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Address to the Northeastern University Corporation

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[ANNUAL REPORT](#)

[SPEECHES](#)

[OP-EDS](#)

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[N.U. HISTORY](#)

[PAST PRESIDENTS](#)

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Address to the Northeastern University Corporation May 28, 1997 Meridien Hotel, Boston

One year ago, almost to the day, I was waiting with my family for a call from [Board of Trustees] chairman [George] Matthews to tell me the board's decision on the Northeastern presidency. As George knew then, and as the entire Northeastern community knows now, I dearly wanted the chance to lead Boston's pre-eminent urban university.

Not that I expected the new president's task to be easy. I was acutely aware of the difficulties with which Northeastern had struggled since the early 1990s, and I knew that the 1995-96 year had been hard: another dispiriting mid-year budget cut; no salary increases; and an estimated \$16 million long-term structural deficit.

But I also knew the university had faced its troubles in remarkably thoughtful ways. By deciding to become quantitatively smaller and qualitatively better, and by upgrading both the physical campus and the technological infrastructure, the university had begun to attract better prepared applicants and to provide an enhanced setting for serious scholars.

But I was drawn to Northeastern for an even more exciting reason than its urban character and recent progress. I believed

this university to be positioned to seize an historic opportunity. In the context of a dramatically changing international economy, college students have been demanding greater attention to preparation for the workplace. Northeastern's tradition of practice-oriented education, anchored by the flagship co-op program, provides the basis for this university to assert national leadership in this new environment.

With thoughts like these crowding my brain, you can imagine my excitement that May morning last year when George Matthews finally called to offer me the presidency. Today, having worked with the faculty and staff for an academic year, having walked the campus and met the students, I am more convinced than ever that Northeastern has emerged from its recent crisis and is poised to achieve at last the broad recognition it has long deserved.

So my enthusiasm is unabated, and these feelings have been sustained, throughout this past year, by the support I have received from the campus community, from the members of the governing boards and from the Board of Trustees. To all of you, my deepest thanks. To you, chairman Matthews, a particular thank you - for that phone call a year ago and for your unflagging encouragement and guidance ever since. And to [former president] Jack Curry, who is unable to be with us today, let me acknowledge for all of us a deep debt of gratitude for leadership that brought Northeastern through its hour of utmost need stronger than ever as an academic institution.

II

The most striking fact about the current year has been the radical change in campus atmosphere. Ten months ago we were preoccupied with the financial pressures of the recent past, and the campus community looked fearfully to the 1996-97 year in anticipation of more budget cutting and belt tightening. Very quickly last fall, however, it became clear that our enrollments were considerably stronger than had been anticipated, that revenues would be correspondingly higher than projected, and that, far from facing new reductions, there was a realistic

prospect of a modest budget surplus. The happy realization that the hard work of the Curry years was beginning to bear fruit buoyed us all and created a welcome opportunity to think positively about the future. I can report to you today that this upbeat feeling, so palpable in September, propelled by good news large and small thought the year, has only grown stronger.

When we who work at this university watch in awe as [trustee] Bob Marini, backed by generous contributions from so many of you here today, takes the Centennial Campaign past its goal back in March, nine months ahead of schedule, and just keeps on going; when annual giving grows by more than 15 percent and heads toward an all time high of \$27 million; when our endowment tops the \$300 million mark for the first time, we all get the sense that something special - and quite wonderful - is happening at Northeastern. So thanks to all of you for your devotion and support. I trust that the academic progress I will report to you this morning justifies the hard work you are doing on our behalf.

There is much to report - so much, in fact, that I am able only to mention a few highlights. The year's manifestations of financial strength and alumni generosity extended to the physical plant as well. The opening of the Marino Recreation Center and the Egan Research Center, along with the linking of the entire campus to the Internet, have made our campus an even grander place in which to learn and grow.

