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## Transcript of the State of the University address given by Provost Abdelal, October 6, 2004

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## Speeches

### State of the University Address

Wednesday, October 6, 2004  
 Noon to 1:30 p.m.  
 Blackman Auditorium

Last September, in my second University address, I suggested that, in order to realize our vision for becoming one of the top 100 institutions in the nation, we need to enrich certain aspects of the academy, particularly, the ranks of the professoriate and support of instructional and research programs. As you know, several months later, President Freeland announced an ambitious \$ 75 million, five year, "Academic Investment Plan". It is a great pleasure to be in position to report to you on the investments we made in the first year of the plan.

We identified three primary themes in the plan; namely, strengthening undergraduate education, strengthening professional graduate programs, and further development of strategic research areas. At the heart of the Academic Plan, we envisioned the addition of 100 tenure-track and tenured faculty. We are clearly on our way to meeting our goal as we have successfully recruited an outstanding group of 20 faculty members that started this fall. These 20 positions were carefully distributed to address the three primary themes of the plan. It is important to emphasize that when we recruit a faculty member to respond primarily to one theme, let's say, high demand in an undergraduate major, the same faculty member is expected to contribute to scholarship and research in his or her area, and to the enhancement of graduate programs in the department. Several of the faculty we recruited were more senior faculty and in fact joined us with tenured appointments. In two cases, we took advantage of gifts that have previously endowed chair professor positions to recruit world renowned senior professors that have moved to Northeastern this fall: one to become the George Behrakis chair with joint appointments in Chemistry and Pharmaceutical Science and director of a newly established center for Drug Discovery; the second as the Eleanor Black chair with joint appointments in Biology and Pharmaceutical science and director of another new center for Inflammation. We also enriched the diversity of tenured faculty through the successful recruitment of a highly accomplished senior African-American scholar.

As you know, Northeastern achieved a major milestone in the national ranking this fall by being ranked in the USNWR as 120 th and thus in the top half or Tier I of universities. Enriching the ranks of the professoriate will further enhance the quality of the academic experience for our students , which will be reflected in enhanced learning and higher retention and graduation rates. Enriching the professoriate will also enhance our academic standing. These are inherently important goals for an academic institution that seeks further excellence but these areas also provide the foundations for the metrics that are used in national rankings. While we emphasize appropriately the overall ranking of our undergraduate education, it is important to point out that we have a number of undergraduate programs that are highly ranked. Foremost in the rankings of specific undergraduate programs is International Business, which was ranked as #18 in 04 and advanced to #16 in 05, ahead of numerous top 50 institutions.

While strengthening the professoriate is at the heart of our academic plan, it must be reinforced by other important elements that are essential for providing our students with excellent academic experience. I would like to highlight a number of areas that have been achieved in this regard: (1) the library collection was strengthened by adding 600k to the recurring budget, which represents an 15% increase; (2) established funding for undergraduate research; (3) added three academic advisors; (4) strengthened supplemental instruction in what I call "gateway courses", these are the more challenging courses where we know from grade distributions that students can benefit from supplemental instruction; (5) increased funding for the Honors program.

While we needed new funding to enhance the aspects of the academic experience that I highlighted, it is also important to talk about progress in enhancing the quality of



**Provost Ahmed Abdalal**

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undergraduate education with existing resources. A key achievement in this regard is the work by the division of Cooperative Education to enhance the quality of coops and experiential opportunities for our students and by our professoriate to integrate experiential learning into the curricula. Northeastern has been the recognized leader in this area nationally and it is important that remain in the leadership position. In harmony with our model of practice-oriented education are two other aspects that we believe further enhance learning by students at Northeastern. The first is a highly evident emphasis on inter-disciplinary connections, as reflected in the extensive availability of dual undergraduate majors. Inter-disciplinary approaches have been widely recognized as the most successful approaches for solving challenges and problems in the work place, indeed in the world. The academic leadership and the faculty are strongly committed to sustaining and enhancing inter-disciplinary learning through continuous curricular innovation. The second aspect that we are working to strengthen further is the participation by undergraduate students in research with faculty in their majors. At the last two convocations, each of the graduating student speakers spoke eloquently about the depth of learning gained through engagement in undergraduate research. A third aspect that is in harmony as well with cooperative education is international experiences. In my analysis, the success of Arts and Sciences in attracting increasingly accomplished students in a very competitive environment can be ascribed to the efforts by its faculty in developing attractive academic programs that creatively combine all these features; experiential, interdisciplinary, research, and international.

