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Address to the Northeastern University Corporation

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Northeastern University

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Speeches of Richard M. Freeland

**Address to the Northeastern Corporation
May 7, 2003
Ritz-Carlton, Boston**

NOTE: This speech is accompanied by a PowerPoint presentation. Clicking on the slides will open a new window.

We gather at a time of turbulence in our world. Events abroad and at home command our attention with more than usual urgency. We have found ourselves, in recent months, going about with one eye trained on the TV screen, as dramas unfold in the Middle East, or in Washington, D.C., or on Beacon Hill.

At Northeastern, we have been absorbed by all of this. We created special programs to help students understand the forces swirling around them. We planned for emergencies. We calculated the effects of a weakened economy. Yet even as we attend to immediate concerns, we remain focused on our underlying responsibilities. Young people still deserve the best education we can provide. Important scholarly issues still need to be pursued. The community around us still needs our constructive engagement. And our beloved university needs to maintain its course toward heightened levels of accomplishment and recognition.

And so, in a turbulent time and a troubled world, I am pleased to report that Northeastern is in solid condition. While we have work to do to achieve our goals, we are proud of the accomplishments of the year and optimistic about the future. In my remarks this morning, I want to share with you some of the good news from Northeastern, to update you on our progress towards top-100 status and to tell you where we stand on our single most important strategic priority, which is securing our position as the national and international leader in practice oriented education.

[Click [here](#) to see slide] The year began with the wonderful news that in the annual U.S. News survey of educators, Northeastern ranked first among universities that combine classroom study with workplace experience. It was especially

gratifying to outclass not only all other co-op campuses, but many other institutions that pursue other versions of classroom-workplace integration — places like MIT, Michigan and Cornell.

Later in the year, we received the complimentary news that, in a poll of high school guidance counselors, Kaplan/Newsweek ranked Northeastern's career services tops in the country.

As the annual admissions cycle unfolded, we had even more dramatic confirmation that the quality of our work is being recognized. As (Board of Trustees) Chairman (Neal) Finnegan has noted, applications for undergraduate admissions skyrocketed by 27 percent this year, at the same time they increased in average quality. Our graduate programs also achieved some remarkable progress, with law increasing applications by 27 percent, engineering by 31 percent and computer and information science by 47 percent.

These dramatic affirmations of our strength from three critical constituencies — university-based educators, high school guidance counselors and prospective students — reflect impressive work by many members of the Northeastern community.

[Click [here](#) to see slide] We continued the physical enhancement of the campus, which is playing a large role in attracting students to us. We opened the magnificent Behrakis Health Sciences Center and related parking and residential structures, winning accolades from both building users and architecture critics. The next major project — a residential complex that includes a stunning 16-story glass-fronted tower and a new home for the College of Computer and Information Sciences — is rising before our eyes. The beautification of Huntington Avenue and the SquashBusters facility are nearing completion.

The intellectual strengthening of the university continued in parallel with the physical changes **[click [here](#) to see slide]**. This was a year of particularly dramatic progress in the creation of new centers of scholarly excellence, with the funding of six intercollegiate research centers in fields ranging from electronic materials to urban health to global management. This brings to 18 the number of research centers established since 1997, including the Center for Subsurface Imaging and Sensing — our Engineering Research Center — which received a rave review this year from the National Science Foundation, and also the Institute for Molecular Biotechnology, the Center for Urban and Regional Policy and the Center for Advanced Microgravity Materials Processing. These initiatives have added immeasurably to the intellectual vitality of Northeastern, as they have helped us attract senior professors with national reputations. Since 1997, we have appointed 11 faculty to named chairs and distinguished professorships. The past year brought us four such appointments: Bill Hancock in biotechnology, Joe Raelin in practice-oriented education, Vladimir Novotny in civil engineering and Hortensia Amaro in urban health.

[Click [here](#) to see slide] As these large themes of progress unfolded, we were also heartened by impressive individual achievements. Among the faculty, Professor Richard Katula was named a Fulbright scholar; Sara Wadia-Fascetti was honored by President Bush for outstanding mentoring, Steve Morrison received the distinguished member award from the American Economic Association and Andy Sum and Paul Harrington achieved new heights nationally as commentators on labor-market trends. Among students, we were thrilled by our continuing domination of the Business Beanpot, the success of our law students in regional and national moot court competitions, three Truman Scholarship finalists and the remarkable success of our student-athletes, who have won five league championships so far and are well positioned to finish the year ranked by the National Association of Collegiate Directors of Athletics as among the 100 most successful athletic programs in the country, for the first time in our history.

