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Acceptance remarks to the Northeastern University Community

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Acceptance Remarks to the University Community May 29, 1996 Curry Student Center

Chairman Matthews, President Curry, members of the Board of Trustees: I accept with joy my election as the next president of Northeastern University. Students, faculty and staff of Northeastern, you are the beating heart of this institution. I pledge my total commitment to providing the leadership you deserve as we face together the uncertainties of a new century.

Alumni and friends of Northeastern, you have benefited from what this university has been and you have helped to bring us this far; I dedicate myself, with you, to forging a future for Northeastern worthy of our magnificent heritage.

All of this is a little overwhelming, you know. I haven't pretended for a moment that I didn't want this job. A friend of mine is a corporate headhunter. He counseled me to be standoffish in the search; you will do better, he advised, if you are not too eager. I listened respectfully, but I couldn't do it. I loved too much the prospect of being Northeastern's president. The first thing I said to the nominating council was that I wanted the job. I blurted out the same thing to the trustees and to Chairman Matthews the minute I met him. I am not much of an actor.

But what could I do? This is a dream come true for me. To stand before you today is the proudest moment of my professional life.

I want you to meet my wife. She is Elsa Nuñez and she is my partner and companion in all things. She is also an accomplished professional educator, and I know that she will be an asset to this university. We have two children, Antony and Maria, who could not be here today, but I hope you will meet them soon.

My brother Stuart, my lifelong friend and guide, my sister-in-law Barbara, and my nephew Jeffrey are also here today, representing my family.

I feel grateful this morning to many people: to the faculty, staff, students, alumni and trustees on the nominating council, including chair Thomas Skelly and the two subcommittee chairs, Neal Finnegan and Kathryn Nicholson; to the members of the executive committee and to the full Board of Trustees who grilled me graciously for the better part of an afternoon and made more calls to check me out than I could possibly have imagined; to [Board of Trustees] secretary Vincent Lembo and Deanna Jantzen; and of course, to President John Curry, who traveled to New York to meet with me; his decency, his competence, his dedication to this institution provide a model I shall seek to emulate; and finally to Chairman George Matthews, whose love of this university shines through his quiet manner. My special thanks, Mr. Chairman, for your support and your confidence.

And thank you all for being here this morning to share this moment with Elsa and me.

We do not face an easy time. Northeastern is going through a transition. Charting a path to bring this university through the next few years as a stronger, more vibrant, more recognized institution will take the best intelligence and dedicated energies of all of us.

I know we can do it. There is so much strength here. There is so much talent here. There is so much loyalty here. These wonderful buildings around us bespeak our strength. And there are sturdy traditions on which to build.

I know something of these traditions. The press has depicted me as the first outsider to be elected president, but I have been connected to this university for a long time.

As Chairman Matthews indicated, I taught history here in the early 1970s when Ray Robinson chaired the department. Later, as dean of professional studies at UMass/Boston, I worked closely with your school of business and its dean, Jim Hekimian, to build collaborative programs. Still later, as dean of arts and sciences at UMass, I worked with Arvin Grabel and Mel Marks to build a wonderful engineering transfer program. Most recently, as a scholar writing about universities in Massachusetts, I studied your history and talked at length with two of your greatest presidents, Asa Knowles and Ken Ryder.

So I know Northeastern as a distinctive institution with well defined traditions and commitments. Let me emphasize three that I find particularly inspiring.

First, from our earliest years, Northeastern has worked to link the classroom and the workplace, in part through co-op, in part by stressing practical fields, beginning with business and engineering, more recently criminal justice, computer science, the health professions, and law, and finally by making sure that practical subjects are firmly grounded in the liberal arts and sciences and that liberal learning never becomes disconnected from the discipline of practice.

A second tradition has been your commitment to providing opportunities for young people from modest backgrounds and adults seeking to improve their circumstances, a commitment that began a hundred years ago with evening classes in rented rooms for recent immigrants, displaced farm boys and urban workers, a commitment that has become more inclusive as the city has become more diverse and as the need for education has become more urgent.

A third theme has been service to the community, especially the metropolitan community of Boston. Northeastern has defined itself from its inception as an institution dedicated to public service, and it has steadily extended this commitment, from an early emphasis on collaboration with business and industry to today's myriad points of contact with the schools, neighborhoods and institutions of Boston and our neighbors in the Fenway, South End and Roxbury.

