational path.

The second movement, interdisciplinary scholarship, is driven by the fact that most societal problems are too complex to be solved by a single discipline. Environmental sustainability is one example. Public health is another.

Groundbreaking knowledge is surfacing at the intersection of academic disciplines. This is the essence of interdisciplinary scholarship.

Our entrepreneurial culture has guided us down this path and collaboration cannot be limited to the confines of our campus.

In our endeavor to integrate the translational and interdisciplinary movements, we will strive for pre-eminence in distinctive research platforms that build on our strengths.

We will reward innovation and collaboration. The centers of excellence that emerge from these platforms will lead us to rethink graduate education along interdisciplinary lines.

The first step in this process is our plan to hire 30 interdisciplinary faculty leaders over the next three years. They will join the vanguard of other faculty colleagues that are advancing our efforts in these areas.

Northeastern should become the destination for scholars who collaborate to advance knowledge and deliver solutions that meet societal needs.

The third theme is humanities and the arts.

We have notable strength in fields ranging from music to visual arts, from architecture to American literature, and from history to sign language.

We will build on this.

Humanities and the arts nurture an appreciation for creativity, aesthetics and values.

For individuals, they stir our passion, motivate and ground us. For communities, they represent a universal language with the power to transcend barriers and bridge the gaps that divide.

Nowhere is this power more evident than in our Dialogue of Civilizations program, which takes our students around the world to engage with their peers.

It is my desire that in their intellectual adventure, every Northeastern student will explore the human experience through the humanities and the arts. The reach of these fields invigorates our relationship with the community and the city.

We join with our neighbors to create film festivals and jazz concerts, to assemble an oral history of Roxbury, and to create and display art in our communities. With the Boston Symphony Orchestra, we launched an acclaimed on line music conservatory.

This coming fall, we will offer a Bachelor and Master of Fine Arts degree with the Museum of Fine Arts.

There will be many other such partnerships to come.

The fourth and final theme I will speak about today is our urban engagement.

This engagement involves much more than location. It defines us. We do not consider the city and the communities around us as a research lab. Our neighbors are partners with whom we forge a common destiny.

Partnership, by definition, is a two-way street. It involves listening and learning from one another other.

Let me share with you a humbling moment I experienced early on in a meeting with community leaders. While discussing workforce development, I stated that Northeastern will

do more to find employment opportunities for people in the neighborhoods.

Much to my surprise I was told, "We don't want you to see us as needing jobs.

We want you to look at us as budding entrepreneurs and help us in this endeavor."

I was taken aback. This one statement expanded my perspective.

Some people have asked me if our rise as a national and international institution has come at the expense of our engagement with the city and the communities. To the contrary. Because Boston is a world-class city, our urban engagement takes on a global significance.

The Stony Brook is an ancient waterway that to this day flows underground winding through the neighborhoods that intersect our campus. At one time, it united and brought sustenance to the people on its banks.

Under the aegis of Mayor Menino, we will work with community leaders to launch the Stony Brook Initiative.

Like the brook itself, this initiative will unite Northeastern and the communities in new ways. Together, we will tackle important issues that impact our neighborhoods: such as, housing and economic development; K-12 education; and health and recreation.

Based on conversations with community leaders, we envision a new Northeastern-Neighborhood Alliance of students, faculty and staff volunteers who will engage with the schools, homeless shelters, religious organizations, and community centers.

In the decades ahead, our graduates will be successful not only because of what they have learned at Northeastern, but also because of what they have learned here in Roxbury and Mission Hill, in the Fenway and the South End, and throughout Boston.

Zeina and I are here today because we saw something remarkable at Northeastern. I can sum it up in one word – passion.

From my first meeting with a broad cross-section of our campus community, I sensed the passion faculty, students, staff, alumni and friends feel for this wonderful institution.

Every day this passion comes into sharper focus for me. It is a passion for scholarship that can address societal issues. A passion for research that creates new knowledge and approaches. A passion for this university's growth and its place in the world. A passion for engagement that embraces diversity in all its forms.

1978 was the year I first landed in Boston. I knew only a few people and had no idea what to expect. I was a stranger in a strange land.

But very early on I was adopted by people who were warm and supportive. Some of them are here today. They made me feel truly welcome and gave me the foundation to build a life in this country that I consider my true home. Last fall, I was reminded of that warm welcome when I attended a reception for New Bostonians, sponsored by Mayor Menino.

It is now my turn, and yours, to reach out in the same way.

We will achieve our aspirations as an institution only if we continue to embrace and celebrate our diversity in all its forms. We cannot merely be a mirror of what society is; we should be a model of what society can do.

We are the latest participants in a journey that began in the YMCA so many years ago. Thousands preceded us.

You have entrusted me with the future of this institution. On behalf of the generations to come, I have the responsibility to uphold that trust.

I cannot succeed alone. Ours will be a shared success.

It will take our collective energy, effort and passion.

I am deeply honored to share this trust with all of you.