Less visible than new buildings, new programs and individual successes was work by faculty, staff and students across the university to prepare for conversion to a semester calendar next September. We have been at this task for three years. The planning and administrative challenges have been immense. But we are ready. Conversion will occur in the fall.

So there is much to celebrate this spring, and I extend special words of appreciation to those members of the Northeastern community who have contributed to the achievements I have cited. I would like particularly to thank and recognize two members of the university leadership who are stepping down: Vice President Karen Rigg, who has overseen student life for 14 years, and Vice President Rick Porter, who has guided dramatic changes in our co-op program. Let me also take this opportunity to acknowledge several new members of the university community who have joined us since the last annual meeting: Provost Ahmed Abdelal, law Dean Emily Spieler, nursing Dean Nancy Hoffart, corporate relations Vice President Marion Stanley, public affairs Vice President Robert Gittens, Athletic Director Dave O'Brien, department chairs Steve Burgard in journalism and Jack Reynolds in pharmacy practice, and director of the Center for the Study of Sport in Society, Peter Roby. We also should acknowledge Dan Bourque's promotion to vice president for facilities.

Members of the campus community recognize that our work would not be possible without the support and guidance of our governing boards. I thank you all, and I especially thank our trustees for their stewardship, led by chairman Neal Finnegan. Neal has reported on the progress of the Leadership Campaign, but I would like to add my personal thanks to several governing board members who are playing key roles in leading this effort: campaign chair Ron Rossetti, vice chair Arthur Pappas and campaign leaders and committee chairs Henry Nasella, Lloyd Mullin, Bill Cotter, Dennis Picard, Gene Reppucci, Chet Krentzman, "Bunny" Solomon, Bob DiCenso, Bob Johnson, Bob Marini, Kevin Fitzgerald, Fred Brodsky, Joe Cronin, Pat Rivelli and

Nancy Haynes.

II. Progress report

In previous reports, I have focused on our progress toward recognition among the nation's top 100 universities in this decade [[click here to see slide](#)]. As you recall, we benchmark ourselves annually against the 13 private universities shown on this slide. Most of these institutions have already achieved top-100 status. We focus on the four key metrics that underly all ranking systems, including U.S. News & World Report [[click here to see slide](#)].

Let me briefly summarize changes in our position since my last report to you a year ago.

Student Quality

The first metric involves the quality of students we enroll. This slide [[click here to see slide](#)] shows changes in total applications, applicant quality and admissions selectivity since we adopted the "smaller and better" strategy in the early 1990s, and between last year and this. As you can see, the exciting news about the strength of the incoming class accelerates a pattern of steady improvement and should propel us solidly into the range defined by our comparator institutions. We are on track toward meeting our goals in the area of admissions.

Student Success

A second area in which we need to improve involves our success in graduating those we enroll as freshmen [[click here to see slide](#)]. In the mid-1990s, Northeastern reported a six-year graduation rate of 40 percent, well below the 70-plus percent performance we need to reach. Here, as well, we can see impressive progress. The percentage of freshmen who return as sophomores is now approaching our comparators, and our graduation rate is projected to hit 60 percent this June — a 50 percent improvement in just six years. I am especially pleased that during the past year we achieved good movement in freshman-to-midler retention [[click here to see slide](#)]. Our biggest challenge is to improve our performance after the sophomore year, so the nice increase in those persisting through the start of the third year is especially gratifying.

Resources

The third area where we compete for top-100 status is resources. Our efforts here focus on three streams of revenue [[click here to see slide](#)]. The first is student payments, and derives from improved retention. Each 1 percent increase in our graduation rate adds at least \$1 million to the annual operating budget, so that the 20 percentage point increase I just reported accounts for \$23 million in gross revenue this year. Our second major thrust involves efforts to win grants and contracts from outside funding agencies. Over the past five years, we have

made solid progress in this arena, adding \$16.5 million to annual operating expenditures, although during the current year we're tracking a little behind the goal we have set for ourselves. Finally, we are well past the halfway mark in our ambitious effort to raise \$200 million through the Leadership Campaign, a tribute to the generosity of many in this room and others who could not be with us today.

All of this is commendable progress, but the resource challenge for Northeastern remains severe [[click here to see slide](#)]. We clearly spend less per student than the institutions among our benchmark comparators that have a similar or greater level of research activity. Where can we find the additional revenue we need? Our tuition levels are already high in relation to our competitive position. Our revenue from sponsored projects is already well above most of our benchmark institutions. Our income from philanthropic giving on a per student basis is well below our comparators. To achieve our goals, despite the economic challenges of the times, we must find ways to increase revenues from each of the revenue streams I have been discussing.

