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Messages & Writings : April 2007

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To the Northeastern Community:

As we approach the end of the academic year - my first as president - I would like to share some thoughts about this community that has been so welcoming to me.

As a resident of three continents during my life, I have seen how people of different backgrounds and cultures can become mired in unceasing conflict — or choose to work together to create a rich, vibrant community.

Our location presents a wonderful advantage and many opportunities for Northeastern. We are in a city that welcomes newcomers and fosters their aspirations, and we are an integral part of neighborhoods that reflect the diversity of Boston and of America. Indeed, we have moved the university's central administration to Columbus Place, squarely where the South End and Roxbury come together, as one indicator of our commitment to these neighborhoods.

We make valuable contributions to our city, our region and our nation. Our faculty members are renowned for their work in health care, housing, social justice and education, and our students are engaged in the neighborhoods, from volunteering with Jumpstart to creating the Roxbury Oral History Project to cleaning up the city through the upcoming Boston Shines effort.

We reach out across the country through such distinctive programs as the Torch and Ujima scholarships, which provide deserving students access to our university - though providing access to talented students of all backgrounds and financial circumstances continues to challenge us, as it does all of higher education.

We reach out across the world through efforts such as the International Student and Scholar Institute (which has recently welcomed me into its Phi Beta Delta honor society); Dialogue of Civilizations, which immerses students in other cultures; and our partnerships in Greece, Australia and elsewhere.

Building and sustaining a diverse community, however, is not without challenges. It is always a work in progress, and I by no means want to suggest that we are where we want and need to be here at Northeastern. In the wake of an abhorrent verbal attack on a faculty member last year, I established the Committee on Community, Harmony, Inclusion and Justice to find better ways to live up to our own expectations of a campus community respectful of all its members. I know some Asian and Asian-American students, here and throughout the country, have felt uncomfortable – through no fault of their own - in the wake of the horrific shootings at Virginia Tech, committed by a deeply disturbed young man who happened to be of Asian descent.

I was privileged to attend the university's Diversity Recognition Awards ceremony this week, and witnessed a standing-room-only crowd that honored students, faculty and staff for their commitment to diversity on campus. It was a profound moment for all of us. But the measure of success will come when we don't have to celebrate diversity once a year, because we have incorporated its values into our daily lives.

Northeastern should not be a mirror of society. Our higher calling is to be a model of what society can be. Every day, this community seeks to move closer to that goal, and for that reason, I am inspired and humbled to have been welcomed at Northeastern.

Joseph E. Aoun
President
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