Staying connected to the workplace; providing opportunities for those who need them; serving the urban community - these themes have been constant in Northeastern's history yet they have repeatedly been

reshaped to fit changing needs of current times.

Now circumstances call upon us to adapt again. I am well aware of the pressures this university has experienced in the recent past: the reduction in enrollments, the loss of revenue, the painful pattern of cutting back. It is testimony to the leadership of President Curry and to the resilience of this community that Northeastern has been able to transform adversity by affirming a revised conception of itself that has already begun to show results.

You have sought to enroll fewer numbers of students but better prepared students. You have given a heightened emphasis to academic quality. You have launched an ambitious fundraising effort to build support for financial aid, for endowed professorships and a more vigorous program of research and scholarship. You are paying new attention, based on the work of the strategic planning committee, to make sure that students get connected to Northeastern and stay connected.

Smaller and better has begun to work, but we all know we have a long way to go to achieve stability within this new formulation.

We have work to do in continuing to serve students from our surrounding communities while reaching out aggressively to enroll larger numbers regionally, nationally and internationally.

We have work to do in thinking afresh about our programs, one by one: Is each contributing as much as it can to our overall mission? Does the combination of our offerings take the fullest advantage of our distinctive strengths? Do we have the right balance between the arts and sciences and practical subjects? Are our graduate programs and research activities as strong as they can be? What are the new roles for co-op as we refine and elaborate our mission in the period ahead?

Finally there is work to do in telling Northeastern's story to our friends and supporters, beginning with our alumni but reaching out to a wider and wider community as we seek recognition and support for the important work we do. We are already Boston's premier urban university; we must sustain that quality while also projecting it on a wider canvas as we claim our rightful place as a national leader in demonstrating the contributions a university can make to the well-

being of urban community.

All of this is possible. I believe young people and their families, and adults seeking educational opportunity, are receptive to Northeastern's story. At a time when a skeptical public sees academia as preoccupied with esoteric themes, our emphasis on combining theory and practice, on linking the classroom and the workplace, strikes a resonant chord. At a time when young people are properly anxious about making their way in a frighteningly competitive job market and the nation is rightly anxious about our place in the global economy, Northeastern's emphasis on practical programs and useful skills speaks to vital contemporary concerns. At a time when frustrated students find themselves paying more and more tuition while institutions devote less and less attention to undergraduate education, our emphasis on learning and teaching, on controlling costs and providing opportunities, will be welcomed. And at a time when too much of the public sees academia as slack and undisciplined and self absorbed, our commitments to quality and hard work and public service convey values that young people long for and adults respect.

So I believe we can get to where we want to be, and I dedicate myself this morning to helping this community get there. And I also ask your help in getting us there.

I mentioned earlier three central traditions of Northeastern. Let me close with reference to a fourth. This university has always been a community. More than any university I know, Northeastern asks of its members a true commitment to the institution - not just to the discipline, not just to the profession, but to the place, to practicing the profession here, with these students, in our programs, and the institution has in turn respected and sustained the community and its members, even in the most difficult of times. There is more institutional loyalty here than in any university I know. I pledge my best efforts to sustain and nurture the strength of this community. We shall need that strength and dedication as we face the challenges that lie ahead.

Americans love to hate bureaucracies, but the great French statesman, Jean Monnet, understood that the most important work of developed societies must be done through complex organizations, and so he wrote that "institutions are more important than individuals" in

advancing the cause of civilization. But he added this important qualification: "Only individual men and women, when they have the strength, can transform and enrich the things that institutions provide to successor generations."

Men and women of Northeastern, the future of this great institution of higher learning is in our hands. Let us work together to enrich the things that Northeastern will provide to successor generations. Thank you very much.

Other addresses:

1998

- [State of the University Address](#), October 8, 1998
- [Address to the Northeastern Corporation](#), May 21, 1998

1997

- [Remarks before the National Commission on the Cost of Higher Education](#), November 7, 1997
- [Centennial Convocation Address](#), October 16, 1997
- [State of the University Address](#), September 29, 1997
- [Address to the Northeastern Corporation](#), May 28, 1997
- [Remarks to the Boston Chamber of Commerce](#), April 4, 1997
- [Address to the University Community](#), February 27, 1997
- [Inaugural Address](#), January 17, 1997

1996

- [State of the University Address](#), September 30, 1996

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