Academic Reputation

The fourth and final metric that contributes to our ranking is academic reputation. This is an especially difficult measure to change because it is quantified through opinion surveys of individuals with little current information [[click here to see slide](#)]. We are helped by the fact that our reputation is already within the range on a five-point scale defined by our comparator universities. But the fact is, despite all the progress we have made, our reputation as measured by U.S. News has remained essentially stable [[click here to see slide](#)].

I believe, however, there are encouraging signs in this arena, including the dramatic rise in applications for admission. This year we also saw welcome progress in the rankings of our law school and our College of Business Administration, adding to the upward movement of engineering in recent years. If we maintain our course of steady improvement, our overall reputation will eventually catch up, though the lag is a frustration to us all.

How do these various metrics combine to produce our overall position [[click here to see slide](#)]? This slide reports the change in our ranking by U.S. News over the last two years, and reveals an incremental increase. There is, of course, reason to anticipate that our continuing improvement, especially in student quality and student success, will lead to another step forward in next September's rankings, though our spectacular admissions numbers for next fall will not be reflected by U.S. News until the fall of 2004.

III. Progress on POE

Taking all the metrics together, we are making solid progress toward our top-100 goal. I hope you share my pride in what

Northeastern has accomplished. I am confident we will get the rest of the way. But this is slow, steady work over an extended period, with hazards and potential reversals along the way. Repositioning Northeastern is a complex undertaking. No one magic priority will get us there, which is why we labor on many fronts — undergraduate programs, graduate programs, the faculty, the campus, the calendar, technology, athletics — to accomplish our purposes. Moreover, ranking systems are crude instruments that change for reasons unrelated to academic quality. This is why our position is best assessed through the four underlying metrics I have just reviewed, rather than through our numerical position in a particular ranking scheme. At the end of the day, if we are competitive among the nation's major universities in these four metrics, Northeastern will be very strong, and the overall ranking will take care of itself.

Despite the complexity and multi-faceted character of our repositioning effort, there is one dimension of Northeastern that matters more than others to our long-term progress, and that is our commitment to leadership in practice-oriented education, building on our great tradition of co-op and taking co-op to a new level of excellence within a fully integrated, practice-oriented curriculum. It is clear that the special character of education at Northeastern explains much of our current admissions success. All the other things we are doing to strengthen the university are essential. They make us competitive with other major universities.

[Click [here](#) to see slide] But, in the end, when a talented applicant is deciding between Northeastern and one of our top competitors, the differentiator is likely to be the special nature of our educational program, and particularly co-op. I am especially struck by two facts. First, about half our entering freshmen identify Northeastern as their first-choice school, and another quarter identify us as their second choice; second, in a remarkably symmetrical pattern, about half of our freshmen list co-op as their top reason for selecting us, with another quarter listing it as their second reason. Nothing else about us is remotely as important as co-op in persuading those we admit to choose us. And the reason our students give for wanting co-op is striking. They are drawn to us not because co-op helps pay for college, not even because it helps build a resume, but because it helps with career exploration and enhances learning. In short, the well-prepared students we are enrolling today value co-op, above all, because it adds value to their education.

So, as we do other things to improve Northeastern, we stay focused on building the nation's and the world's strongest practice-oriented curriculum. In my report to this body five years ago, I summarized the two basic challenges we face in this connection: strengthening the integration between co-op and classroom, so that students have the richest possible opportunities to test academic ideas in real-world settings, and enhancing the interactions between our professional programs and the arts and sciences, so that every student has access to a university-level experience of liberal education while also having a chance to pursue a particular specialty. In the final part of my

remarks today, I shall summarize the progress we have made in these two areas over the past several years.

[Click [here](#) to see slide] Our efforts to strengthen connections between co-op and classroom began with the decision in 1998 to move our co-op faculty physically and organizationally into the colleges. The goal was to facilitate interaction between co-op and classroom faculty in planning our educational programs. This restructuring is now fully accomplished. The next step was to redesign the curriculum of each college and each major so that sequences of courses are synergistic with successive co-op experiences as students move through their undergraduate years. Completing these new program designs — we call them integrated learning models — has been a major component of planning for conversion to a semester calendar, and we are getting ready to implement these restructured curricula next September. With these new coursework patterns in front of us, we have been reviewing all co-op positions to make sure they provide appropriate learning opportunities at appropriate points in each student's program, and culling out those that do not measure up. In parallel with these planning efforts, we have initiated a program of faculty development — supported by a wonderful gift from trustee Nonnie Burnes — to help our academic faculty develop skills in utilizing co-op experiences to enhance classroom learning. This program is now in its second year, and has had 26 faculty participants who can serve as champions of co-op-classroom integration within their individual units.