Improvements in our material circumstances have been paralleled by welcome signs of academic progress. A better budget has allowed us to allocate incremental dollars to each of the colleges and several student support units - the first new funding most of these units have seen in years - to support top priority initiatives. At the same time, while reducing the overall size of the faculty, we have strengthened the professoriate with 20 new appointments, including astronaut and distinguished scientist Al Sacco who was named to the Snell Engineering chair. During the past 12 months the Northeastern faculty has published 50 books, and research grants are running well ahead of last year, heading toward a projected record total of \$30 million by the year's end. Several faculty members have

achieved significant professional recognition this year, including four Fulbright grants and four career awards from the National Science Foundation.

We have focused intensively on strengthening the caliber of Northeastern students. We have provided additional resources to the admissions office to make sure the news about the new Northeastern reaches not only our traditional service community in Massachusetts and New England but new sources of students across the country and around the world. In addition, we have built into next year's budget the biggest expansion in direct dollar support for students in more than a decade - with the lion's share of the increase targeted toward upperclass students so that the stronger students we are bringing to the university are better able to stay. We have also allocated resources to make sure that the gates of Northeastern remain open to students from modest circumstances and diverse backgrounds.

In a word: these efforts are working - academically and financially. Applications for the fall are running 10 percent ahead of last year for a smaller number of freshman seats. As a result, we have become markedly more selective. The average combined SATs of students who have paid deposits for the fall is up by 30 points. Most encouraging of all is the second consecutive increase in our retention rate: 91 percent of last fall's freshmen are still enrolled this spring, a 2 percent improvement over last year and a nearly 5 percent increase over two years ago.

On the strength of these strong enrollment prospects, we have constructed for next year the best budget this university has enjoyed in a long time. The projected \$20 million increase in revenues makes possible our new investments in financial aid and academic programs while permitting us to provide the faculty and staff of the university with the first salary increase in two years.

Thus, as the academic year comes to a close, the university stands on solid ground. We have moved from a time when we were focused, perforce, on clawing our way out of a crisis to a moment when we can refine and act on a vision for the future.

Much of our energy this year, and much of my personal attention, has been directed toward defining that vision.

III

How should we characterize our dreams for Northeastern during the decade ahead? My thoughts begin with respect for the qualities that have historically set this university apart and with attention to our current strengths. Looking at the university through these two lenses, I believe our path is clear.

Northeastern in 1997 is a national research university that is student-centered, practice-oriented, and urban. Our aspiration should be true excellence within this distinctive framework.

The first two words - national and research - are used to characterize us by the quasi-official classifications of the Carnegie Foundation and the pop market raters at US News and World Report. Today, far more than 20 or 40 years ago, our students come from every region of the country and many countries of the world. Today, far more than in the past, our faculties and their graduate students are active participants in national scholarly communities.

The second phrase in my characterization, "student-centered," proclaims that well-prepared graduates are our most important product. We want our faculty to be active scholars but we want them to understand that instruction is job one.

We also say we are practice oriented. Our roots are in professional education. Co-op is our signature program. Our primary educational emphasis is on preparing students for practical roles in society.

And finally, we are urban. We bring the scholarly expertise of our faculty to the concerns of the city; we provide access to learning for urban residents; we are a good neighbor to the communities that live nearby; and we are a diverse community that reflects and embraces our urban setting.

So we know what we are. Our task now is to refashion these

guiding principles into a new model of a university that meets the challenges and seizes the opportunities of a new century.

We have worked hard this year to meet that challenge. Two task forces have reviewed our role as a research university. The first is helping us focus our scholarly resources on work that promotes economic development, technological progress, or institutional change. At the group's suggestion, we are establishing this summer a new office of technology transfer to facilitate applied research and its applications. The second task force evaluated every one of Northeastern's graduate programs and has recommended concentrating our investments in a limited number of fields where we can excel. The task force's herculean effort will challenge us with difficult choices in the months ahead.

To symbolize our commitment to wider recognition as a research university dedicated to practical applications of scholarship, we are raising funds for eight endowed trustee professorships. We will recruit to these positions nationally recognized scholars whose work represents the very best in applied research and professional practice.

We are also working to make Northeastern a shining example of what it means to be student-centered.

