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Transcript of speech given by Provost Abdelal at the Diversity Awards Banquet, May 21, 2003

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Speeches

Diversity Awards Banquet

Wednesday, May 21, 2003

2:30 to 4:30 p.m.

Raytheon Amphitheater, Egan Center

It is a great pleasure to be with you this afternoon in this celebration of the President's Diversity Recognition Awards.

This is a decidedly critical time to be discussing diversity. I am told by my sociology friends that moments of racial progress are often followed by periods of attempted retrenchment. There are considerable signs in current events that suggest their insights are applicable now.

One key example comes from legal challenges to diversity in higher education. As you know, the U.S. Supreme Court has already heard the first oral arguments on affirmative action in the college admissions process, a case brought against the University of Michigan by several white graduate students who felt they had been excluded from admission because they lacked minority status. Dozens of universities, Northeastern among them, as well as major Fortune 500 corporations, responded in defense of affirmative action policy by flooding the high court with friend of the court briefs emphasizing the importance of diversity on college campuses and in the workplace. Thousands rallied in support of affirmative action the day that oral arguments began, including a busload of Northeastern students. If the court decision draws tighter boundaries around the pursuit of diversity, I trust that thoughtful educational leaders, as we have here in President Freeland, will continue to seek new ways to ensure educational equity and rich educational experiences.

When we talk about diversity, we tend to think of race, but we need to recognize that human diversity is actually cultural diversity. The genetic differences between races are negligible. We now know that genetic variation *within* race category is greater than variations between races. Race itself is a social category that was devised historically and continues to operate to divide groups for the purpose of allocating resources, opportunities, and rights. So while race is not a real phenomenon from a genetic standpoint, it continues to have real consequences in terms of peoples' life chances and social treatment. If we wish to work against racism – this inequitable allocation of resources, opportunities, and rights – we have to acknowledge the social construct of race. When we talk about diversity, we need to keep in mind that we are in fact describing cultural and not genetic diversity.

We're often told that diversity is "good for us" in and of itself, that having a well-rounded community – filled with varying perspectives, colors and religions – is healthier than one that is homogenous. Sociologically and educationally, it seems, diversity gets a thumbs up. But people rarely talk about why – and specifically why – it's a good idea that our environments are diverse rather than not.

As a long-time academic and administrator, and as a U.S. minority myself – I am originally from Egypt, as many of you know – I believe diversity is extremely important, in and of itself, that we enrich one another with multiple perspectives. Quite simply, when you talk to someone who's different from you, your experience is broadened and your eyes open up to the breadth of experience and range of worldviews of others.

Imagine for a moment – and this is on a very simplistic scale – that everyone in this room was from the same cultural or religious background, from the same socio-economic class, of the same race, or the same creed. It would be homogenous and wholly dull, the wideness and richness of experience gone. And I myself might not be present. That possibility is personally – and more so professionally – worrisome.

The profound irony of arguments that would limit diversity, however, is that diversity is



Provost Ahmed Abdalal

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exactly that which makes this country so unique and so promising. The fact is that despite our mixed history, we have been ahead of many other countries in terms of celebrating diversity but we stand to lose ground unless we succeed in defending the policies and laws that made it possible to strive for richer diversity in our educational institutions and in the work place. What often gets left out of the discussion of diversity is the fact that this nation was built by the labor, sometimes forced, of diverse groups, and is increasingly multi-cultured, multi-national, multi-ethnic. As many people say, everyone – save the Native Americans first present on this continent – is an immigrant to some degree, determined only by time and the level of voluntariness of their entry.

Another thing that gets left out of the discussion about diversity is the fact that students exposed to diverse campuses make better employees. They're more culturally flexible, more understanding, more sensitive and more worldly. Given that the U.S. population and New England in particular is increasingly inhabited by immigrants, and that businesses large and small rely on this population for business transactions as well as to fulfill important labor supply issues, these qualities are much-sought after. So in that sense, diversity makes for sound practice at universities training a skilled workforce.

Diversity is not an end in itself, but a means to an end: the end in the University context is a higher caliber general education as evidenced by better performance in liberal arts courses by students in more diverse settings. In society at large, diversity is the means to advancing civilization and sharing the benefits of this increasingly small globe across all of the groups that inhabit it.

Focusing next on Northeastern, when I first visited Northeastern University just a little over a year ago, I quickly recognized that this university is special in the sense that it has an engaged and diverse community. The people we've honored here today believe, like, I do in keeping the rich cultural traditions alive here at Northeastern and have taken special measure to ensure it. I salute every one of them and urge all of you going forward to, first and foremost, be aware, be sensitive, and be open to the diversity of experiences and people around you. Diversity is not just numbers or something as simple as a quota — it is voice, participation, and respect. What we have here at Northeastern is a real awareness of where we need to be in terms of diversity and understanding – we are not there yet, but I for one believe we're on the right path. Towards this goal, I am pleased to share with you that Professor Kwamina Panford, has agreed to devote 50 percent of his effort as Associate Vice Provost for Academic Opportunity and Diversity, the other 50 percent will remain in chairing African American Studies.

I am very impressed with the commitment of the University leadership to the cause of diversity, a commitment that is exemplified by President Freeland. His leadership has led to an environment where there is a real respect for multiple opinions, and multiple heritages. This commitment is specifically expressed in two ways: the first is promoting diversity among faculty, staff, and students at Northeastern; the second is the commitment to an urban mission that seek to promote economic and social development in the surrounding urban community through applied research centers and through community service centers. So while we have centers that are focused on molecular biology, nanotechnology, or microgravity – you notice all these focus on molecular level, we also have centers that are focused on race and justice, and urban health. One can say that our overarching vision as articulated by President Freeland is not only to become one of the top 100 research universities in the nation but also with a mission that ranges from "molecules to the neighborhood". This an expression that Hortensia Amaro uses to describe the activities of the center that she directs. I like it and she and I agreed that we can share it. Another way of saying this is that we aspire to become one of the top 100 research universities in the nation but importantly, among the more select group of universities that is strongly committed to the highest ideals in serving the community and indeed humankind. I sincerely believe that under President Freeland leadership, we can achieve both.

Thank you.