[Click [here](#) to see slide] We have taken other steps to strengthen the capacity of co-op to contribute to education at Northeastern. Students now use the Web to screen possible co-op positions and schedule meetings with their co-op advisers. We have been experimenting with Web-based means to keep students connected with Northeastern during their co-op assignments. We are working to make sure faculty achievements in co-op-classroom integration are taken into account in academic personnel decisions. Finally, we have launched a series of research efforts to more fully understand and document the ways in which co-op can enhance student learning.

[Click [here](#) to see slide] We are also making progress on building the other dimension of our practice-oriented curriculum, increasing the ability of students to gain the benefits of both liberal and professional education during their undergraduate years. Every one of our colleges, as part of its strategic plan, has committed itself to building more interdisciplinary and intercollegiate linkages and offering students more opportunities to work across collegiate lines. Since 1997, we have been adding programs that enable students to integrate different but related fields. Today, we offer 39 dual majors and 16 interdisciplinary majors and minors. We shall continue to grow these options in the years ahead. In addition, we have taken steps to reduce administrative barriers to our students in moving among the colleges in unstructured ways, allowing them to develop more than one side of their minds and spirits. To reinforce and further

promote this emphasis on intercollegiate interaction, we have promoted interdisciplinary scholarly activities among the faculty, for example through the 18 intercollegiate research institutes that I mentioned earlier. For many of today's students, the opportunity to pursue both a professional interest and a subject that piques their curiosity or touches them emotionally is one of the great values of Northeastern.

The work I have been describing is deep work, way down in the trenches of our organization. Important as it is in providing the foundation for our claims to educational distinction, it is not the stuff of press releases or glossy brochures [[click here to see slide](#)]. So we have also been taking more visible steps to project Northeastern to a broad public as the national leader in practice-oriented education. This is, of course, the point of our branding campaign, which is spreading the Northeastern message — “higher learning, richer experience”—across newspapers and airwaves regionally and nationally — and winning prizes for excellence along the way.

To reach a more academic audience, we have been hosting international conferences on practice-oriented education. The second conference occurred just last month and attracted 200 scholars representing 52 institutions and five countries. Special Web sites and promotional materials developed for these conferences have projected our commitment to practice-oriented education far beyond those who were actually able to participate. Also this year, we opened the new Center for Work and Learning, under Knowles Professor Joe Raelin, to conduct and disseminate high-level scholarship on the characteristics and benefits of practice-oriented education. Finally, to reach the corporate community, we held last fall the first co-op awards banquet to recognize co-op employers who have been particularly good partners over the years. Over 170 corporate leaders attended this event.

So, we are doing the hard work needed to support our position as the leader in practice-oriented education, and we are also making sure the world knows what we are up to. The fact that the university-based educators who fill out the annual U.S. News survey ranked us number one for programs that link classroom work with workplace experience is testimony to the impact of these efforts.

One final point about this central element in our overall effort to reposition Northeastern [[click here to see slide](#)]: I am more convinced today than I was five years ago that this is the right strategic focus for us. With each passing year, it becomes clearer that the educational world is moving in our direction. The fact that U.S. News instituted a new ranking in this area just last year is only one of many indications. Most colleges and universities today have built some version of workplace experience into their undergraduate programs. This includes a great many traditionally liberal arts colleges, such as Bates, Depauw and Smith, as well as major research universities, such as Michigan, Johns Hopkins and Duke. Similarly, more and more liberal arts colleges are finding ways to incorporate professional programs into their

offerings. A recent survey found, in fact, that many institutions formally classified as liberal arts colleges actually enroll a majority of their students in professional majors. A group of institutions calling itself New American Colleges has now come together around the principle of building linkages between liberal and professional education.

All over higher education, the central themes of practice-oriented education — integrating classroom learning and workplace experience, and integrating liberal and professional education — are gaining traction.

As ideas that once made us a maverick move to the mainstream, we need to work harder to stay on top. Northeastern has a wonderful opportunity to lead one of the most important educational movements of the century, but to do that we need to be very good, and that is what the efforts I have been describing are all about. We are determined to remain the gold standard in co-op and in practice-oriented education. We believe that success in this effort, when combined with all the other steps we are taking to strengthen the university, will not only propel us into the top 100, but assure our position for many years to come **[click [here](#) to see slide]**. Twenty-two thousand applications for 2,800 freshman places tells you we are on the right track.

The world is a troubled place. Life is not easy for young people completing college today, and it is not likely to get easy any time soon. We owe our students the best possible chance to prepare for adult life in the fullest possible way. That is the promise of practice-oriented education at Northeastern. And that is a promise we intend to keep.

Thank you.