The most important step we have taken in this respect is the large increase in financial aid already discussed. But we have moved on other fronts as well. The provost's office is leading an effort to assure that each academic department places the tasks of teaching, instruction and advising at the center of its priorities.

Simultaneously, we have begun a major review of the administrative units that provide direct services to students. Eight key departments, including the president's office, will attend training sessions designed to enhance the quality and responsiveness of our services. I am determined to end, once and for all, the infamous NU shuffle.

Finally, we are moving as quickly as possible to respond to accelerating student needs for affordable housing. We are

expanding the availability of rental units in the immediate vicinity. We are well into the design of new dormitories for the northwestern corner of the campus. And we have proposed to the city an exciting housing development along Columbus Avenue that would provide more units for both students and community residents.

The third focus of our efforts this year in our work has been our orientation toward practice. Here the first order of business is to move each of our professional colleges into the strongest possible position within its particular competitive arena. I am determined that the colleges of engineering and business will reassert Northeastern's traditional status in these critical fields, and I am pleased that we have reversed multi-year slides in applications to both colleges. We have also begun to strengthen the health sciences which have yet to achieve their full potential. And there is important work to be done in arts and sciences, law, criminal justice, computer science, and University College.

Beyond sponsoring excellent programs in a range of professional fields, Northeastern should offer the country a vision of practice-oriented education at its best. I believe that we possess the elements of such a curriculum in our several professional colleges, in our College of Arts and Sciences, and in our co-op program. What we have yet to put in place are program structures that offer each of our students an integrated experience of all three of these great learning traditions. With leadership from the provost, the deans and the faculty we will create such a curriculum, and in so doing assert Northeastern's claim to national educational leadership.

To highlight our commitment to excellence in practice-oriented education, we have established a new program of undergraduate scholarships - we call them presidential scholarships - which will be awarded to middlers who achieve distinction in all three aspects of a Northeastern education: in professional studies; in liberal learning; and in co-op. The first Presidential Scholars will be selected this spring and will represent the highest aspiration of undergraduate education at Northeastern.

Finally, our urban character. Our goal is to be a model of the

potential for an academic institution to enhance its metropolitan community. We will, of course, continue our traditional work with health care and social service agencies, the police, the courts and the schools across the city. But we are also moving to dramatize our urban role through a more focused commitment to our immediate neighborhood. At the request of the [Boston] Superintendent of Schools [Thomas Payzant], we are helping to create a model school district in Roxbury. With support from the federal government, we are creating a facility to train area residents to become small business entrepreneurs.

Above all, we are turning Columbus Avenue into a symbol of creative collaboration between university and community. Our proposal for mixed-use housing was celebrated by the Boston Globe on page 1 as a nationally unique example of university-community partnerships. We are close to acquiring the development rights for the site of the former Registry of Motor Vehicle's building on the southwest corner of our campus which we plan to develop as yet another example of a university community cooperation. Upon completion, these two projects - anchored by our administrative offices at Columbus Place - will improve the neighborhoods near us and powerfully affirm our links, both symbolic and practical, to the city of Boston.

IV

And so today, as we prepare for our our second century, we remain as we began nearly 100 years ago: strongly tied to this city and to the world of work. Yet we will be dramatically different also. In future years students will come to Northeastern more for the quality of what we do, less because we are convenient and inexpensive. I hope that I have conveyed to you today the sense of the excitement and purpose I feel - and I think the entire Northeastern community feels - as we contemplate the possibilities that lie ahead. With our proud heritage, our strengthening financial position, our recent investments in quality, the future is calling us on to new greatness. While much work lies ahead, with your continued enthusiasm and support, there is no doubt that we shall answer the call - proudly,

courageously and with the same indomitable 99-year-old Husky spirit that has made Northeastern University the great educational enterprise it is today.

Other addresses:

1998

- [Address to the Northeastern Corporation](#), 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
- [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
- [Acceptance Remarks to the University Community](#), May 29, 1996

[Return to top of page](#)