We are investing significant efforts in establishing collaborative institutional linkages around the globe in order to broaden the opportunities for international coops that combine experiential learning opportunities with experiencing and learning of another culture. Such experiences will enable our graduates to be better informed global citizens who are better prepared to advance in the increasingly global workplace and who also could make their own contributions to inter-cultural understanding and to world peace.

I would like next to focus my remarks on professional graduate education. First, I am pleased to note that our School of Law has advanced from the 50 th percentile in 04 to the 44 th percentile in 05. Selectivity in Law admission is ranked even higher at the 32 nd percentile. The engineering graduate program ranks at the 40 th percentile. Regarding CBA, our MBA advanced this year to 93 out of 185, which is the 50 th percentile. The Nursing program was ranked in 05 at the 29 th percentile.

The academic investment plan enabled the addition of TT faculty in CBA, COE, and Bouve and provided funds for marketing and recruitment. Similar efforts are under way in Law, which are funded using their internally generated funds, COL being on the Resource Center Management model.

Regarding research and Ph.D. programs, the academic plan has identified two strategic themes for investments. The first is the interdisciplinary sciences and engineering with foci in biotechnology, nanotechnology, and sensing and imaging. All of these foci are important for economic development and health and represent major federal and business investments initiatives. Northeastern has very strong interdisciplinary faculty teams in the three areas. Sensing and Imaging is anchored by an NSF national engineering research center which was reviewed very favorably by NSF after three years and was funded last year for an additional five years at \$ 4 M from NSF. This center also receives in excess of \$ 1.5 M annually from industry. I wish to add here that while our center came across the review by NSF with flying colors, other centers at top ranking institutions did not. In biotechnology, we have had significant NIH and NSF funding for a number of years, and this has been considerably strengthened by the establishment of the centers for Drug Discovery with annual funding of \$ 2.5 M and the Center for Inflammation with annual funding of 400K, which is expected to increase. In the third area, nanotechnology, we have learned recently that NSF has funded a Nano Science and Engineering Center that is led by Northeastern with annual funding of \$ 2.6 M. I should add here that this award was one of six awarded by NSF after a very keen national competition. The leading universities for the other five awarded centers are Univ. of Calif. At Berkeley, Stanford University, Univ. of Pennsylvania, Ohio State Univ., and University of Wisconsin. In other words, we are in excellent company.

One note regarding the interdisciplinary sciences and engineering is that in this area, we are competing nationally - - not regionally. We have already shown that we can do very well in these competitions. One important advantage for Northeastern is that our faculty are not only very creative but also are more truly collaborative and their research emphasizes interdisciplinarity to a higher degree than many other institutions. Another advantage is that our foci under this theme also generate synergy through collaboration in overlapping research as well.

The second theme in strategic research emphasis is "urban and public policy". Our goal here is to become one of the leading urban-oriented research universities in the nation. We aim to do so through fostering interdisciplinary research in the social sciences and Law focusing on public policy, economic development, and health issues. We have very strong faculty in several university-wide centers that focus on these areas and we have invested

this year and plan to invest further in the foundation departments and centers. A very relevant urban-oriented effort is also enhancing K-12 education in Boston. I am pleased to note here that Northeastern is a partner in a major NSF award that was recently announced.

I recognize that I frequently mention outside funding. I do so because it is recognized nationally that competing effectively for grants and prestigious fellowships is one of the best indicators of quality of effort but it is important to emphasize that an "endowment for the humanities or the arts fellowship" or a Fulbright fellowship is as important to Northeastern as an NSF or NIH grant. The goal is to be very competitive nationally for recognition through awards across disciplines.

In conclusion, I wish to express my sense of excitement about the progress that Northeastern is making, through the efforts of its faculty, staff, and students, in enhancing the quality of academic programs, and in enhancing our national recognition. Through your efforts and through the enabling of the academic investment plan, I am confident that we are on our way to become a great university. Importantly, we need to consciously work on accomplishing this goal while preserving the wonderfully engaged community that we have here at Northeastern. This is the treasure that we already have in hand!

Thank you.

